PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE INTEREST OF REGIONAL ACTORS

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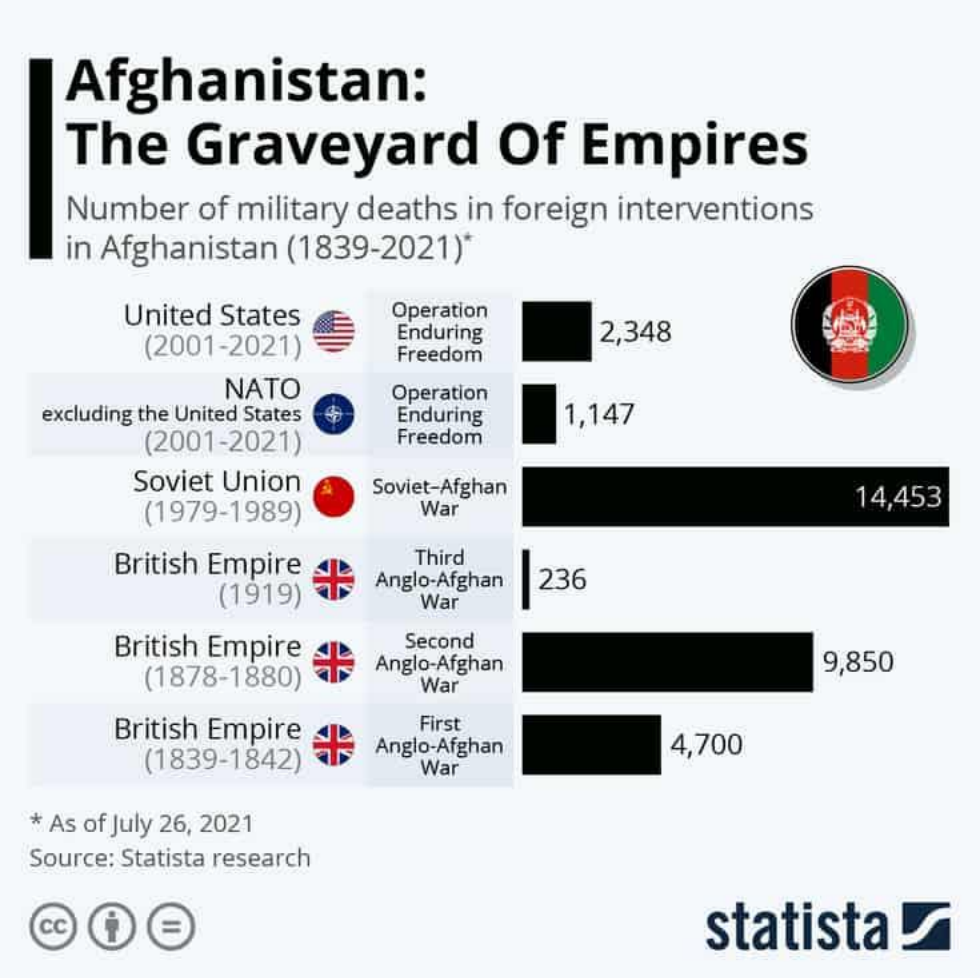
Abstract

This research paper describes the efforts made by the regional actors to bring stability to Afghanistan. This piece of research highlights the interests of regional powers in Afghanistan. This research's primary objective is to understand why neighboring countries try to bring stability to Afghanistan and how they can get their aim in this country. For regional actors, Afghanistan looks like a playground to play their proxies rather than a graveyard for empires. All regional actors used the way of investment in various projects and contacted various groups within Afghanistan to achieve their aims. How these states achieve their objective is the other, but no one can deny the geostrategic importance of Afghanistan. If someone thinks about keeping the realist parameters in mind, one can conclude that each state is worried about its ambitions, survival, security maximization, and relative gain.

Keywords: Region, Stability, Islamabad, China, Central Asia,

Introduction

Afghanistan has been in a state of war due to the interference of world and regional states, along with various players seeking power for the last seven decades. Afghanistan is a playground for external powers to play its game; it is not a graveyard of empires (Khokhar, 2021).



