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EXTERNAL INVOLVEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This project report assesses the nature and extent of external involvement – both official and private – in the current conflict in Afghanistan. It examines both the motivations (strategic, political, economic, religious, etc) for interference and the activities (military, diplomatic, etc) of external sponsors of the Afghan warring parties. This analysis will have the added benefit of throwing light on the foreign and security policies of a number of regional and extra-regional states.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For over two decades Afghanistan has been at war. The fighting began with rebellion, then was transformed into resistance to Soviet invasion, and since 1989 has involved factional feuding over control of the country. The conflict has produced a very heavy – though not reliably quantified – toll of death and injury, and has generated the largest single refugee group in the world. Foreign intervention, in the first instance by the Soviets, and since then less overtly by Afghanistan's neighbours and other outside actors, has fuelled the conflict. The United Nations has concluded that the key to ending the conflict is the termination of all foreign interference.

Foreign intervention in Afghanistan is actuated by a large number of strategic, political, economic, religious, and other factors. As might be expected of a long-running and bitterly-contested war, the most salient motivation for intervention by outside states is security concerns. For most states, these concerns relate to the importation from Afghanistan of ideas or violence (or both). Thus, Islamabad worries that the Afghan and Pakistani volunteers who left Pakistan to fight in Afghanistan will return, and pose an internal security threat to Pakistan. However, recent Pakistani governments have also seen in Islamic militants, trained or combat-conditioned in Afghanistan, a useful instrument for fuelling the insurgency in Kashmir and sustaining Pakistan's half-century confrontation with India. Furthermore, Islamabad believes that Afghanistan would provide Pakistan with "strategic depth" in the event of a war with India. Thus, Pakistan's internal security needs are balanced by broader strategic requirements.

In this regard Pakistan differs from other intervenors, whose security focus tends to be domestic. For example, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are irritated that opposition groups have sought bases in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan. Russia, India, and China - which are all militarily-powerful, face no direct military threat from Afghanistan, and between them share only 76-km of border with that country - fear that Taliban's message of Jihad will find an echo in their Muslim populations. Even countries as remote as the United States can worry about the security implications of the Afghan conflict. Taliban has irritated Washington by giving sanctuary to Osama bin Laden, the terrorist financier, and Saudi Arabia's favour has been alienated by the same issue. It is noteworthy that the only neighbouring state that thinks that it is relatively immune to Islamic militancy – Turkmenistan – has been mildly well-disposed towards Taliban.

No other motive for interference is as general as security, but some do affect more than one country. Taliban's religious extremism makes religion one such motive. Saudi Arabia's initial support of Taliban was religion-based, where by contrast Iran's hostility has owed much to Taliban's attack on Afghanistan's Shi'a minority. A corollary to Taliban's religious militancy is the antipathy it engenders among some countries, which are alienated by Taliban's human rights record, particularly with regard to women.

Taliban's leading role in drug production and trafficking is a source of considerable concern to a number of countries. Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey and Tajikistan are all transit routes for narcotics produced in Afghanistan, and increasingly

their own populations are vulnerable to drug use. Another negative consequence of the conflict for Afghanistan's neighbours is the presence in several of them, but primarily in Pakistan and Iran, of large refugee populations, which pose both an economic and a security burden.

Domestic political pressure can exert a strong influence on foreign policy, but with regard to Afghan policy it only really influences the actions of Pakistan and, to a lesser extent, Iran. Both the current military government in Pakistan and its democratic predecessor have faced strong pressure from Islamic groups that support Taliban, and it has been tempted to troll for their support by backing Islamic militancy in both Afghanistan and Kashmir, while trying not to encourage extremism on its own soil. Iran, too, has faced public pressure on its Afghan policy, with irate citizens demanding retribution for the murder of eight diplomats and one journalist in a city captured by Taliban. Some governments – notably that of Uzbekistan – are not above exaggerating the threat of Islamic militancy for their own political ends.

Only one state – Pakistan – thinks it has important economic incentives for involvement in Afghanistan. Its initial vision of economic opportunity in Central Asia revolved around transportation routes (notably for energy) through Central Asia. Without security, roads and pipelines cannot be built or maintained, and the prospect of one faction (Taliban) controlling the whole of Afghanistan has certainly enticed Islamabad. That dream has receded, but Pakistan has other economic concerns relating to Afghanistan, most notably the loss of revenue caused by smuggling.

For much of the past decade, international censure has not been much of a factor in influencing the behaviour of external sponsors of the conflict. This has been largely because some of the powers that might have exerted an influence – notably the US and China, and to a lesser degree India – have not themselves been strongly engaged on the issue until recently. As that changes, international pressure is beginning to affect the Afghan policies of some states, notably Pakistan. Territorial issues have played only the most minor role in encouraging outside interference in Afghanistan.

In examining the motives that prompt external involvement in Afghanistan, only one state scores high on almost every count: Pakistan. That state is also nearly unique in having a strong additional influence on its Afghan policy: the willingness of Pakistani citizens or residents to join the ranks of one of the warring sides (Arabs also enlist, but in smaller numbers and with minor implications for their governments). Saudi Arabian policy is similarly affected by the sanctuary given bin Laden by Taliban. In the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Pakistan should be the primary external actor in the Afghan conflict.

At first glance it appears that while Pakistan has strongly backed Taliban, all the other states that have intervened in the conflict have supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. However, there has been a surprising degree of fluidity in external involvement in the conflict since the rise of Taliban in 1994. For example, after 1994 Pakistan switched from backing another faction to support of Taliban, and since the 1999 military

coup has effectively put Afghan policy in holding mode, while still backing Taliban. The United States was initially favourably disposed towards Taliban – without providing assistance – but from about 1997 switched to hostility towards Taliban and more active participation in Afghan affairs. The varying fortunes of war have affected the policies of some of Afghanistan's neighbours or near-neighbours. China, Russia, and some of the Central Asian states initially opposed Taliban to varying degrees, but became more accommodating in the wake of Taliban's apparent march to complete victory in 1998. Since the Taliban drive stalled in late-1998, these countries have shifted back to policies of containment of Taliban (China) or active support of the opposition (Russia and its Central Asian allies). Perhaps the most dramatic shift has been that of Saudi Arabia, which began by strongly supporting Taliban but later reversed course, largely from anger at the sanctuary given Osama bin Laden, a strong opponent of the Saudi ruling house.

The changes in Pakistan's position can be largely explained by the growing pressure from the international community, particularly the US, and by concerns of a spill-over into Pakistan of the Afghan conflict. However, they can also be explained by the fact that Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan is far from unitary, and is shaped by a number of different individuals and organisations: the Prime Minister, the Foreign Ministry, the Interior Ministry, the armed forces, and above all by the Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI).

The most important type of outside assistance has been military, but its providers have tried to cloak their activities in anonymity. The ISI effectively runs Pakistan's Afghan policy, and thus it might be assumed that the Pakistani military would play a direct role in the conflict. The Pakistani forces may have provided planning and logistical support to Taliban, along with some equipment. Whether military personnel have assisted Taliban is unclear, although past such involvement has been admitted and there have been reports of Pakistani servicemen taking their discharges immediately before joining Taliban ranks. Pakistani officials have complained that the US cruise missile attacks on militant training camps inside Afghanistan in August 1998 killed several ISI personnel. Militarily, the flow of volunteers (both Pakistani citizens and Afghan refugees) from Pakistan into Taliban ranks has probably been as significant as the provision of more traditional forms of military assistance.

Only Taliban has received manpower assistance from external sources, but it is evident that the sizeable arsenals fielded by both sides could not be obtained without foreign help. The bulk of the material help for the Northern Alliance has been provided by Iran and Russia, while Tajikistan has supplied the logistics base, thanks to its proximity to Northern Alliance territory. Large quantities of equipment have reached Taliban *via* Pakistan, but private foreign backers of the Afghan militia may have supplied some of it. Both sides appear to have received extensive technical, logistical, training, planning and other help from their external sponsors.

A different form of outside military assistance has been apparent attempts to divert Taliban attention and resources. This was most evident in September 1998, when

major Iranian exercises on the Afghan border likely distracted Taliban and helped to curtail its strongest and most successful push against the opposition. It is certainly the case that the offensive stalled at that time, and that there has essentially been stalemate since. Similarly, Russian threats of pre-emptive military strikes against Taliban in April and May 2000 may have been intended to divert Taliban resources to vulnerable sectors in the north. The only direct military action undertaken by an outside power in Afghanistan was the US cruise missile strike. It only targeted Taliban indirectly, and had minimal military impact.

In contrast with military backing, the weight of external diplomatic support has been very much in favour of the opposition. Nonetheless, the isolation and poverty of Afghanistan reduce the scope for diplomatic action to assist or pressure one or other of the warring parties, as Taliban's refusal to hand over bin Laden demonstrates. Only three countries – Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates - have recognised Taliban as Afghanistan's government (the opposition has Afghanistan's seat at the UN as well as in several regional groupings). Interestingly, while some Arab governments and publics support Taliban, the Arab League has ignored Afghanistan. Without yet recognising Taliban, Turkmenistan has shown itself moderately well-disposed towards the militia, a stance which has given Ashkhabad some influence in the peace process. However, diplomatic recognition does not imply diplomatic relations, and the Saudis at least have curtailed relations with Taliban, largely on the issue of bin Laden.

While diplomatic efforts have been largely directed at containing Taliban, there has been some attempt at engagement, most notably by the Chinese. The US is involving itself in the Afghan conflict, and its efforts to build a coalition against Taliban may enhance the diplomatic option, as well as promote compromise solutions such as the convening of a "Loya Jirga" (grand council).

Not all outside involvement has been partial. The UN has been heavily involved in the Afghan situation for the past two decades, and has played a key role in attempts to resolve the conflict. In recent years this role has been reinforced by limited diplomatic presence in Kabul. It also derives from the UN's co-ordinating role in de-mining and in the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Afghans. Nonetheless, Taliban has viewed the UN (as well as the foreign non-governmental organisations in Afghanistan) with a suspicion that has been heightened by the refusal of a UN seat to the militia and to the UN's imposition of sanctions on Taliban in November 1999.

The fighting of recent years bears out the UN contention that external sponsorship sustains the Afghan conflict. Much of Taliban's success between 1996 and 1998 depended on bribery, and its is noteworthy that victories have been far fewer since official Saudi funding was ended in late-1998. Foreign volunteers have constituted some 15-30 percent of Taliban strength, and the decline of this source of manpower seems to have been an important factor in stalling the militia's advance. On the other side, Northern Alliance resistance has been solidified by infusions of equipment from the opposition's foreign sponsors. With an over-stretched Taliban facing the prospect of guerrilla warfare in the areas it has seized, a stalemate has developed. Taliban has a

manpower advantage, the opposition probably some equipment advantages. Both sides equally have significant weaknesses. Taliban's need to police the areas it has seized diminishes its manpower advantage. The opposition is an alliance largely in name, and its collapse in 1998 was very largely a product of intense feuding.

However, neither side – Taliban especially – seems ready to discard the military option. Taliban evidently thinks that final victory remains within reach; the opposition wants to liberate the non-Pushtun populations from Taliban control. Given the almost complementary strengths and weaknesses of the two sides, stalemate seems a more likely outcome than total victory. This implies that the external backers of the two sides will maintain some level of support, simply to sustain such a stalemate and protect their investment, probably without providing the means whereby more decisive results might be achieved. Nonetheless, a continuing stalemate does open the way for new options, such as a Loya Jirga, to gain ground in the longer term (as happened with the rise of Taliban).

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has been at war for more than two decades, with insurgency giving way to foreign (Soviet) intervention, which in turn was replaced by civil war. The cost of such conflict over more than two decades is hard to quantify; the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute has not in fact tried, but the Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid puts the figure at over 1.5 million.[1] However, for nineteen years in a row, Afghans have had the unfortunate distinction of remaining the largest single refugee group in the world (while more than 2.6 million Afghans still live in exile, at one point that number was as high as 6.2 million[a]).[2]

Attempts to resolve this conflict are made regularly and unavailingly, and in mid-1998 the Secretary General of the United Nations concluded that

> "The key to ending the Afghan tragedy lies in whether or not the international community has the resolve to address its external aspects, namely, the continuous foreign interference in the form of providing arms and other supplies to the warring factions."[3]

In mid-1999, UN Special Envoy to Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi warned Afghanistan's neighbours to "stop pouring arms and other war-making materials into the country."[4] In his report of 10 March 2000, the Secretary General noted that the flow into Afghanistan of weapons and other war-making materials continued.[5] A Security Council statement of 7 April 2000 called upon all states to prohibit their military personnel from planning and participating in combat operations in Afghanistan, to withdraw their personnel, and to ensure that the supply of ammunition and other military *materiél* was halted.[6]

Foreign interest in Afghanistan is readily comprehensible. The country's location at the crossroads between Iran, Central Asia, and South Asia have given it a strategic significance for centuries. It has acted alternatively as a buffer between competing empires and ideologies and as a military corridor. When it filled this role in the nineteenth century, the competition between Britain and Russia for advantage in the region led to the coining of the phrase "the Great Game." That phrase is being used once again, rather promiscuously.[b]

Aim

The aim of this project report is to examine the nature and extent of external involvement – both official and private – in the current conflict in Afghanistan, and to assess the impact of that participation on the continuation of the fighting. This analysis will have the added benefit of throwing light on the foreign and security policies of a number of regional and even extra-regional states.

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[a] In July 1999, Afghanistan's population was estimated at 25.8 million (CIA World Factbook).

[b] A senior analyst with the Heritage Foundation in the US recently used it to define international rivalries over oil in the Caucasus and Central Asia. A paper published by National Defense University in 1996 used the term as its title and theme, without reference to Afghanistan or India.

BACKGROUND

The Great Game I

In a report to the UN Security Council of 9 December 1998, Secretary General Kofi Annan warned that Afghanistan had become "the stage for a new version of the Great Game."

The phrase "Great Game" originated nearly two centuries ago as a description of British worries over anticipated Russian advances on India, and of the resulting competition for influence in Afghanistan. For the British, who coined the phrase,[c] this competition was a game because it involved exploration, espionage, and adventure (as it did on the Russian side). The "Great Game" was initiated in 1807, when Napoleon suggested to Tsar Alexander I that together France and Russia should invade India, with French troops crossing Persia and Afghanistan, joining Russian troops in the latter country. The two rulers fell out, and the threat never materialised, but Russian advances in the Caucasus and Central Asia worried London and Calcutta. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the British and Russian empires in Asia were separated by some 2,000 miles; by the end of the century the gap had shrunk to a few hundred miles, and in some places (in the Pamir region) to less than twenty. British policy-makers were aware that previous Indian empires had been overthrown by invasions – usually from the north-west – and feared that any new invasion would lead to an internal revolt. Hence a morbid fear of attack from the north-west.

As for the Russians, in 1864 Foreign Minister Prince Gorchakov circulated a memorandum to the major European powers in which it was averred that

> "The position of Russia in Central Asia is that of all civilised states which are brought into contact with half-savage nomad populations possessing no fixed social organization. In such cases it always happens that the more civilised state is forced, in the interests of the security of its frontiers and its commercial relations, to exercise a certain ascendancy over those whose turbulent and unsettled character make them undesirable neighbours."[7]

The positions of Britain and Russia hence corresponded to the dictum of the noted British historian, H.A.L. Fisher, who contended that "an orderly power ringed round by turbulence always finds itself compelled to establish peace and security upon its frontiers."

The British response to Russia's apparent challenge was epitomised by two schools of thought: the "forward" and the "masterly inactivity" schools. For proponents of the former, the British needed to pre-empt Russia's advance by invading Afghanistan or establishing a compliant buffer state there. The advocates of "masterly inactivity" felt that the Russians should be allowed to over-extend themselves. Over the course of the

[c] It is attributed to Captain Arthur Conolly, who coined it in the early years of the nineteenth century, and was one of the game's early victims, being executed in Bukhara in 1842.

nineteenth century, the British twice invaded Afghanistan. On the second occasion (1877-80), British action was precipitated by the despatch of a Russian mission to Kabul, along with major Russian advances in Central Asia. In the next few years, those advances took Russian troops close to the Afghan border. When Russian troops defeated an Afghan force at Panjdeh in 1885, Britain and Russia came close to war, with troops of the British Indian army being mobilised and sent to the north-west frontier. In the years before the First World War, Russia's concern at Germany's growing power led to a reconsideration of its relations with Britain and hence of its policy *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan and India. In August 1907 an Anglo-Russian convention declared that Afghanistan was outside Russia's sphere of influence, and St Petersburg agreed not to send agents to Kabul. For their part, the British undertook not to annex or occupy any part of Afghanistan or to interfere in the internal administration of the country. Thus, after one hundred years, the "Great Game" was over.

In recent testimony, Professor Neil MacFarlane urged that observers of the situation in Central Asia not "be carried away by analogies to the 'Great Game'." He argued that the "Great Game" was largely a product of British concern over the security of India, and that there is no similar dynamic today since Western vital security interests are not in play. He argued that because vital interests are something people will fight for, and that Western states would not fight for Central Asia and the Caucasus, therefore the analogy to the "Great Game" is deeply flawed.[8]

However, important interests for some countries, and vital ones for others, are engaged in this region – Islamic militancy, oil, and drugs among them - and they involve some of the same protagonists as in the nineteenth century. India and Russia are the two most obvious, and their current involvement in Afghanistan will be discussed in this project report. India's concerns are no longer those of Britain, but in the early-nineteenth century much of the defence of India fell upon an Indian surrogate of the British government, the East India Company. Not only were most of the troops involved Indian, the costs of defence were assumed by the Company rather than by London. It is true that the Company exercised less and less control, until the Crown took over in 1858. Nonetheless, London and Calcutta were often at odds over how India should be defended.[d] While British policy regarding India during the period of the "Great Game" was undoubtedly shaped by London's broader diplomatic needs (and especially by policy *vis-à-vis* Russia in the context of Europe), security and commercial interests relating specifically to India were the determinant of the advance to the north-west frontier. As the correspondence of Governor-General Sir Henry Hardinge showed, the annexation of the Punjab in the 1840s - which brought British and Indian troops to the Khyber Pass - was done very hesitatingly, and was largely precipitated by turmoil in the Sikh kingdom.

Furthermore, a central element of the historic "Great Game" was a battle for influence in Afghanistan. As this project report will show, that has not changed.

[d] For example, in 1848 the Company's Board of Control (London headquarters, with strong government links) opposed annexation of the Punjab, in the face of Governor-General Lord Dalhousie's advocacy of such a policy. Eventually, the Board gave way, saying that "It is clear now that you have the right to do what you choose."

As MacFarlane suggests, the West is unlikely to sacrifice troops to secure any goal in Central Asia, and certainly not to the degree that Britain did in the late-nineteenth century. Nonetheless, it has strongly supported local efforts (as Britain harnessed local troops and treasure in the nineteenth century). American support for the Afghan *mujahidin*, and hence for Pakistan, during the 1980s is the most obvious example. Russia clearly was willing to sacrifice troops in the same conflict. Washington's willingness to fire Tomahawk cruise missiles at Afghanistan – with the risks attendant on such action – is indicative of contemporary engagement. And if India and Russia no longer feel threatened by each other – they are now on the same side - they do feel challenged by events in Central Asia. Hence, the analogy of the "Great Game" as a description of events at the turn of the twenty-first century may be stretched, but it does conjure up important security interests played out in contemporary Afghanistan.

The Great Game II

The conflict between the Soviet Union and the US in Afghanistan is a better

Kremlin's decision to invade. The Soviets had had the capability to invade Afghanistan since the 1950s, and had not done so. Indeed, Moscow paid a high price for its occupation of Afghanistan in terms of its relations with Third World, and especially Muslim, countries.

Pakistan began lending surreptitious support to Afghan rebels against the regime of Daud Khan in 1974. After the Soviet invasion, many of the anti-Soviet guerrillas (*mujahidin*) established bases in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, notably in Peshawar, the provincial capital.

For its part, the US's interest in Afghanistan had all but disappeared by the 1960s, and there was a tacit acceptance that Afghanistan was within the Soviet sphere of influence (allowing the Soviet leadership to assume that invasion would not provoke a military confrontation with the West). Although Pakistan was early in the field in supporting the rebels, US backing for them only came after the Soviet invasion. Even then, Washington did not begin to supply sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons to the *mujahidin* until 1986, and it left the main political decisions regarding which Afghans should be supported to Islamabad. Pakistan also became the main conduit for Western aid to the *mujahidin*. With the backing of the CIA and of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), some 35,000 Muslim radicals, from 40 Islamic countries, joined the fight against the Soviets and their client Afghan regime. By the late-1980s combined US and Saudi assistance to the Afghan resistance had climbed to about $1 billion per year. At least 13,000 Soviet troops are thought to have died in a nine-year occupation of Afghanistan, and the USSR poured a total of $45 billion into the lost war.[10]

A New Great Game?

In the nearly eight years between the Soviet withdrawal and Taliban's capture of Kabul (September 1996), the outside world largely ignored the growing anarchy in Afghanistan (after the overthrow of the Soviet proxy regime in 1992, Afghanistan has been wracked by civil war). External involvement in the country during the period 1989-1996 largely comprised the supply of large amounts of emergency aid (though less than half that requested by the UN) and endorsement of UN attempts to broker a peace settlement. In marked contrast with the situation in the 1980s, in September 1991 the US and Russian governments agreed to end arms supplies to Afghanistan.

The involvement in Afghanistan's civil war of a considerable number of outside countries exacerbates the conflict – as the UN tirelessly points out – and complicates the search for a peaceful solution to the problem.

AFGHANISTAN'S NEIGHBOURS

The international attempt to resolve the conflicts in Afghanistan currently revolve around the Six-Plus-Two formula. The "Six" are the states neighbouring Afghanistan: Pakistan (a shared border of 2,430-km), Iran (936-km), Turkmenistan (744-km), Uzbekistan (137-km), Tajikistan (1,206-km), and China (76-km). The "Two" are Russia

and the US, whose involvement makes the analogy of the "Great Game" more tenable, if the US is substituted for nineteenth-century Britain and India's involvement (albeit outside the Six-Plus-Two formula) is factored in.

Pakistan

Pakistan is the primary external actor in the conflict in Afghanistan, and thus its motives, policies, and actions merit particular scrutiny in any assessment of external intervention in that conflict.

Background

From 1947 to 1963, Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan were largely determined by the Pushtunistan question. As successor state, Pakistan inherited the territory east of the Durand Line, a border demarcated by the British in 1893, but challenged by the Afghans as having been drawn up under duress (it was never intended as a *de jure* international boundary). Consequently, Afghanistan demanded that an independent Pushtun state be established, incorporating a large area of Pakistan. Because of this dispute, Afghanistan was the only country to vote against Pakistan's admission to the United Nations in 1947. The issue smouldered for years, even leading to border clashes in 1960 and 1961. In the latter year, Afghanistan closed the border and severed diplomatic relations. However, the resignation in 1963 of Daud Khan, then the Afghan Prime Minister and a militant exponent of Pushtunistan, along with the intercession of the Shah of Iran, led to an improvement in relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

As noted earlier, Pakistan began giving Afghan rebels surreptitious support soon after Daud Khan's coup, becoming heavily involved – with US and Saudi backing – after the Soviet invasion. The ISI played an important role in distributing US weapons and funds in Afghanistan. Thus, the ISI was in a position to promote the strictest Islamists and pro-Pakistan Pushtun elements within the Afghan resistance (the then-head of the ISI, Lieutenant-General Hamid Gul, was himself an Islamist). A corollary of the campaign to eject the Soviets from Afghanistan was that the Pakistani military establishment became "transfixed by the conviction that…Pakistan's role in aiding the victory of the Mujahideen…has earned Islamabad the right to decide who should or should not rule in Kabul."[11]

Until late-1994, Pakistan supported Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of a Pushtun militia, and his allies, but – recognising that Hekmatyar could not take Kabul – Islamabad then decided to switch horses and back Taliban, then a new force on the scene (in fact, Taliban was established by Afghan refugees in Pakistan). Initially, Pakistan provided civil aid, repairing infrastructure in areas taken by the militia (the initiative came from the Pakistani interior ministry, rather than ISI, which hastily followed suit).

Motives Behind Pakistan's Policy Towards Afghanistan

Given the long border shared between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the history of their relations, it is hardly surprising that Islamabad does not feel itself a disinterested

neighbour of the war-torn state to its north-west, nor that its involvement far exceeds that of any other state. Pakistani policy towards Afghanistan is actuated by a large number of strategic, security, political, economic and other factors.

For some fifteen years, Pakistani commentators have linked Afghanistan with the notion of "strategic depth." In the event of a conflict with India, many Pakistanis envisage that a compliant regime in Afghanistan would give Pakistan a secure base for its forces (presumably mainly aircraft, given the likelihood that road access between Pakistan and Afghanistan would be probably be limited in an India-Pakistan war). But "strategic depth" seems to have a broader meaning than simply military basing. It also appears to refer to sustaining Islamic militancy, in order to impress upon New Delhi the risk that militancy would continue even where large parts (or all) of Pakistan may be overrun by the Indian army. Thus, there would be no finality to Indian victory. Further, some Pakistanis envisage the creation of a belt of Islamic countries – including the states of Central Asia, as well as Afghanistan –which would add to Pakistan's strategic rear by increasing its commercial, cultural, political, and diplomatic influence.[12]

One of the primary concerns of the Pakistani government is internal security, and the conflict in Afghanistan has serious repercussions on the situation within Pakistan. There has been a reflux of extremism into Pakistan, with Taliban-style groups emerging in the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan. In 1995 hundreds of Afghan and Pakistani Taliban were involved in an uprising to demand Sharia law; the revolt was crushed by the army. Islamic militancy is beginning to seep from these provinces into Punjab and Sindh (for the first time, in mid-1999 the majority of the Pakistani volunteers in Taliban ranks were not Pushtuns but Punjabis). A backwash of violence emanating from Pakistani *mujahidin* may not be Islamabad's only concern. In late-September 1999 Taliban fired several missiles into Pakistan. Attack from this quarter would be only a minuscule problem for Islamabad, but it could not ignore the potential for it altogether, given the history of the frontier.

Islamabad is trying to perform a balancing act. On the one hand, it wants to control the blow-back of violence onto its own soil, something which requires, in part, some kind of arrangement with Taliban. On the other hand, both former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and present Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf have shown themselves anxious to enlist support of Islamic extremists in Pakistan, and this has entailed backing for Jihad, whether in Afghanistan or Kashmir. Pakistan has been an active supporter of the Kashmiri resistance – regular troops were involved alongside Islamic militants in the Kargil incursion into the Indian state in the second quarter of 1999 – and thus Islamabad has a common cause with the *mujahidin* there. Since many of those *mujahidin* have been trained in Afghanistan, and some are Afghans, any action that Pakistan takes against Taliban could hurt Islamabad's cause in Kashmir. Likewise, one of the well-springs of international (and particularly American) pressure on Taliban – the attempt to persuade Taliban to withdraw sanctuary for the terrorist financier Osama bin Laden – has little appeal for those Pakistanis who welcome bin Laden's support for the Kashmiris.