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https://www.statista.com/chart/25400/military-deaths-in-foreign-interventions-in-afghanistan/

For the last few years, the country has faced the evil of terrorism, narcotics, human rights violations, political instability, economic and security problems, and social division. Amidst all this chaos, regional countries, especially neighboring states, worked hard to bring stability to the war-ruined country. Pakistan, China and Iran are the few countries that tried hard to bring peace to Afghanistan. After the Taliban arrived in Kabul, Islamabad organized a meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs of regional countries to discuss Kabul's changing political scenario online (Zafar,

2021). The basic theme of the meeting was stability and rehabilitation in the country. Military means are not the only solution to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. However, this meeting showed the importance of Afghanistan to the neighboring and regional actors. Pakistan's primary worry was the growing influence of New Dehli in Afghanistan. Islamabad can not afford confrontation on both ends. China is worried about the militancy in Afghanistan. China thinks terrorist organizations like ETIM would harm Beijing's aims in the area. China always thinks that friendly ties with Afghanistan favor both countries. Ankara wants to lead the Islamic world and tries to enhance its soft power in the region. Turkey offered security for the Kabul airport, but the Taliban denied it. Tehran and Kabul are facing severe threats from Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Tehran is worried and is taking steps to eradicate this evil from Afghanistan and the region. Other countries like Central Asian states (CARs) are also worried about the growing presence of ISKP in Afghanistan (Saikal & Nourzhanov, 2021). Apart from this, the CARs often showed their concerns about the safety of minorities living in Afghanistan. Moreover, Central Asian countries want to enhance their economic ties via Islamabad and Tehran to the whole world, especially the Middle Eastern region but peace in Afghanistan is necessary to enhance trade ties.

Research Questions

- Are regional states keen to bring stability to Afghanistan, or is it just a liberal paradigm to bring peace to Afghanistan?
- How did geography play an important role in bringing peace to Afghanistan?

Theoretical Framework

To conduct our research, realist theory was the best to apply. Realists believe that the state is the fundamental element of IR. They also focus on other factors but put the principal stress on the state. Realist scholars think that national interest is the leading factor for states and often go for it. States are rational actors; thus, their primary choice is to go for their national interests. Countries cannot afford such a step that can ruin their position in the global arena. In the global system, leaders are bound to think about the survival of their countries because, in global politics, a wave of competition is alive. The anarchic International system compels countries to take steps regarding their protection. Self-help is another realistic factor that signals no permanent friend and foe in the global system; the constant thing is the interests. Realist scholars stress after survival, countries enhance their power and go for relative gain and national interest. In the case of Afghanistan, neighboring states are willing to bring stability and peace to Afghanistan; otherwise, the regional governments will face the spillover effects of disturbance in Afghanistan. Peace is the only way to maximize the regional countries' economic activity and bring prosperity to the region.

Peaceful Afghanistan and Regional Countries

1. Pakistan

While signing a new partnership agreement with New Dehli in 2011, Hamid Karzai, the ex-president, said that New Dehli was Kabul's friend, but Islamabad was its twin brother (Karzai, 2011). We are born twins whether someone likes it or not; change in geography is impossible. Islamabad links with Afghanistan through a 2670km long border.

Disturbance in Afghanistan directly affects Islamabad's internal security and economy; that is why Pakistan is the primary stakeholder in Afghanistan. Indian presence in Kabul harms Pakistan (O'Hanlon, 2013). Islamabad was always keen to get support within the country to counter India in Afghanistan.

Efforts to Bring Peace to Afghanistan

From the beginning of the external interventions, Islamabad always supported a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. Bonn Conference was held in 2001 when a sketch was drawn for the rehabilitation of Afghanistan. Pakistan stressed inviting the Taliban, considering them a major player in Afghanistan. Henry Kissinger said in September 2021 that creative diplomacy could have prevented terrorism (Kissinger, 2021). In 2009 US surged in troops, and the Obama administration considered the fact and tried to approach the Taliban for negotiations. However, right from the beginning, Islamabad always supported peace initiatives and, thus, applauded the establishment of the High Peace Council in 2010. But the death of Burhanuddin Rabbani damaged its activities.