Islamabad may also anticipate negative security ramifications from a Taliban defeat. The Pakistani government wants to avoid the break-up of Afghanistan, which might revive demands for the establishment of a Pushtun state ("Pushtunistan") incorporating a substantial belt of Pakistani territory. By the same token, if the anti-Taliban opposition, the Northern Alliance, prevails, it might bring to the fore a man, Ahmed Shah Masud (the military leader of the opposition), who is thought to be virulently anti-Pakistan.[13]

Although Pakistani-Afghan relations ceased largely to revolve around the border issue in the early-1960s, the problem has not been entirely resolved. While Pakistan's concerns on the subject may now be mainly focused on the potential for a Pushtunistan, the actual demarcation of the border likely remains an issue for Islamabad, even if probably a minor one. At the end of May 2000, a Northern Alliance newspaper claimed that the Pakistani and Afghan interior ministers had met earlier in the month, and had reached agreement on a number of issues, among them recognition of the Durand Line.[14] While the source of this story might be a subjective one, Radio Pakistan reported that Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider told newsmen on 19 May that the two sides

> "agreed to restore sanctity of Durand Line in order to check the free crossing of Afghans into Pakistan. Afghans entering Pakistan will have to carry some travel documents. This will be later changed into passport system."[15]

The Afghan ambassador to Islamabad later claimed that the issue had not been mentioned.[16] Whatever the truth of the story, it does suggest that Afghan recognition of the Durand Line remains a goal of Pakistani policy. Both sides did agree that they discussed demarcation of an area that had not been covered by the Durand Line, and which had become a source of dispute. The tribes living in the Pakistani district adjacent to this particular stretch of the border claim to live in constant fear of raids by Afghan tribesmen, and have requested government protection.

As most of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, Pakistan is heavily affected by the drug trade. For years, Pakistan has been one of the main transit routes for Afghanistan's heroin. Naturally, this has had untoward social consequences for the country. From having a negligible number of heroin addicts in the early-1980s, Pakistan is now thought by the UN to have 1.5 to 2 million addicts (Rashid puts the figure in 1999 at five million[17]). Since Taliban is deeply involved in the narcotics trade, deriving much of its revenues from the taxation of production and smuggling of drugs,[f] it is likely that the trade has some negative affects on relations between Islamabad and the militia.

Pakistan has strong economic as well as security and social motives for establishing its influence in Afghanistan. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991,

[f] Afghanistan produced 4,600 tons of opium in 1999, more than twice as much as in 1998, according to the UN. Around 96 percent of Afghanistan's opium production is cultivated in Taliban-controlled areas, and the militia has become the world's biggest producer and smuggler of hard drugs, overtaking rings in Colombia and Burma.

many countries saw economic opportunity in the resources and markets of Central Asia (the region's oil and gas reserves are thought to rival those of the North Sea). Pakistan is a member of a Muslim economic bloc, the Economic Co-operation Organisation (ECO), founded in 1992 and comprising the Central Asian states, plus Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and Azerbaijan. Like other external powers, Pakistan has been disappointed by the reality of economic opportunity in Central Asia. However, one of its biggest dreams – oil and gas pipelines linking Pakistan with the energy resources of Turkmenistan – remains alive, although barely. These pipelines would cross Afghanistan (the oil route would be Chardzou [Turkmenistan]-Herat [Afghanistan]-Gwadar [Pakistan]; the gas route would be Daulatabad [Turkmenistan]-Herat-Kandahar-Multan [Pakistan]). Pakistan imported $2 billion of oil in 1995-96, and although it has gas reserves of its own in Baluchistan, it faces a gas shortfall by 2010. Thus, Islamabad is eager to find alternative and cheaper sources of energy.

When the possibility of a Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan pipeline was first broached, Pakistan was apparently not averse to India's energy needs being met as well as its own (economies of scale would benefit Pakistani consumption). The energy needs of both Pakistan and India's western states, as well as of the New Delhi area, prompted the American company Unocal to explore the potential for a spur-line to the Indian capital from the proposed trans-Afghanistan route. For all the rivalry of the two countries, Unocal claimed that there was support in both Pakistan and India for such a spur-line. Since then, India-Pakistan relations have been soured by the Kargil conflict of summer 1999. As a result, New Delhi objected when Tehran sought to modify a 1993 Indo-Iranian memorandum of understanding on an offshore pipeline between Iran and western India (natural gas from Turkmenistan as well as from Iranian fields could flow through this pipeline). The Iranians approached Pakistan for transit rights for an Iran-India land pipeline (which is thought likely to be 15-20 percent cheaper than a shallow-water one), and on 3 April 2000 Musharraf approved the request on the understanding that Pakistan would earn transit fees of $600-700 million. The Indians objected to Tehran's action, on the ground that it would put a major Indian energy lifeline at Pakistan's mercy.[18] If a natural gas pipeline were constructed between Iran and India, whether by land or offshore, one of the benefits of a trans-Afghanistan route – meeting India's need for natural gas – would be lost.

While cost is a factor in construction of the trans-Afghanistan pipelines, security is a major issue. In order to justify underwriting pipeline construction, international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, and the business community would require the establishment of a stable Afghan government with broad internal support, international recognition, and good relations with its neighbours. None of these conditions have prevailed in Afghanistan. The Unocal-led consortium made it clear that the gas pipeline would not be built if the war in Afghanistan continued. Unocal's gas pipeline route would transit Afghanistan *via* Herat and Kandahar, and at that time (the consortium was formed in October 1997) its entry point into Afghanistan placed it within 200-km of a major front line. Taliban insisted then (and with the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998 would now be more emphatic) that the route was entirely under its control.

But without a ceasefire, or the final victory of one side, there is no way to guarantee that construction work will not be disrupted.

One day after US cruise missiles struck militant training camps in Afghanistan in August 1998, Unocal suspended activities associated with the pipeline project. It announced that it would only resume pipeline activity when and if Afghanistan achieved the peace and stability necessary to attract funding from international lending agencies and an established government acquired UN and US recognition. Two months after the Unocal announcement the UN once again refused to recognise Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. In December 1998, Unocal bailed out of the project (citing as the reason Taliban treatment of women, rather than the lack of security and recognition).

However, a rival consortium, led by the Argentinian company Bridas, remains in contention, and Pakistan still seems hopeful that the trans-Afghanistan pipeline will be constructed. Musharraf voiced strong support for the project during a visit to Turkmenistan on 15 May 2000. In his speech he referred to the need for peace and stability in Afghanistan, implicitly linking construction of the pipeline and an end to the fighting. However, only three days after Musharraf's visit, for the first time in eight years, gas from western deposits in Turkmenistan was directed to a Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan-Russia pipeline. With a recent agreement greatly to increase Turkmenistan's gas exports to Russia, and with alternate pipeline prospects for Caspian and Central Asian energy (via Iran, or Azerbaijan-Georgia-Black Sea, or Turkey), the advantages to third-party countries of a trans-Afghanistan pipeline route are reduced.

The dream of tapping markets in Central Asia does not solely revolve around energy pipelines. In October 1996, then-President Farooq Leghari visited Uzbekistan, and one of the issues discussed with his hosts was the establishment of a new transportation corridor from Termez to Karachi, *via* Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat.[19] It is doubtful that anything has come of this proposal, but it does give a further indication of Pakistani thinking with regard to trans-Afghanistan communications. As in the case of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan pipelines, security would be a key dimension in the realisation of an Uzbekistan-Pakistan corridor. As will be seen, other transit possibilities are being scouted by Pakistan, suggesting that route security remains a salient motive for Islamabad. Rashid claims that truckers are equally interested in transportation routes across Afghanistan, and that their frustration with being frequently stopped and "taxed" by different factions along a single route was a catalyst in swinging Pakistani support behind Taliban in late-1994.[20]

Impoverished as it is, Afghanistan has a number of other impacts on the Pakistani economy. Under international law, Pakistan must allow landlocked Afghanistan to import and export goods duty-free through Karachi; the goods should only transit Pakistan. This requirement is incorporated in the 1965 Afghan Transit Trade Agreement (ATTA), whereby certain goods can be imported into Afghanistan free of Pakistani duties. However, a significant proportion of these goods are then smuggled into Pakistan, depriving Islamabad of a source of indirect taxation and undercutting local industry. The

ATTA trade has expanded enormously since Taliban became a force on the Afghan scene. According to the Pakistani government, Pakistan's losses in customs revenue and sales taxes from this source in 1998 amounted to 30% of the government's total revenues of $6 billion.[21] Shortly after the Pakistani coup, Musharraf withheld wheat exports to Afghanistan, causing a 20 percent jump in prices in that country, which is largely dependent on food imports (about 450,000 metric tonnes of wheat per year are shipped from Pakistan to Afghanistan). The ban was reversed on 17 November. While this action may have been an attempt to control Taliban behaviour, it is also likely that it was prompted by a need to protect domestic food stocks. Finally, whatever the security implications of thousands of Pakistani *madrassah* students fighting in Taliban ranks might be, the reality is that they cannot be absorbed by the Pakistani economy. Likewise, continued fighting in Afghanistan could potentially produce a new influx of refugees,[g] with the economic cost associated with such a development.

A final concern of Islamabad, associated with Afghanistan, is the impact support for Taliban has on its relations with other countries, and in particular with two basically anti-Taliban allies, Iran and China. Thanks to strong Indian lobbying, Pakistan is already facing diplomatic isolation for its support of the insurgency in Kashmir, and now faces a growing anti-Taliban international coalition (which is likely to include the US, Russia, China, and India, along with other countries) that may isolate it still further. This trend is well illustrated by Pakistan's relations with a traditional ally, Iran. For instance, the 1998 massacre of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif, responsibility for which Tehran assigned to Taliban, severely damaged Pakistan-Iran relations. This was demonstrated by a hostile official and public reception given then-Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz during a visit to Tehran in mid-September 1998. Far more critical in the near term is Pakistan's need for foreign assistance. Islamabad is negotiating a $2.5 billion loan with the International Monetary Fund, a body in which US influence is strong. Thus far Washington has not pushed the IMF to block the loan, but Pakistani behaviour, domestically as well as in Afghanistan and Kashmir, may be made a litmus test of continued American backing.

Pakistani Involvement in Afghanistan, 1994-1999

The support for Taliban, begun in 1994 has persisted since.[h] For example, Pakistan was the only country that did not support a UN resolution of December 1998 that threatened unspecified sanctions against Taliban.

In order to assess the nature of Pakistani support for Taliban, it is necessary to determine who shapes Pakistani policy towards Afghanistan.

Shaping Pakistani Policy: Islamabad's policy towards Afghanistan has never been completely unitary. At a seminar in October, one speaker urged co-ordination of Pakistani policy: "This means that instead of ISI, the Foreign Office etc having their

[g] The UNHCR reports that there are currently some 1.2 million Afghan refugees living in refugee villages in Pakistan, along with an unknown number of unregistered Afghans living in the country's main cities.
[h] Pakistani diplomatic recognition of Taliban came on 26 May 1997, when Mazar-i-Sharif first fell.

separate policies there should be one coordinated and integrated policy."[22] There are a number of institutions and individuals that shape it. ISI is charged with managing covert operations outside Pakistan (it has also been deeply involved in domestic politics), and thus has effectively run Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan in recent years.[i] Rashid claims that there is an Islamic fundamentalist lobby within the agency. In fact, at the start of the 1990s, a new army chief attempted to purge Islamist generals from the top echelons of the army. One of those fired was the head of ISI, General Hamid Gul (who is now a politician and a strong proponent of a "soft" Islamic revolution).

However, ISI is not without competitors, and several other players exercise varying degrees of influence over Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan. These players include the Prime Minister, the Foreign Ministry, the Interior Ministry, and even the Pakistani transport and smuggling mafia. Thus, for example, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto had close ties to Taliban, whereas her successor, Nawaz Sharif, did not. After the murder of Iranian consular officials in Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998, Sharif wrote to Iranian President Mohammad Khatami condemning the killings, strongly denying Pakistani involvement in Afghanistan, and urging Pakistani-Iranian co-operation in settling the conflict.[23] Over the next year, Sharif became increasingly perturbed by the spill-over into his country of the conflict in Afghanistan, and even claimed, on the eve of his own overthrow, that Pakistan had developed a new policy *vis-à-vis* Taliban. Initially, the Interior Ministry seems to have been ahead of the ISI in its backing for Taliban (the intelligence agency seems initially to have been sceptical of Taliban capabilities). However, Interior Ministry support appears to have cooled, probably as a result of the spill-over of conflict from Afghanistan and perhaps also because of the damage caused by the smuggling through Pakistan of drugs produced in Afghanistan. As will be seen, in early-2000, Islamabad decided to expel large numbers of foreign mercenaries, a step that is likely to exacerbate Taliban's manpower problems. The Interior Ministry seems to have been behind this decision.

The Foreign Ministry has presented an official face of Pakistan's Afghan policy that is widely at variance with the activities of the ISI. Thus, in September 1998, Pakistan radically downgraded its embassy in Kabul (Saudi Arabia suspended diplomatic relations with Taliban in the same month). Islamabad has long called for a peaceful settlement of the conflict and for the installation in Afghanistan of a representative coalition government. For instance, in April 1998, a senior Foreign Ministry official told Raymond Chan, Canadian Secretary of State (Asia-Pacific), about Pakistan's efforts to help end factional fighting by creating a conducive atmosphere to install a broad-based government in Kabul acceptable to all segments of Afghan society.[24] Six months later Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz told the Iranian Vice-President that his government wanted to co-operate with Iran in encouraging the establishment of a broad-based government.[25] The Foreign Ministry has had to react to strong international pressure to influence a change in Taliban behaviour, and to a certain extent its actions and pronouncements reflect this. However, they also provide diplomatic cover to continued official (ISI) and

[i] Saudi intelligence similarly runs Saudi policy *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan. This proved costly to Taliban when, in 1998, Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, insulted the Saudi intelligence chief, who was the brother of the Saudi Foreign Minister.

non-official support for the Afghan militia. Despite its role in palliating the activities of other Pakistani organisations before the international community, the Foreign Ministry is said to be "virtually irrelevant" to the formulation of Pakistan's Afghan policy.[26]

Pakistani Military Involvement in Afghanistan: It might be assumed that the Pakistani military would be heavily involved in implementing decisions made by the ISI (which might be described as a "semi-military" body[27]), given the leading role in policy towards Afghanistan played by the ISI. Furthermore, Rashid claims that some 20 percent of the Pakistan army in the mid-1990s was made up of Pakistani Pushtuns, and that as a consequence the military was determined to see a Pushtun victory in Afghanistan.[28]

However, it is not clear how far Pakistani *military* personnel have actually been assisting Taliban. Whenever Taliban shows signs of military professionalism (as in the capture of Jalalabad and Kabul in 1996, and Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998), the assumption is made that Pakistani personnel were involved. Likewise, observers concluded from the poorly-executed Taliban offensive in March 2000 that it did not seem to have benefited from ISI planning and logistical support.[29] The Pakistanis are willing to admit *past* involvement of military personnel in Afghanistan's conflicts. For instance, Brigadier Mohammad Yousaf, head of ISI's Afghan Bureau in the mid-1980s, stated that Pakistani advisors, usually in three-man teams, were attached to *mujahidin* units: "The men we sent into Afghanistan were…soldiers from the Pakistan Army serving with the Afghan Bureau of ISI."[30]

Islamabad has always tried to maintain an element of deniability, claiming non-involvement while at the same time seeming to maintain its assistance to Taliban. For instance, at a meeting of the Six-Plus-Two forum of Afghanistan's neighbours in July 1999, Pakistan pledged to keep out of the conflict. Days later, Taliban launched an offensive that had the hall-marks of Pakistani backing. The following month, Pakistan was subjected to unprecedented criticism during Security Council debates on the situation in Afghanistan, when several ambassadors – including those of the US, Russia, and the Netherlands – specifically named Pakistan in demanding an end to foreign intervention in the Afghan conflict; a senior UN official also cited Pakistan. In fact, a UN report in June 1998 made a veiled reference to Pakistani military backing of the Taliban:

> "As for the Taliban, international media have continually reported that large amounts of military supplies, including tanks and armoured personnel carriers, have been purchased outside the region and delivered to the Taliban, apparently through a neighbouring country. Although this has been strongly denied…several sources in the region maintain that the Taliban indeed received these supplies. In addition, there is little doubt that the Taliban continue to enjoy free fuel and lubricant supplies from outside… UNSMA has recently been informed by reliable witnesses that the Taliban received a large delivery of military supplies loaded on 200 trucks. United Nations personnel were reliably informed of, and in one case directly witnessed, the presence of foreign military instructors giving training and guidance in camps on both Afghan sides."[31]

The Taliban northern campaign in summer 1998 was marked by impressive logistics support, and as many as four hundred new pick-up trucks, imported from Pakistan, were apparently used to spearhead the advance.[32] Rashid states that ISI officers visited Kandahar frequently to help Taliban prepare the operation.[33] In 1997-98, Pakistan provided arms, ammunition, aerial bombs, and spare parts for Taliban's tanks and artillery, as well as wheat and fuel, as well as facilitating Taliban's purchase of arms and ammunition from Ukraine and Eastern European countries.[34]

There has been evidence of a significant number of *ex*-Pakistan Army NCOs serving in combat roles with the Pakistani volunteers and in specialist technical roles.[35] Some of these men were thought to have volunteered directly from regular army units, and been officially discharged before going to Afghanistan.

It has been reported that ISI officers helped Taliban set up a new command structure for their forces in about mid-1995.[36] Pakistani military personnel are also thought to have served in militant training camps in Afghanistan. A senior Pakistani official stated that five ISI officers were killed in the US cruise missile attacks on camps run by bin Laden in August 1998.[37] In testimony before a subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 2 November 1999, Michael A. Sheehan, Coordinator for Counterterrorism, reported that the US had "repeatedly asked Islamabad to end support for terrorist training in Afghanistan…and to block financial and logistical support to camps in Afghanistan."[38] Yet as Davis points out, the Northern Alliance has been unable to show off military POWs, but has had no difficulty in producing Pakistani volunteers they have captured.[39]

Pakistani Volunteers: Large numbers of Pakistani volunteers have fought in Afghanistan, with one estimate claiming that, altogether, between 80,000 and 100,000 Pakistanis trained and fought in Afghanistan between 1994 and 1999.[40] In August 1999 it was estimated that 3,000-5,000 Pakistanis were fighting alongside Taliban.[41] Other Western sources put Pakistan numbers at 8,000.[42] Whatever the actual strengths, it appears that Pakistani volunteers have been critical to Taliban's military capability, and they are a source of support less vulnerable to policy changes than Pakistani government or intelligence agencies. In addition, many Afghan Taliban were born in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, and still retain Pakistani links (identity cards, ability to speak Urdu, and so on), further cementing the ties between the militia and its main state benefactor.

It is unclear whether the flow of volunteers from the Pakistani *madrassahs* continues unabated or has declined in the past year. In mid-September 1999, a senior Taliban official stated that the number of Pakistani volunteers was being reduced because "we don't count on them." This led to speculation that pressure was being exerted – China was thought to be the most likely candidate - on Pakistan to reduce the flow of volunteers.[43] At the end of May 2000 Taliban Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel stated that Taliban no longer needed volunteers,[44] again implying a reduction in their number. In mid-June diplomatic observers were quoted as claiming that the flow of Jihadis appeared to have slowed to a trickle this year.[45] They ascribed this change to

diplomatic pressure from Islamabad. It would not be surprising if fewer Pakistani volunteers joined Taliban, given the rival attractions of Kashmir (where outside militants probably now exceed locals in numbers) and Chechnya, the declining lustre of Taliban, and reports of demoralisation and war-weariness among Taliban forces, which would presumably affect non-Afghan fighters.

The notion that the Pakistani government has taken steps to reduce the manpower supply to Taliban is reinforced by Islamabad's apparent decision – evidently prompted by international pressure and increasing sectarian violence - to deport militants from Arab and African countries still in Pakistan. These men had evidently come to Pakistan during and after the war against the Soviets, and it is quite likely that a proportion of them had fought on the side of Taliban in the more recent conflict. An Interior Ministry official noted that "These people have formed groups and networked with other militant organizations."[46] Even if such men are not Pakistanis, their expulsion from Pakistan would hurt Taliban recruiting, a fact of which Islamabad would be aware.

On the other hand, the pattern of previous years, when numbers of Pakistani volunteers join Taliban ranks on the eve of an offensive, continues. In early-2000 a senior UN official told the Security Council that hundreds of foreign "volunteers" – many presumably Pakistanis - were joining Taliban ranks in anticipation of a major offensive. When an estimated 3,000 Taliban fighters launched an attack on the Shomali plain, north of Kabul, on 1 March, they were reportedly backed by "some Pakistani volunteers."[47] In late-May 2000, Haider held talks with his Taliban counterpart, with the stated purpose of getting the militia to eradicate the training camps in Afghanistan. Although Haider claimed progress, the claim was rather qualified by Mutawakel, who acknowledged the existence of "residences of some Pakistani volunteers," which he believed were not related to the training camps.[48] Taliban did close some camps in mid-2000, but Afghans (including Taliban soldiers) reported that alternate camps were set up elsewhere.[49] Finally, in June 2000 (on the eve of the usual Taliban summer offensive) the UN Secretary General reported that "The presence of non-Afghan volunteers, mainly from religious schools in Pakistan, among the Taliban forces is reported to be significant."[50]

Whatever the number of Pakistani volunteers serving in Afghanistan at any particular time, it may not accurately reflect Pakistani government policy. Haider has said he wants to establish control over the Pakistani-Afghan border. However, it is located in a semi-autonomous tribal belt, and it would probably be fairly difficult at that point effectively to prevent Pakistanis entering Afghanistan to serve in Taliban ranks (deporting Arabs and Africans living in Pakistan would probably be easier, especially since most of their governments had reportedly agreed to accept their return). Occasionally Pakistani *madrassahs* ship off large drafts of volunteers (usually just before a Taliban offensive), and it might be easier (although dangerous) to disrupt the flow at such "collection" points.

Pakistan's Afghan Policy Since the Coup

Just before the October 1999 coup in Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif was becoming increasingly concerned by an upsurge in sectarian violence in the country. The day before the coup, Sharif was in the United Arab Emirates, where he discussed his attempts to get Taliban to stop all activities in Pakistan, close all training camps, and either hand over bin Laden or ask him to leave Afghanistan. Although at the time Sharif may have been trying to secure US support to head off a possible coup, he did tell Gulf officials that Pakistan had a new policy towards Taliban.[51] Whether, had a coup not occurred in Pakistan, Sharif could have implemented a changed strategy in the face of likely ISI opposition or subversion is a moot point.

Since the October coup, Islamabad's Afghan policy has been said to be in "holding mode" – some munitions have been sent, but ISI officers have been withdrawn from advisory roles with Taliban forces.[52] While Pakistani policy remains opaque, and its public expression (through the Foreign Ministry) maintains the appearance of even-handedness, there does seem to be increasing ambivalence in official attitudes towards the Afghan conflict, reflective perhaps of international pressure and of Taliban's inability to complete the conquest of Afghanistan.

There are still influential proponents of Taliban at the centre of Pakistani policy. The new head of the ISI, Lieutenant-General Mahmoud Ahmed, is a supporter of the militia. Lieutenant-General Mohammad Mir Aziz Khan, the new Chief of the General Staff, is also thought to favour Taliban. With the military's new direct role in the formulation of policy these officers might be expected to have considerable influence *vis-à-vis* relations with Taliban.

Apart from the personal dynamics that encourage Pakistani support for Taliban, Islamabad's motives (discussed earlier) for involvement in Afghanistan arguably would incline it towards continued support for the militia. For example, Pakistan does not seem to have relinquished its hope that Afghanistan can provide an energy corridor from Central Asia. In mid-May 2000, Petroleum Minister Usman Aminuddin stated that Pakistan would spend six billion rupees (about $165 million, Canadian) to repair roads in Afghanistan, thus enabling the transport of liquefied petroleum gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan. Road repair is scheduled to begin later in 2000. Like many such projects, implementation of this scheme may be problematic, particularly given Pakistan's financial woes. However, it does have the advantage of not having to rely on standards of security set by international financial institutions. An existing road between Turkmenistan and Pakistan transits Afghanistan *via* Herat and Kandahar (it is presumably virtually the same route planned for the pipelines). Aminuddin said that he did not know whether the proposed trade route would pass through opposition territory, although the area is in fact in Taliban hands. Nonetheless, local unrest, allied with guerrilla operations in Taliban-held territory fomented by Masud, could pose a serious threat to the route. Securing the road may thus give Pakistan an incentive to continue its backing for Taliban.

If some of the most salient Pakistani motives - the trans-Afghan pipeline, support for Kasmiri militants, "strategic depth," and, from one perspective, internal security - for backing Taliban probably have not changed enough to warrant a radical switch in policy, a number of indicators also still point in the direction of continued Pakistani support for the militia. While the Pakistani government has offered to take up the issue of Osama bin Laden with Taliban, comments by both Musharraf and Haider, to the effect that the US should deal directly with Afghanistan on this issue, and not *via* Pakistani intermediaries,[53] indicate limits to Pakistani willingness to pressure Taliban. This hands-off attitude is the more notable for having come within two weeks of visits by a Pakistani delegation (including the ISI chief) to Washington and FBI Director Louis J. Freeh to Lahore. During these contacts the Americans asked the Pakistanis for their assistance in catching bin Laden.

A final, if indirect, indicator of continued Pakistani support for Taliban – or, at the least, of the absence of a significant policy change *vis-à-vis* Taliban - is the fact that Pakistani volunteers are still joining the militia, probably in some numbers. As was noted, such a situation would not necessarily reflect Pakistani policy, since any effort to crimp the manpower supply would require both a policy decision and steps actively to implement it. However, it might imply that the advantages of a changed policy would be outweighed by its difficulties, especially since the supply of volunteers is probably the form of intervention most associated with Pakistan by the international community, and would therefore offer the clearest signal of a switch in Pakistan's position on Afghanistan.

While some pointers suggest that Islamabad's reasons for supporting, and policy towards, Taliban are unchanged, others imply a degree of rethinking, suggesting that Islamabad is not insensitive to the growing international pressure on it to change its Afghan policy, or to the domestic dangers of inheriting economic problems and militancy from Afghanistan. In the weeks immediately after the coup, Pakistan closed and then reopened the border with Afghanistan, with harmful effects on Afghanistan's food supply. In mid-December 1999 it closed down some Afghan banking operations in Pakistan in conformity with UN sanctions, and in early-2000 Pakistani authorities came up with a plan to halve Pakistan's duty-free trade with Afghanistan. Although the difficulties of implementing any such plan would be great, its consideration indicates that Islamabad is less willing than heretofore to allow Afghanistan, and Taliban, to profit at Pakistan's expense.

On the diplomatic front, in December Iran and Pakistan agreed that both countries would encourage Afghans to set up a "broad-based representative and multi-ethnic government." Within six months of his first visit to Tehran, Musharraf was there again in June 2000. Both he and President Mohammad Khatami trumpeted an improvement in bilateral relations, and Afghanistan was evidently an important topic of discussion, with both leaders emphasising their common interest in working for the peace and unity of the country.