In November 2011, Pakistan, with CARs and other major actors of the region, pledged to work together to boost economic ties, stop terrorism and bring peace and stability. Islamabad initiated peace talks in Murree in 2015 to bring closer the Taliban, the Afghan regime, and the US. Murree's talks derailed due to the sudden demise of the head of the Taliban, Mullah Omer (Khan A. , 2016). In 2016, Islamabad made another effort for stability in Afghanistan but failed. It had one shortcoming and faced one setback. The shortcoming was the absence of a militant group, while Mullah Mansur's death in a US drone attack was a significant setback. The failure of the Six Nations Talks arranged in 2016. Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and India were part of that discussions. The sole purpose was to convince the Taliban to respect the peace discussions and sit at the table. But India never sat with the Taliban in the past and was unclear about discussions with the Taliban. India has always had a problem with the Taliban and thinks Islamabad can use the Taliban against India in occupied Kashmir. It also had other worries regarding Beijing, Islamabad, and Moscow that these countries wanted to use the Taliban against the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Neighboring states, worried about the increasing threat of ISIS in Afghanistan, established a trilateral discussion platform in 2016. But the US and European countries were not behind this step, and Afghanistan was also concerned about its exclusion from the talks.

Islamabad has permanently been enhancing its support for peace initiatives to bring stability to Afghanistan. Pakistan welcomed the deal between Ashraf Ghani and Gulbadin in 2016 (Snow,

2016). This support has also been shown in the highest military ranks of the Pakistan Army.

For instance, during his visit to Moscow in 2018, General Bajwa stressed the significance of a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. The stance was repeated during Bajwa's visit to Afghanistan in June 2018. Islamabad also played a crucial role in the Qatar talks between America and the Taliban. Due to Pakistan's tremendous efforts to establish a peaceful Afghanistan, a deal was signed by the Taliban and the US representatives on 29 February 2020, enacting the plan for the US troops' withdrawal from the state (Riaz, 2021). The Qatar agreement was a diplomatic win for Pakistan.

Reconstruction, Assistance, Development

Afghanistan has never seen peace for almost the last four decades. To make peace possible, it is necessary to work on promoting education, rehabilitation and construction along with the diplomatic front. Pakistan never installed mega projects to boost Afghanistan's economy and provide jobs to the local Afghans due to its bad economic condition. Islamabad supported Afghanistan on various fronts, including increasing the capacity of state institutions since 2001. The state authorities of Pakistan established an Afghanistan planning cell under the Planning Commission of Pakistan to support various projects in Afghanistan. In the Tokoyo conference held in 2002 to support the Afghan people, Islamabad pledged 100 million dollars to help the Afghan state institutions, reconstruction and rehabilitation phase (Clark, 2012). Islamabad worked on many projects like railways and roads. Islamabad provided transport to Kabul university, and Pakistan also worked on schools and hospitals in Afghanistan. Students from Afghanistan are getting scholarships from Pakistan without discrimination of gender (The Nation , 2018). Thousands of Afghan students are studying in Pakistan's top universities.

2. China

Afghanistan links with China with a 74km border, which is much smaller than Pakistan and Iran but is vital for both states. China is working on many mega projects in the world. Afghanistan has a crucial place in China's economic agenda.

BRI an Opportunity for Investment

Belt and Road initiative is the prime project of China in the 21st century. Afghanistan has a crucial place regarding BRI for China. Beijing is keen to link with all neighboring states, including Tehran and New Dehli, through corridors, railways and road projects. The Chinese ambassador said in 2016, without Afghanistan, there would be no connectivity in the region (Li, 2021). Security is the fundamental issue for Beijing to invest in Afghanistan. However, Beijing is keen to invest in various projects in Afghanistan. China is investing in large parts of the globe and is willing to invest its significant share in Afghanistan. Still, security is the primary problem in Chinese investment in Afghanistan.

https://www.statista.com/chart/16075/the-share-of-bri-investment-destinations/

Although Beijing has security concerns in Afghanistan, China has done splendid work in Kabul. Beijing has constructed a hospital for the masses of Kabul. Beijing also constructed various vocational institutes for people to learn skills; Beijing is keen to establish Chinese language institutes and in this regard, it has established a center at the university of Kabul. But the negative side is that most developments remained in Kabul or its peripheries. Due to security concerns, the rest of Afghanistan remained thirsty for foreign investment. China wants to do more for the people

of Afghanistan, but peace is necessary for development.