In addition, Islamabad has recommended that Taliban open a dialogue with the Northern Alliance, and during a visit to Kuwait in mid-April, Musharraf told a local newspaper that "Pakistan extends support to both the Taliban as well as the Afghan opposition groups."[54] When US President Bill Clinton was debating whether or not to visit Pakistan during a tour of South Asia in late-March 2000, Islamabad sent a number of signals hinting at a new policy towards Afghanistan. For example, Musharraf told a television audience that he had received assurances from the second figure in the Taliban hierarchy that the terrorist camps in Afghanistan would be closed down. He also stated that he would be going to Afghanistan himself to discuss this issue further[55] (five months later this visit still had not eventuated). Pakistani officials claim that General Ahmed visited Afghanistan in April 2000, in a bid to moderate Taliban's behaviour.[56] As noted above, in late-May 2000, Haider held talks with his Taliban counterpart regarding the closure of training camps in Afghanistan. Finally, in July 2000, Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar gave a cautious blessing to ex-King Zahir Shah's attempt to convene a Loya Jirga (grand council), a traditional Afghan meeting to resolve disputes.

In June 2000, the Secretary General of the UN observed that

> "Although outside interference in Afghanistan continues, there are indications that Governments in the region are beginning to realize that their national interests would best be served by the achievement of a peaceful settlement in that country rather than through the continued sponsoring of their favoured factions."[57]

Annan did not specify a country in this statement, but as far the most involved outside country, Pakistan is a likely candidate. If so, how far action follows "realisation" remains to be seen.

Whichever way the debate on Afghan policy between the various foreign policy actors in Pakistan goes, an important factor in the choice will be the results of the fighting. Each Taliban success is likely to encourage Pakistan to ignore the costs of backing the movement, each check to give Islamabad pause. The longer the Northern Alliance holds out, the greater the pressure on Pakistan, particularly as influential outside powers (the US and China, in particular) become more involved in the search for a solution to the conflict.

Iran

Background

Iran shares nearly 1,000-km of boundary with Afghanistan, as well as a long history of conflict with its neighbour. For two hundred years from 1526 Afghanistan had no political identity and was parcelled between the rulers of Persia and Mughal India. At the end of that period an Afghan ruler overthrew the Persian Safavid dynasty, but before long a new Shah overran Afghanistan. Even after Afghan rule was re-established in

Afghanistan in the middle of the eighteenth century, Persia continued periodically to intervene in Afghan affairs, making a major attempt to seize Herat in 1837.

In recent years, Iran's bilateral relations have tended to veer between pragmatic and ideological orientations. The apparent ascendancy of the "reformers" in Iran seems likely to tilt foreign policy in the direction of pragmatism, although Tehran will still pursue a leadership role in the region.

Motives Behind Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan

In the early-eighteenth century, the Persian shahs tried to the Sunni Pushtuns into Shi'as, laying the seeds of a historical animosity. Taliban are militantly anti-Shi'a, and systematically hunted down Hazara Shi'a after the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif before going on to seize much of the Hazarajat. Tehran is thus concerned with the situation of Afghanistan's Shi'a,[j] although the latter are only lukewarm in their support for Iran, and have often resented Tehran's meddling. As a factor in shaping Iranian policy towards Afghanistan, sectarian bitterness was probably reinforced in recent years by attacks on Iranian cultural centres and Iranians in Pakistan, perpetrated by Sunni terrorists trained in Afghanistan.

Despite the potential for religion to be at the heart of Iranian-Taliban differences, it is likely that Tehran is in fact more exercised by another issue, and that for mainly political reasons. Iran is still smarting from the killing of eight staff members of the Iranian consulate in the Northern Alliance headquarters of Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998, when Taliban forces seized the city. A journalist was also killed, and the Iranians claimed that Taliban seized 70 Iranians, half of them truck drivers (the captives were gradually released between September and late November). At the time, Tehran claimed to have evidence that Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, personally ordered the attack on the Iranian consulate. Iran implicitly menaced Afghanistan with attack when it staged two major exercises on the Afghan border. Nearly two years later, the punishment of those responsible for the killings remains a very important issue for Iranian public opinion.

Tehran is also very concerned by the flow of narcotics over the Iran-Afghan border. The Iranians claim that more than 3,000 tonnes of narcotics are smuggled over the border each year, destined for the Iranian and European markets (officials state that there are about 1.2 million Iranians who habitually use drugs). Each year large numbers (174 in 1999) of Iranian security personnel are killed in clashes with drug smugglers, and the war on drugs cost the country an estimated $800 million in 1999.[58] The Iranians blame Taliban for this situation.

Yet another irritant in relations is the presence in Iran of a large number of Afghan refugees in Iran (the UNHCR estimates that there are some 1.4 million of them). Repatriation had begun in the early-1990s, but was suspended when Taliban captured provinces near the Afghan-Iranian border. Growing unemployment and deteriorating economic conditions in Iran are creating pressures for the extrusion of the refugees, and

[j] Most Shi'a are of Persian origin, but Afghanistan's Shi'a (the Hazaras) are of Mongol descent.

in February 2000, the UNHCR and Iran agreed a voluntary repatriation programme, a tentative beginning to which began in mid-April.

The main Iranian opposition group, the Mujahideen-e-Khalq, have frequently visited Kandahar (Mullah Omar's headquarters), and asked Taliban for an operational base (at least until summer 1999, there was no sign that Taliban had agreed, but Tehran would still be concerned). Taliban has given support to other Iranian opposition groups, including the small Ahl-e-Sunnah Wal Jamaat.

A traditional irritant between Iran and Afghanistan has been the division of the waters of the Helmand River basin. This river irrigates Iran's Sistan province, but Afghanistan controls the distribution of the river's waters. This problem does not seem to have been a major source of antagonism between the two countries in recent years, but it does recur periodically. Thus, an Iranian newspaper recently complained that Taliban had blocked the flow of the river, stating that this was done to influence Iranian participation in peace negotiations then underway under the auspices of the Organisation of Islamic Conference.[59]

Finally, Iran has economic motives for concerning itself with the Afghan conflict. Most obviously, it has an interest in blocking proposed oil and gas pipelines from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan, since alternate routes can be found through Iran. Instability in Afghanistan – which would be promoted by preventing a complete Taliban takeover - would frighten international investment in any trans-Afghanistan route. In addition, like Pakistan, Iran's economy is negatively affected by trans-border smuggling.

Recent Iranian Involvement in Afghanistan

Rashid claims that Iran first began providing the Rabbani regime and the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum with "substantial" military aid in 1993.[60] Since then, Iran has rendered important military assistance to the opposition Northern Alliance. Iran has not only helped both the Shi'a Hezb-i-Wahdat group, Dostum's Uzbeks, and Masud's Jamiat-i-Islami, in 1996 it also re-armed the fighters of Ismael Khan (the former governor of Heart), who had taken refuge in Iran, and then flew them into northern Afghanistan to bolster the opposition's defences there. In fact, in mid-1998 it was thought that Iran was supplying even more arms, fuel, and other resources to the Northern Alliance than was Russia (Iran flew in planeloads of arms to the Hazaras, and the Iranian truck drivers captured in 1998 had been ferrying arms to the Hazaras). In mid-1998 an American official was reported as saying that Iranian personnel – presumably military – were working with the anti-Taliban opposition.[61] In July 1999, *Jane's Defence Weekly* reported that Iran was leading covert training assistance for the anti-Taliban opposition from a base in Mashad (Russia, Tajikistan, and India were also involved in this activity). Iran was also providing the Northern Alliance with technical assistance, for example helping in the construction of a new bridge over the Amu Darya River in the vicinity of Masud's headquarters.[62] In addition, massive Iranian exercises on the border in September and October 1998 probably took the pressure off the Northern Alliance at a critical juncture –

Taliban deployed some 5,000 troops to face a possible attack from Iran - and may well have saved the Alliance, which at that time was reeling under Taliban attack.

In June 1997, Taliban ordered the Iranian embassy in Kabul closed, signalling a downturn in relations. These were further strained in August 1998, with the killing and detention of a number of Iranians in Mazar-i-Sharif. In November 1999 there were signs of a slight thaw in relations between Iran and Taliban. In that month Iran reopened a border post near Herat (it was closed in August 1998), allowing trade to flow between the two countries. In December, Iran and Pakistan discussed ways of encouraging Afghans to set up a broad-based government, and a month later an Iranian delegation held trade talks with Taliban, the first such visit since 1996. Iran has also been co-ordinating efforts with Pakistan – at least on a diplomatic and commercial level - to restrain Taliban. To some extent, this more accommodating attitude seems to have resulted from Iran's chairmanship during 2000 of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), which is trying to mediate the Afghan conflict.

However, given the pressing issues between Iran and Taliban and the stalemate in Afghanistan, it seems unlikely that the improvement in relations will be anything more than tepid in the near-term. In fact, the signs of thaw have been accompanied by contrary indicators. At the end of March 2000, Ismail Khan, a Masud ally and Taliban's most valued prisoner, escaped from a Kandahar jail. Ismail Khan found refuge in Iran, and was still there at the end of May. This episode was probably a forceful reminder to Taliban of Tehran's willingness to provide sanctuary to its enemies (Dostum also found refuge there) and to arm and train opposition forces. Iran also still recognises the Jamiat-i-Islami of Berhanuddun Rabbani (the political leader of the Northern Alliance) as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. The drug war remains a strong bone of contention, and on 17 May 2000 the Iranian parliament voted to seal the 940-km border with Afghanistan, promising a special budget to permit construction of electronically-equipped walls and fences.

Central Asian States

Background

Central Asia played an important role in the nineteenth century "Great Game," and the region remains a pivotal player in the modern version of that struggle. The five Central Asian states share Afghanistan's isolation, but in some ways the burden of isolation is more trying, in that some of them have significant energy resources that are difficult to bring to market, given the instability along the southern periphery of the former Soviet Union. In addition, most have fairly secular regimes and feel themselves threatened by Islamic militancy, one important source of which is Afghanistan.

Motives Behind Central Asian Involvement in Afghanistan

The primary concern of most Central Asian states *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan is security. On the one hand, regimes fear the spread of Islamic militancy within their own

populations. On the other hand, they worry that Afghanistan provides a sanctuary for their opponents (eight hundred Uzbek and Tajik fighters who took over parts of southern Kyrgyzstan in August 1999 had fought in Afghanistan).

Concern is liveliest in the two front-line states of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, although it is not shared by Turkmenistan, the only other Central Asian state to share a border with Afghanistan. Just as Afghanistan appeared to provide a buffer between India and Russia during the nineteenth century, so ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks in Afghanistan have provided the Central Asian states with a buffer against the spread of Pushtun fundamentalism. In the circumstances, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, especially, and also Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, can be supposed to sympathise with the Northern Alliance's goal of recovering the northern provinces lost in 1998.

Although security is a pressing concern for regional regimes, and makes them hostile to Taliban, they have other motives for looking askance at events in Afghanistan. Just as Pakistan is finding, Afghanistan's illegal exports are undermining legitimate economic activity in Central Asia. The Central Asian states also have a serious problem of narcotics smuggling originating in Afghanistan. Yet another worry with an economic dimension is that of refugees from the conflict in Afghanistan. Such an influx would have social and economic as well as possibly security implications, and would particularly affect the front-line states. However, Taliban successes in the north have not yet produced large refugee outflows, so while the refugee issue seems to have been a major concern at the time of the fall of Kabul and the first Taliban capture of Mazar-i-Sharif, it is doubtful that it remains so.[k]

Turkmenistan: Turkmenistan is the exception among the Central Asian countries. While staying largely aloof from the Afghanistan conflict (it thinks that it is immune to Islamic fundamentalism), it has been mildly well-disposed towards Taliban. This posture is primarily motivated by Turkmenistan's desire to see construction of oil and gas pipelines from its fields to Pakistan; energy companies will only finance such a project with some guarantee of stability, which Taliban has seemed best able to offer in recent years. However, it, too, is feeling the negative effects of the Afghan conflict, having become a major export route for Afghan heroin.

Uzbekistan: Uzbekistan has been afraid that Islamic fundamentalism will take a political form, and it was instrumental in pushing Russia into intervention in Tajikistan's civil war in 1992 (as well as involving itself militarily). In February 1999, five co-ordinated car bombs exploded in Tashkent, in what the government claimed was an attempt on President Islam Karimov's life. In September 1999, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) declared a jihad against the Uzbekistani government, and in November

[k] UNHCR data indicate that in September 1999, there were 8,000 Afghan refugees in Uzbekistan and probably a much smaller number in Turkmenistan; no figures were provided for Tajikistan. Compared with the war in Tajikistan, the refugee impact of the Afghan conflict upon the Central Asian states seems to have been relatively small.

the organisation was blamed for a violent encounter outside Tashkent which killed some two dozen on both sides.

Despite these attacks, it is possible that the threat to Uzbekistan posed by Islamic militants has been exaggerated, as a justification for cracking down on domestic opposition. Diplomatic sources have noted that in contrast to Taliban's first capture of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1997, when Uzbekistan blocked the approaches to the "Friendship Bridge" linking Uzbekistan and Afghanistan with tanks and concrete blocks, there are now no obstacles barring the bridge.[63]

Uzbekistan has only 137-km of border with Afghanistan, but as long as the Northern Alliance (and Dostum in particular) controlled Balkh province (of which Mazar-i-Sharif, a mainly Uzbek-populated city, is the capital), the Central Asian state was protected by a buffer zone. Thus, the defeat of Dostum and the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998 removed that bulwark (Karimov is unwilling to back Masud, a Tajik).

Like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan maintains that recent attacks in Central Asia received support from extremist organisations in several Muslim countries, including Afghanistan. Taliban have allowed Tahir Yuldashev – an Uzbek rebel implicated in an attempt on the life of Karimov in February 1999 - to set up a training camp in an area of northern Afghanistan controlled by the militia, and his headquarters are supposedly in Kandahar.[64] In June 1999 the Uzbek Foreign Minister held talks with Mullah Omar and asked for Yuldashev's extradition; according to an Asian diplomat in Tashkent, Omar flatly rejected the request.[65]) Some 1,500-2,000 fighters of the IMU are thought to be in the area of Mazar-i-Sharif, and the movement has an office in Kabul.[66] Yuldashev and Juma Namangani, another IMU leader, were reported to have had talks with senior Taliban officials in June 2000, with a view to joining forces in the fight against the Northern Alliance.[67] In February 2000 a series of blasts in Tashkent caused a number of casualties, and once again raised the spectre of Afghan-exported militancy.

An added concern for Uzbekistan is the historical role of Bukhara as a major site of Islamic pilgrimage, which may tempt a successful Taliban to interfere in Uzbek affairs. Although senior Taliban officials have ruled out exporting their Islamist revolution beyond Afghanistan's borders, individual Taliban supporters have been less reticent. In October 1996, in the wake of Taliban's capture of Kabul, a mullah declared in a mosque in that city that the militia would march on to capture Bukhara, Samarkand, and even Moscow. At much the same time, Russian television footage showed crowds in Kabul yelling "We want Samarkand, we want Bukhara."[68]

Tajikistan: There is evidence that Taliban (as well as other Afghan factions) backed Islamic rebels in Tajikistan, where a civil war erupted in 1992. The United Tajik Opposition set up bases in Afghanistan – which they maintained until after the Tajik peace agreement in June 1997 – and arms and fighters regularly crossed the frontier into Tajikistan. Ironically, Taliban's capture of Kabul probably resulted in the Tajik ceasefire and peace accord, because secular forces in Tajikistan all felt threatened. Despite the 1997 peace accord, opposition groups in Tajikistan (as also in Uzbekistan) still find

refuge in Afghanistan, whence they constitute a continuing threat not just to the government in Dushanbe, but also to other Central Asian regimes. As long as Masud (a Tajik) retains his toehold in the north-east of Afghanistan, Tajikistan has a buffer against Taliban.

Like Iran, Tajikistan has a major narcotic smuggling problem. Reports of the amounts of drugs intercepted as they were smuggled into the country, mostly for trans-shipment to European destinations, vary remarkably.[69] In January 1999, President Rakhmonov told an international conference that drugs were being smuggled into Tajikistan from Afghanistan at the rate of one ton a day, and that addiction in his country was increasing.[70] Obviously, with a border with Afghanistan of 1,200-km and (as UN maps show) numerous crossing points for smugglers, only a tiny proportion of the narcotics entering Tajikistan are actually intercepted. This problem has existed since Tajikistan became independent, but appears to be worsening, in part as a result of greatly increased production in Afghanistan, but also as a result of increased efforts to interdict the Iranian route. In October 1999, Pino Arlacchi, Executive Director of the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, reported that, with the creation of a security area on the Iranian-Afghan border, the "flow of drugs has shifted north, particularly to the border with Tajikistan."[71] In February 2000, the UN launched a $65 million drug control initiative in the countries bordering Afghanistan. The "security belt" projects in Central Asia include training for border police and law enforcement officials, and help in establishing national drug control agencies and policies.

Kyrgyzstan: Kyrgyzstan may not share a frontier with Afghanistan, but it does have some of the same security concerns as its neighbours. The Ferghana Valley, an ethnically-mixed area, straddles the borders of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It is an ethnic, religious, and political tinder-box (it was the scene of pogroms in the late-1980s). The area remains volatile. Kyrgyzstan's vulnerability to its neighbours quarrels was dramatically highlighted by two IMU incursions in August 1999 (the first lasted one week, the second, larger, one ended after two months).

Kazakhstan: Kazakhstan is the most distant from Afghanistan of the Central Asian states, but it provided a battalion of frontier guards to protect the Tajik-Afghan border from about 1994 to 1997. The Kazakh government maintains that recent attacks in Central Asia received support from extremist organisations in several Muslim countries, including Afghanistan.

Recent Central Asian Activities *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan

For most of the 1990s, the states of Central Asia have taken steps to protect themselves from conflict emanating from Afghanistan. In May 1992 four of the five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) joined Russia and Armenia in signing a collective security treaty. At the time, Tajikistan was just beginning its civil war, and the threat of a spill-over from Afghanistan undoubtedly influenced the accord. Little more than a year later, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan sent small numbers of troops to join Russian military and border forces in

protecting Tajikistan from opposition fighters based largely in Afghanistan. While the Central Asian allies have withdrawn most of their troops from Tajikistan during the past two years (a peace agreement supposedly ending the insurgency was signed in June 1997), they still participate in the occasional exercise there to practise defeating an incursion from Afghanistan. Kazakh and Uzbek troops assisted Kyrgyz security forces contain an incursion into Kyrgyzstan by IMU fighters during August 1999, a clear demonstration of the sense of common threat felt by all but one of the Central Asian states. Both the Americans and the Russians predict further incursions into Central Asia by Islamic militants.

Turkmenistan: As noted above, Turkmenistan does not share its neighbours' anxieties towards Taliban. In fact, there are suspicions that Taliban may have used Turkmenistan territory in its attacks on Mazar-i-Sharif. However, Turkmenistan's seeming neutrality has allowed Ashkhabad to play an important role in the "Six-Plus-Two" peace talks, notably a seemingly promising negotiation in March 1999.

Uzbekistan: If Uzbekistan was willing to defend its perceived interests by military intervention in the Tajik civil war, it would not be surprising if it took self-protective measures *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan. In fact, it is thought that before Dostum's defeat in 1998, he had received at least financial support from Uzbekistan. The defeat of Dostum in summer 1998, and Taliban's capture of the Uzbek area of northern Afghanistan, led to a reduction in Uzbekistan's support of the Northern Alliance. However, prolonged opposition resistance to Taliban seems to have heartened Uzbekistan, which has provided military equipment to Northern Alliance in recent months. In March 2000 Dostum returned to Uzbekistan from exile in Iran. This action, along with Dostum's apparent alliance with one-time rival Masud (they met in the Uzbek city of Termez), is a further indicator that Uzbekistan has decided once again to back the Northern Alliance. Dostum is said to have several thousand well-trained men in Uzbekistan[72] - if true, this would represent a significant gesture of support in a region where warlord armies are viewed askance by ruling regimes.

However, Uzbekistan is still hedging its bets. In late-May 2000 Russia threatened to launch pre-emptive strikes against Taliban bases, prompting Mullah Omar to warn Uzbekistan against allowing Russia to launch any attack from Uzbek territory. In response, Karimov stated that his country would not agree to the deployment of Russian troops or military facilities on its soil.[73] Yet a few days later, at the end of May, Uzbek aircraft seem to have violated Afghanistan's air space; Taliban lodged a complaint with the UN.

Tajikistan: In May 2000, the Tajik government persuaded most of the IMU militants in Tajikistan to leave for Afghanistan, where a larger IMU force is already established in an area under Taliban control. Tajikistan provides the Northern Alliance with an important logistical base. In June 1998 United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan referred elliptically to external military support for the anti-Taliban opposition, and added: "…it was widely known that one UF faction has been regularly allowed to use an airfield outside Afghan territory as a shelter base…"[74] At the same time, American

officials and others claimed that the Northern Alliance had a major supply centre at the air base at Kulob in Tajikistan.[75]

Kyrgyzstan: The threat posed regional regimes by exile rebels materialised in August 1999, when hundreds of IMU militants, who with their leader Juma Namangani had spent several years in Tajikistan, invaded Kyrgyzstan, seizing several villages and four Japanese geologists.[1] After two months the hostages were freed, and the infiltrators were ejected.

Kazakhstan: On 25 May 2000, the Kazakhstan National Security Committee announced the arrest of 16 Afghan and Pakistani nationals it said were Taliban *mujahidin* en route for Chechnya via Georgia.[76] After Russia made a series of threats of pre-emptive attack against Taliban in May 2000, Kazakhstan (like Uzbekistan) distanced itself from any Russian action.

China

Background

China shares only a very small border with Afghanistan, and that in the fairly inaccessible Wakhan Corridor. At the same time, its history is far less intertwined with that of Afghanistan than those of many others of Afghanistan's neighbours or near-neighbours. Lacking much capacity to supply aid, the People's Republic of China and Afghanistan enjoyed generally cordial relations, with the latter backing China's admission to the UN. However, since the arrival of Taliban on the scene, China has been given cause to worry over the spread of Islamic militancy in its western province of Xinjiang, with its Muslim minority.

Motives Behind China's Policy Towards Afghanistan

As many of Afghanistan's neighbours, China sees a potentially serious security threat in Taliban. Beijing is concerned by apparent Taliban backing for Uighur Muslim separatists in Xinjiang. Uighur militants have trained and fought with the Afghan *mujahidin* since 1986, and Taliban inherited most of the Uighurs still left in Afghanistan. Western intelligence officials claimed in early-1999 that almost all of the arms and explosives used in attacks on the security forces in China had come from Afghanistan.[77] The Uighur militants also have close ties with bin Laden and Yuldashev both of whom are linked with Taliban. A related worry is the flow of cheap heroin into Xinjiang via Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor. Beijing apparently hopes that by holding out the prospect of improved relations to Taliban (who are desperate for international recognition), the militia will cut off support for the Uighurs and clamp down on drug runners.

[1] The IMU fought on the opposition side in the Tajik civil war and – although Uzbeks - some of its militants also reportedly fought alongside the Pushtun Taliban in Afghanistan.

Recent Chinese Involvement in Afghanistan

Although it closed its embassy in Kabul on the eve of the Taliban capture of the city in September 1996, China largely ignored the civil war in Afghanistan. However, over a period of several months from late-1998 Beijing began to show signs of accommodation with Taliban. Following the US cruise missile attack on militant bases in Afghanistan, Beijing got in touch with Taliban to allow Chinese scientists access to the missiles' computer guidance system. On 10 December 1998, China and Taliban signed a military accord whereby China would train Afghan pilots. In February 1999, Beijing announced an agreement with Taliban to start direct flights between Kabul and Urumqi and to open formal trade talks with the militia (apparently Pakistan encouraged China to visit Kabul). Since then, however, the Chinese seem to have shifted their strategy to one of more active containment of Taliban, although they emphasise the need for a peaceful solution to the conflict (at the "Shanghai Five" meeting in Tajikistan in July 2000, the Chinese delegation countered Russia's calls for military action against Taliban).

OTHER OUTSIDE PLAYERS

Russia

Background

After the 1992 defeat of Najibullah, Moscow's proxy in Afghanistan, Russia reduced its involvement in the country. However, within months Russia was increasingly involved, with its Central Asian allies, in propping up the regime in Tajikistan, which was threatened by an opposition largely based in Afghanistan. Indeed, in April 1995 the then-government in Kabul protested strongly against alleged Russian attacks on rebel bases within Afghanistan. Taliban's capture of Kabul in September 1996 greatly alarmed Russia, which sought to rally the Central Asian states in backing the Northern Alliance. However, when Taliban captured Mazar-i-Sharif and other key strongholds of the Northern Alliance in summer 1998, it gave Russia and the Central Asian states pause in their support of the Alliance. Not only were Alliance supply lines to Central Asia cut, but also Taliban seemed the probable winner, and for a while both Russia and Uzbekistan looked as if they would accept the situation in return for Taliban not exporting fundamentalism into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). However, Ahmed Shah Masud was able to reopen the supply line in late-1998, and the durability of his resistance encouraged renewed CIS backing.

Motives Behind Russia's Policy Towards Afghanistan

Throughout the 1990s, the new Russian state has worried about the possible spread of Islamic militancy in the country, imported from conflict zones on its periphery. In May 1993, then-Defence Minister Pavel Grachev claimed that:

> "Each day blood is being spilled to turn Tajikistan into an Islamic state. If these plans succeed, we should expect Islamic fundamentalism to spread

> further to the north - Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and so forth. We should not forget that there are around 20 million people in Russia who profess Islam. If the flame of war in Tajikistan is not extinguished, it may have dangerous consequences for Russia, too, the more so because aggressive feelings are manifest in Chechnya."[78]

Three years later, Colonel-General Vladimir Semenov, commander of ground forces, argued that the greatest potential threat to Russia came from the possible spread of Islamic fundamentalism from the south and south-east.[79] Since Grachev voiced his fear of Islamic militancy, there have been two wars in Chechnya, continued fighting in Tajikistan, and eruptions in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to reinforce such concerns.

Russian worries about Islamic militancy have been compounded by the latest war in Chechnya, in which large numbers of foreign fighters (notably Wahhabis) have played a major part. It is quite likely that the renewal of the Chechen war would not have occurred without the activities of Wahhabi militants in Daghestan, and foreign volunteers have played a far more important role in the 1999-2000 conflict than they did in the fighting in 1994-96. Russia has been especially exercised by the support given the Chechens and their allies by Taliban.[m] This latter was epitomised by Taliban's recognition of Chechnya on 16 January 2000, which made Afghanistan the only country to do so.

Russia also has a major problem of narcotics smuggling, although a more indirect one than that of Iran or Tajikistan. One of the primary functions of the Russian border forces stationed on the Tajik-Afghan frontier is the prevention of such smuggling (although Russian troops have themselves apparently been involved in drug trafficking in Tajikistan[80]).

On an economic plane, it has been suggested that Russia has an interest in thwarting trans-Afghanistan pipeline projects, thereby increasing the value of its own infrastructure for bringing Central Asia energy to market.[81] However, on these kinds of issues, Russia often has more than one "foreign policy," and the highly influential Russian gas company Gazprom (which is partly state-owned) was a member of the Centgas consortium.