East Turkistan Islamic Movement

Beijing and Kabul had stable ties till 2001. Beijing has acted as a mediator and has included Afghanistan in bilateral and multilateral discussions. It has done shuttle diplomacy between Afghanistan and Pakistan. China also supported Kabul in training its military and cooperated in building a base in Badakhshan. Beijing does not want Afghanistan to become a haven for the ETIM because it will hold Chinese aims to promote its economic agenda in the region. It stresses that the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) may get a strong foothold in war-torn Afghanistan, affecting Beijing's internal peace and territorial integrity. Beijing has a clear intention to help Afghanistan with its internal security. Both states met on several ministerial-level visits regarding the same schedule. At the diplomatic level, Beijing has done splendid work. Beijing always felt uneasy with ETIM, and the Taliban connected with this organization. Yet, Beijing avoids to take sides and avoided opening another front. From 2014 to 2019, Chinese representatives met with Taliban officials on the Afghan peace process on five occasions. Chinese officials met with the Taliban in July 2021 (Aljazeera , 2021). The Chinese press intentionally publicized this event to securitize that China was ready to engage with Afghanistan after the foreign troops withdrew.

3. Iran

Tehran urged demolishing the Afghanistan Taliban regime and supported the US's actions in 2001. Tehran wanted to get rid of Salafi extremism from the neighboring country. Both states came closer to starting a war in 1998, but it took another way to harm Salafists. Tehran began to help militias from the Tajik and Hazara communities in the northern areas of Afghanistan. Tehran's intelligence forces and the Hazara community conducted operations in the border province of Herat (Dobbins, 2010).

AFGHANISTAN'S KEY IRAN BORDER POINTS

Source: United States Geological Survey (USGS).

https://www.flickr.com/photos/sigarhq/8405981232/in/photostream/
After the demise of the militant regime, Tehran discussed four critical points with President Karzai in 2002. Iran stressed Karzai to support the Hazara community, invest in the border areas of Iran, control drug trafficking and avoid confrontation with US. Iran also had some water issues and refugee problems with Afghanistan.

4. Turkey

Ankara has faced two crucial situations in recent history on one end, the tragic incident of 9/11 and, on the other hand, the Arab Spring (2011). Ankara wants to lead the Muslim world and to get prominent place in Muslim states; it uses soft power. In Afghanistan, Turkey has four intentions in evey move, Firstly, Ankara wanted a dominant external policy. Secondly, Turkey always tried to eradicate the evil of extremism and terrorism from Afghanistan. Thirdly, Ankara wanted to boost its relations with Kabul and Islamabad regarding economics and politics. In the end, Ankara was worried about the people of Afghanistan. Ankara was always supported militarily and non-militarily to bring a sense of peace to Kabul.

5. Central Asian States

Central Asian Republics always feel the heat due to the disturbance in neighbouring Afghanistan. Two countries named Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have a crucial place among the CARs and are consistently trying to bring Afghanistan on track to progress. Turkmenistan played an average role, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikstan have faced comparatively less interference (Saikal & Nourzhanov, 2021) CARs have three problems —war spillover, extremism, and drug trafficking. They always focused on three strategies—security, progress, and diplomacy. Central Asian states have always tried to boost ties with Afghanistan in defense, economy and peace initiatives (ORAZGALIYEVA, 2017).

Conclusion

To conclude this study, it can be said that the neighboring players were of the view of getting their interests in Afghanistan. Their moves were vital because they served to bring peace and achieve their interests. Islamabad wanted a power-sharing formula, including the Taliban. Beijing does not wish instability in neighboring states because of war spillover and extremism in the province of Xinjiang. Peace in Afghanistan favors China's plan to promote BRI in the region, including Afghanistan. Beijing felt uncomfortable due to the US presence in its neighborhood. Tehran takes the US as its worst enemy and thinks of putting it out of the region. However, Iran supported the US in the beginning to demolish the Taliban regime but later got a connection with the Taliban. Ankara wants to lead the Muslim world, especially the Sunni block and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Turkey intends to conquer countries by promoting soft power. The Central Asian states are trying to enhance their stature on the globe. CARs are now trying to catch the

world market to export their resources. All countries are willing to bring stability and permanent peace to Afghanistan to achieve their ambitions.

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