Recent Russian Involvement in Afghanistan

Militarily, Russia has been one of the strongest supporters of the Northern Alliance, although its backing for the opposition seems to have faltered briefly after the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998. Despite the 1991 agreement between the US and Russian governments to end arms supplies to Afghanistan, for several years Moscow has supplied heavy weapons to, as well as training and logistical support for, the Northern Alliance (despite apparent concern in Moscow at the financial cost of support for Masud). This

[m] On 17 May 2000, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, a Russian military daily, claimed that there were 150 Taliban fighters in Chechnya. Given Taliban's manpower problems and inability to overcome the opposition, even this number, which is not particularly large, may be questionable.

support in fact pre-dated Taliban's capture of Kabul. It was spotlighted in October 1995, when Taliban jets intercepted a Russian cargo plane, filled with weapons, en route to Kabul. The plane and its seven-man crew were diverted to Kandahar, where they were still being detained nine months later.

In June 1998 the Secretary General referred (indirectly) to outside support for the anti-Taliban opposition:

> "The flow of arms, money and other supplies into Afghanistan from outside has continued unabated during the past three months. United Nations officials witnessed a number of air deliveries of weapons and ammunition by unmarked aircraft to UF [United Front, or Northern Alliance] bases in the north. Reliable sources stated that those resupply flights were occurring at a rate of four to five sorties or more per week. There were also persistent, though not fully confirmed, reports of deliveries of tanks and jet fighters to the northern forces, and it was widely known that one UF faction has been regularly allowed to use an airfield outside Afghan territory as a shelter base… United Nations personnel were reliably informed of, and in one case directly witnessed, the presence of foreign military instructors giving training and guidance in camps on both Afghan sides"[82]

At that time (which immediately preceded the start of the Taliban offensive against Mazar-i-Sharif), US intelligence officials argued that the impressive arsenals fielded by both sides could not be acquired, maintained, and operated without foreign military assistance. While a considerable amount of weaponry was left over from the Soviet era, the demands for spare parts, maintenance, and training forced the belligerents to seek out foreign help.[83] In addition, a former Russian intelligence officer was reported as claiming that Russia's military intelligence services had operatives working with Dostum and Masud in northern Afghanistan.[84] In the circumstances, the Secretary General's guarded remarks would seem to point to Russia, given the military weakness of the front-line Central Asian states. It would not be too difficult for the Russians and Tajiks to co-ordinate logistical support for the Northern Alliance, particularly given that a regiment of the Russian 201st Division was (and probably continues to be) based in Kulob, the Tajik airhead for supplies for the opposition front.

More recently, Sergey Ivanov, the Secretary of the Russian Security Council, told a meeting of his CIS colleagues that he could not rule out pre-emptive strikes against terrorist groups in Afghanistan.[85] Exercises in the Volga Military District and in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in April 2000 were used to underline the message. A few weeks after Ivanov's warning, 16 Russian generals were reported to have visited Northern Alliance territory, where they allegedly offered advice and promised heavy weapons to both Masud and Dostum.[86] A Russian daily claimed that military and Federal Security Service special forces units, including the Alfa Group, were being prepared for an attack, in conjunction with Masud, on bases of the IMU. The daily concluded that official statements about possible strikes on Afghanistan were intended to prepare

international opinion for an operation of this sort, which would be designed to forestall a militant attack on some of the Central Asian states, in a repetition of a two-month incursion into Kyrgyzstan by the IMU in August 1999. The daily noted that at a recent CIS meeting, Ivanov spoke of a need to "devise a mechanism, including a legal one, that makes provision for the presence of Russian subunits – not only military subunits but also, in particular, the Alfa Group – on these states' [Tajikistan and Uzbekistan] territory."[87]

The Russians have denied that they have armed the anti-Taliban opposition, and Masud himself claims that much of his equipment comes from the Russian mafia, rather than the Russian government.[88] Similarly, Ivanov dismissed the press claims of Russian special forces being prepared for employment in Afghanistan.[89] Given Russia's painful memories of the Afghan intervention, threats of this sort are probably much like Iranian exercises, intended to distract Taliban and dissipate its strength without actually portending military action. In this regard, the threat may have worked: the UN reported that during the first half of June, Taliban deployed forces in Balkh Province, "ostensibly in response to the statement by the Russian Federation regarding possible air strikes…"[90]

On the diplomatic front, on 11 May a Russian presidential edict required strict implementation of the UN sanctions against Taliban, and at the same time observers noted that Russian policy against Taliban and in favour of the Northern Alliance was becoming more assertive. In mid-May, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, one of the subjects of discussion being the provision of practical support for the Northern Alliance.

India

Although India no longer borders Afghanistan, as it did during the nineteenth century "Great Game," like most of those countries immediately adjacent to Afghanistan, it believes that the activities of Taliban threaten its security. Yet New Delhi's relative inaction *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan until recently suggest that it its sense of threat was less immediate than that of, say, Russia, its nineteenth century bogey. The Kargil conflict was probably a catalyst of a livelier concern. Within six months of the end of the Kargil conflict, Indian suspicion of Taliban was strongly reinforced by the hijacking of an Indian plane at the end of 1999, an action that deeply embarrassed and infuriated the Vajpayee government (which released three Islamic militants to secure the freedom of the passengers and crew).

Motives Behind India's Policy Towards Afghanistan

New Delhi is very worried by the role of "foreign militants" (i.e., Afghanistan-trained *mujahidin*) in Kashmir. Local militants in the Indian state seem to be tiring of the eleven-year fight, but a large proportion (some Indian sources go as high as three-quarters) of the insurgents in Jammu and Kashmir are now thought to be outsiders. The strong switch from local to external militancy appears to have begun in mid-1998, which tends to explain the relative recency of active Indian concern over Taliban's role in the

export of insurgency. Some of the outside fighters in Kashmir appear to be Afghans,[n] and a proportion of those who are not (such as Pakistani militants) have received training or had combat experience in Afghanistan. The Indian view was recently put by Pravin Sawhney, a security analyst in New Delhi, who contended that "over 100,000 Pakistanis have fought in Afghanistan between 1994-98. These battle-hardened militants, most of whom are unemployed and threaten Pakistan's own stability, are being routed into Kashmir."[91] Sawhney also detects Taliban's hand in the Kashmir insurgency. The view put by Sawhney is echoed in Washington. The latest State Department report on global terrorism contends that during 1999, "Taliban…permitted the operation of training and indoctrination facilities for non-Afghans and provided logistics support to members of various terrorist organizations and *mujahidin*, including those waging *jihad*, in Chechnya, Lebanon, Kosovo, Kashmir, and elsewhere."[92] The Indian government also claims Taliban complicity in the hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane in December 1999, and refused to pay a bill submitted by Taliban for airport and other services provided the seized jet on the ground in Kandahar.

As a result of this outside involvement in the militancy in Kashmir, the violence in the state has escalated greatly in the past year, with the security forces being the particular target of the militants. It is no wonder that New Delhi has become increasingly concerned with the putative origin of the new attack.

Of course, in attacking Taliban for its involvement in the Kashmir dispute, the Indian government is also actuated by a wider interest in frustrating Pakistani ambitions, some of which (as noted above) revolve around Afghanistan. At the same time, New Delhi was alarmed in early-1999 by signs of *rapprochement* between China and Taliban.

Recent Indian Involvement in the Afghan Conflict

India seems to have given strong backing to the Najibullah regime,[93] presumably because of its friendly relations with the Soviet Union and because of Pakistan's support of Najibullah's *mujahidin* opponents. It seems unlikely that there was much tangible evidence of such backing. As Pakistan and Russia, India has changed horses in Afghanistan, and now India recognises Rabbani's Jamiat-i-Islami as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. How far New Delhi has provided active support to the Northern Alliance is difficult to judge. Rashid claims (probably with regard to the period around the 1996 battle for Kabul) that India helped to refurbish Ariana, the Afghan airline, in order to provide the Rabbani regime with a reliable arms carrier. In addition, New Delhi provided aircraft parts, new ground radars, and money.[94] As for Taliban, New Delhi avoided diplomatic contact with it for several years until the Air India hijacking. This incident forced New Delhi to establish contact with Taliban in order to negotiate the safe return of passengers, crew, and plane.

In May 1995 it was reported that stories of Indian arms supplies to the Rabbani regime appeared periodically in the Pakistani press.[95] Seventeen months later, Taliban

[n] A Reuters report from New Delhi on 26 April stated that, according to the Indian government, the majority of outside militants are of Pakistani origin, with "a sprinkling" of Afghans and Arabs.

claimed to have captured Indian-made arms from Northern Alliance forces.[96] Of course, given their sources, such reports may not be completely objective, but they are not likely wholly to invent contemporary Indian interest in Afghanistan. A report in March 1996 (before Taliban took Kabul) claimed that India, Iran, and Russia had given military and financial backing to Rabbani.[97] It seems reasonable to suppose that the escalation of Islamic militancy in Kashmir would dispose New Delhi to give the anti-Taliban opposition greater support, and there are small indications of that. There were reports of Indian feelers to Ahmed Shah Masud immediately after the Kargil operation in mid-1999. A senior advisor of Masud spent several weeks in New Delhi, and an Indian official in Central Asia evidently planned to visit Northern Alliance territory at that time.[98] [o]

United States

Although the US has generally tended to distance itself from the affairs of Afghanistan in the past half-century, during the Soviet occupation of the country Washington supported the *mujahidin* as a means of weakening the USSR, helping to produce a debacle for Moscow. In 1998, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's National Security Adviser, stated that the Carter administration approved support for anti-Communist groups *before* the Soviet invasion in order to "increase the probability" that the Kremlin would plunge into a quagmire.[99] Washington offered itself as one of the principal guarantors (along with the USSR) of the 1988 Geneva Accords, but after the Soviet withdrawal in February 1989, US interest in Afghanistan declined precipitously. This development was quickly reflected in Washington's withdrawal of its patronage of Pakistan. The US continued to supply the *mujahidin*, but its aid had fallen to $200 million by 1991. By 1992, the US was largely content to let Pakistan and Saudi Arabia sort out the civil war. In the past two years that stance has changed.

Motives Behind American Policy Towards Afghanistan

During Taliban's first years, Washington was content to follow the lead of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in backing the militia, which was regarded as anti-Iranian and whose success would permit a pipeline that would circumvent Iran. The Americans also liked Taliban's discipline, aura of incorruptibility, and anti-Communism, as well as its early announcement that it would eliminate all drugs.[p] At the same time, US officials were hostile to the factions, led by Rabbani, then holding Kabul.

These motives were soon reinforced by more overtly commercial ones. In October 1995 Unocal, a US corporation, along with companies from Saudi Arabia (Delta Oil) and elsewhere, signed a memorandum of intent with the government of Turkmenistan that envisaged the construction of a gas pipeline through Afghanistan to Pakistan. In addition to by-passing, and thereby hurting Iran, such a pipeline was also regarded as likely to bolster Central Asian independence of Russia, and also to reduce Russia's role in bringing Central Asian energy to market. A trans-Afghanistan pipeline required political

[o] Central Asia would be the only means of access to Northern Alliance territory for Indian officials.
[p] Taliban cracked down very effectively on hashish, raising hopes (soon dashed) that it could be equally successful in cutting down on opium production and distribution.

stability in the country, which Taliban seemed best placed to provide. Rashid asserts that the main factor disposing Washington to favour Taliban in 1996 was the pipelines issue.[100]

However, it was not long before US policy on Afghanistan began to shift. The prospect of a united Afghanistan was receding, and thus the US wanted to find new ways of helping Turkmenistan market its energy (in fact, Washington even went so far as announce in July 1997 that it would not object to a Turkmenistan-Turkey pipeline route that would cross Iran). In addition, new motives were coming to the fore. Washington was becoming alarmed at the "Afghan Arab" phenomenon, as Islamic fighters fanned out across the Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans, and elsewhere, adding to instability in those areas. Then, in August 1998, the bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania gave Washington a more specific reason to dislike Taliban: the use of Taliban-controlled territory as a sanctuary by the alleged mastermind of the bombings, Osama bin Laden. A desire to bring the reputed terrorist financier to justice may now be the principal motive influencing US policy on Afghanistan (the government has offered a $5 million reward for his capture).

The US's continuing effort to bring Osama bin Laden to justice inevitably pits it against Taliban. The annual State Department report on international terrorism for 1999 commented that:

> "The primary terrorist threats to the United States emanate from two regions, South Asia and the Middle East… In South Asia the major terrorist threat comes from Afghanistan, which continues to be the primary safehaven for terrorists. While not directly hostile to the United States, the Taliban…continues to harbor Usama Bin Ladin and a host of other terrorists loosely linked to Bin Ladin… The Taliban is unwilling to take actions against terrorists trained in Afghanistan, many of whom have been linked to numerous international terrorist plots, including the foiled plots in Jordan and Washington State in December 1999."[101] [q]

This source of dispute between the US and Taliban is unlikely to be removed soon. Taliban believes that to give bin Laden up would erode its declining support among the Afghan population, and for nearly two years the militia has stone-walled both American and Saudi attempts to persuade it to hand him over.

The US continues to be exercised by the threat allegedly posed by bin Laden. On 13 December Michael Sheehan, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Counter-Terrorism, warned the Taliban representative in New York that Taliban would be held responsible for any anti-American attacks linked to Osama bin Laden.[r] This warning

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[q] The latter plot involved Ahmed Ressam, an Algerian who entered the US from Canada. Among Algerians subsequently arrested in connection with the Ressam case are several "Afghan alumni" who trained with the *mujahidin* in Afghanistan and are linked to bin Laden.

[r] However, the US government has not designated Afghanistan as a state sponsor of terrorism, on the grounds that it does not recognise the Taliban regime as the government of Afghanistan.

followed a State Department travel advisory alerting American citizens abroad that the government had "credible information that terrorists are planning attacks specifically targeting American citizens during the period of time leading up to and through the New Year and Ramadan events and celebrations" (i.e., to early January 2000). State Department officials said that the threat came from members of Osama bin Laden's network, and that two attacks were being planned. Thirteen alleged terrorists were arrested in Jordan, and three accomplices were said to be on the run. The group included Jordanians, an Iraqi, and an Algerian; they were reportedly trained in bin Laden's camps in Afghanistan and to be planning an attack in Jordan itself.

Apart from its concern over bin Laden and the "Afghan Arabs," Washington's policy has also been actuated by other motives. One of the catalysts in the hardening American attitude was Taliban's religious fundamentalism and human rights record, especially with regard to women (a concern of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and echoed by Hillary Rodham Clinton). This issue became more evident after the capture of Kabul in September 1996. The growing export of narcotics from Afghanistan gives Washington an added reason to pursue the militia.

Recent American Actions *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan

As noted, initially American sympathies were with Taliban. However, this does not seem to have led to active support of the militia. In March 1996, when Taliban was threatening Kabul, Rabbani complained that the Americans were "mere spectators."[102] At the same time, Dostum was calling for "a high profile U.S. presence in Afghanistan."[103] The *Washington Post* echoed these comments: "Afghanistan slipped off the American A list at the end of the Cold War."[104] So did an American academic who had visited Afghanistan every year for a quarter-century ("The United States keeps its distance"[105]). In fact, the US embassy in Kabul was closed in January 1989, for security reasons (it has not been reopened). Within hours of Taliban's capture of Kabul in September 1996, the US State Department announced that it would send an official to Kabul – in effect re-establishing diplomatic relations – but the announcement was quickly retracted.

A reversal in American attitudes and policy seems to have begun in 1997, prompted initially by concerns over Taliban's treatment of women.[106] This change in policy was reinforced by a number of factors in 1998-99: Taliban's support for Osama bin Laden, Unocal's suspension of activity in the trans-Afghanistan pipeline project in December 1998, a huge increase in Afghan narcotics production (making Afghanistan the largest drug-producing country in the world[s]), and a slight warming in US-Iranian relations.

There are now signs that the long-standing policy of non-involvement has been replaced by more active participation in Afghan affairs. Initially, Washington's renewed interest in Afghanistan took the form of an attempt to negotiate a peace settlement. In May 1998, Bill Richardson, the US ambassador to the UN, visited Afghanistan to try to

[s] The State Department claims that Taliban has made a "policy decision" to use narcotics to "put pressure" on the West.

promote the peace talks. Like so many such initiatives, initial promise was quickly confounded. Since then the US has tilted more against Taliban, without apparently directly backing Taliban's primary opposition, the Northern Alliance.

Washington's most obvious action involving Afghanistan (and indirectly Taliban) was the 20 August 1998 launch of several dozen cruise missiles against six alleged terrorist training camps in the country as a retaliation for the East Africa bombings. Although not aimed directly at Taliban, the August 1998 cruise missile attack on terrorist training camps, some of them associated with Osama bin Laden, could have been expected to irritate the militia. In May 2000, US Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering told a senior Taliban official that Washington reserved the right to repeat the bombings. At the same time he gave Taliban copies of the indictment against bin Laden, in an attempt to refute the argument against expulsion.

In April 1999, a collaborative story by the *New York Times* and PBS's *Frontline* claimed that US special forces were poised near the Afghan border, hoping that one of bin Laden's associates would betray him.[107] A year later, another story – this time in an Islamabad newspaper – asserted that the FBI was directly supervising an operation along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border designed to arrest bin Laden or drive him out of Afghanistan.[108] Although nothing has yet come of such putative operations, they are given some credibility by a similar operation in June 1997, when FBI agents arrested Mir Aimal Kansi - wanted in the killing of two CIA employees outside CIA headquarters in 1993 - in Punjab, with the cooperation of the Pakistani authorities.

In addition to such primarily defensive and retributive actions directed primarily at bin Laden and other terrorists in Afghanistan, the US is showing signs of greater participation in the Afghan conflict. On the one hand, Washington is attempting to isolate Taliban economically and diplomatically. It imposed economic sanctions on Taliban on 6 July 1999, barring Americans from trading with or investing in Afghanistan.[t] The US also played an important part in the UN sanctions of November 1999. However, Unocal's withdrawal from the pipeline project greatly reduces the US's leverage on Taliban. On the diplomatic front, the US is building a coalition of some unlikely partners – including Russia, China, Turkey, Israel, India, and even Iran – to pressure Taliban, and at the same time leaning on Pakistan.

On the other hand, the Administration is apparently considering ways of undermining Taliban within Afghanistan. Among the ways it might do this is by helping Taliban moderates, or finding new leaders among non-Taliban Pushtun tribes, or assisting Masud.[109] The State Department dislikes Masud for his closeness to Iran, and Washington has been careful to point out that criticism of Taliban does not imply recognition of the Northern Alliance. Thus, of these options, the first is probably the one preferred by the US government. In this regard, in May 1999 the US said that it favoured

[t] An American telecommunications company (TSI) set up Afghanistan's first international digital telephone system at the beginning of 2000. TSI owns 80 percent of the project, Taliban the balance. The project went ahead because TSI had made the investment before the imposition of sanctions, but the latter resulted in a delay in completing the project.

the return of Zahir Shah. One year later, Washington stated that it was weighing giving "concrete assistance" to a proposal by Zahir Shah to convene a Loya Jirga.

Arab States

Arab countries and citizens have long been heavily involved in the Afghan conflict. During the period of the Soviet occupation, Saudi Arabia gave the *mujahidin* nearly $4 billion in official aid (about the same amount as the US), a sum supplemented by aid from Islamic charities, foundations, mosque collections, and individuals.[110] As is the case with Pakistan, the involvement of Arabs in the Afghan conflict operates at both a state level and, equally importantly, at an individual level. Of the three states that recognise Taliban, two are Arab (Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), Arab volunteers fight in the ranks of the militia, and Taliban receives both official and private funding from Arab countries. However, the Arab response to the conflict is far from unitary, just as the countries of the OIC range in their reactions to the Afghan conflict from Pakistan at one end of the spectrum to Iran at the other. Even within individual states the Afghan policies followed by the governments in question have not always continued unchanged.

Motives Behind Arab Involvement in the Afghan Conflict

Initially, security concerns were probably secondary to religion in determining the attitudes towards Taliban of some Arab governments. Since the founding of Wahhabism in the late-eighteenth century, it has been associated with the Saud family, which provides the ruling house of Saudi Arabia. Thus, the Saudis have been supportive of attempts, begun during the Soviet occupation, to promote Wahhabism in Afghanistan, where prior to the war the creed had minuscule support. While Taliban is not a Wahhabi movement, it calls for a fundamental interpretation of Islam that is compatible in many ways with traditional Wahhabism (Taliban originated among Afghan refugees from Pakistani theological schools, whose clerics received their religious training from Saudi Arabia). In addition to their family connections to Wahhabism, the Saudi rulers were forced to conciliate senior religious leaders in the kingdom after the government called on US military support against Iraq.[111] Regional rivalries seem to complement religion in determining support for Taliban. Taliban has been militantly anti-Iranian, a stance with which Saudi Arabia would sympathise (ironically, in light of the Gulf War, Riyadh backed Iraq in its long war with Iran).[u]

A number of Arab governments are influenced in their attitudes towards Taliban by their own security concerns. A major area of congruence between the US and some Arab governments is the situation of Osama bin Laden. Saudi Arabia is particularly upset over Taliban's protection of bin Laden, who has been a strong critic of the Saudi royal family. In 1991 the Saudi regime expelled bin Laden from the kingdom, and three years

[u] Iranian pilgrims have disrupted the *Hajj* several times, notably in 1984 and 1987. On the latter occasion 402 people were killed, including 275 Iranians. The Saudi embassy in Tehran was sacked, and the Iranian government vowed to overthrow the Saudi ruling family to avenge the deaths. Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic relations with Iran in April 1988, restoring them in March 1991.

later deprived him of his Saudi citizenship. Saudi Arabia joined with the US in getting Sudan to expel bin Laden in 1996. He has issued a "Declaration of Jihad" against the Saudi royal family and been highly critical of the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia (he likens the American forces to the Soviet occupiers of Afghanistan). Saudi Arabia's early support for Taliban seems to have been based in part on the hope that it would shut down the "Afghan Arab" network in general and bin Laden in particular. As will be seen, the failure of Riyadh's most promising initiative with regard to neutralising bin Laden coincided with a marked deterioration in Saudi Arabia's relations with Taliban. Saudi Arabia is not alone in its concern over bin Laden, who has not endeared himself to other regimes in the region, financing opposition groups in Egypt, Yemen, and elsewhere.

Arab states have probably been less influenced in their attitudes towards Taliban by economic motives than, say, Pakistan. However, a Saudi company (Delta Oil) was a partner in the Unocal-led consortium to build a natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan *via* Herat and Kandahar. From this perspective the Saudis, like the Pakistanis and even the Americans at one point, would at some stage presumably have favoured any development – such as a Taliban victory – that enabled the project by improving the security of the route.

Another influence on the policy of some Arab states has been American pressure. According to diplomatic sources, the US has tried to persuade those countries that have recognised Taliban to join a squeeze on the militia. Some of the Gulf states (notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) have looked to the West (as also to some regional states) for their security, largely as a result of the Gulf War. Although the relationship of 1990-91 has cooled somewhat, US influence remains important, and Administration pressure to join in restraining Taliban would carry weight with some Gulf states.

The picture is a rather different one at the individual level, where many Arabs have responded to calls for Jihad by Osama bin Laden, either by active participation or by financial contribution.

Arab Involvement in the Afghan Conflict

As noted above, religion was probably the starting point of Saudi backing for Taliban. The chairman of the influential Saudi Consultative Council, who was called the "exporter" of Wahhabism, apparently strongly advocated helping Taliban.[112] Having provided financial support to the *mujahidin* during the Soviet occupation, it would not have been difficult for the Saudis to channel funds to Taliban. Prince Turki al-Faisal, the chief of the Saudi intelligence service, worked closely with the ISI, providing financial assistance and large numbers of all-terrain vehicles to Taliban.[113]

The impact of regional security concerns on policy towards Afghanistan is illustrated by the evolution of Saudi government views. As noted, impelled largely by religious motives, Saudi Arabia initially gave important financial backing to Taliban. In addition, Saudi Arabia has been one of only three states to recognise Taliban (according

to Rashid, Islamabad persuaded Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to follow its lead, which would put Saudi and United Arab Emirates recognition in late-May or June 1997[114]). However, more recently the Saudi government has cooled towards the militia. In June 1998, Prince Turki supposedly extracted from Mullah Omar an agreement that Taliban would end bin Laden's sanctuary, provided that he be tried in an Islamic court and not be extradited to face US prosecution. Among the inducements reportedly offered Mullah Omar was the prospect of US recognition and Afghanistan's seat at the UN and the OIC.[115] This deal quickly began to unravel, but Prince Turki apparently returned to Afghanistan to try again. Taliban not only refused to hand over bin Laden, its leader also personally insulted Prince Turki.[116] As a result, on 23 September the Saudi government expelled Taliban's chargé d'affaires in Riyadh, recalled its own chargé from Kabul, and ended funding for the militia.

The Arab reaction to the US cruise missile attacks of August 1998 on targets in Sudan and Afghanistan is revealing. In a belated response to the attacks, the League of Arab States gave only lukewarm support to Sudan, calling for a special Security Council session to discuss the attack and for a fact-finding mission. Interestingly, this Arab League request did not even mention Afghanistan, even though the only deaths from the attacks occurred there. This omission is evidence of the wariness felt towards Afghanistan felt by many Arab states. When discussion in UN forums turns to the situation in Afghanistan, the views of the Arab League seem to be notably missing. For example, in mid-December 1999, the Assembly discussed a draft resolution on the Year of Dialogue among Civilisations, and then proceeded to a discussion of the situation in Afghanistan. Speaking on behalf of the Arab League, the Qatar representative contributed to the first discussion, but no one claimed to speak on behalf of the League when the discussion shifted to Afghanistan. Similarly, the UN acknowledged the role played by the League of Arab States in the resolution of the stand-off with Libya on Pan Am Flight 103. No such acknowledgement was extended the League with regard to Afghanistan. Afghanistan is not a member of the League of Arab States, and thus the League's silence on the conflict there is explicable. However, several of the states have been actively involved with the situation in Afghanistan over a lengthy period, and two of the three countries which have recognised Taliban are League members.

Although the United Arab Emirates have recognised Taliban, the government's attitude towards the Afghan militia may be hardening, just as that of Saudi Arabia has done. As noted earlier, in October 1999 Sharif told Gulf officials that he wanted to persuade Taliban to end its backing for the export of Islamic militancy. Subsequent to Sharif's ouster, some Gulf Arab officials expressed concern that the coup would thwart the planned Pakistani crackdown on Taliban. One Gulf official commented that "We need to see whether the new leadership will keep up the pressure on the Taleban."[117] The United Arab Emirates apparently cut off aid to Taliban during 1999 because of the bin Laden issue.[118] Prior to the imposition of UN sanctions on Taliban on 14 November 1999, the United Arab Emirates was the only regular destination of Afghanistan's Ariana Airlines; that link was broken by the sanctions, which prohibit flights owned, leased, or operated by Taliban from taking off or landing outside Afghanistan.

The gradual erosion of support for Taliban on the part of some Arab states has not yet produced a complete reversal in Arab policies towards the Afghan militia. For example, while Saudi Arabia has suspended diplomatic relations with Taliban, Riyadh has not withdrawn diplomatic recognition from the movement. Qatar has good relations with Taliban, and there may be links between Libya and Taliban. Furthermore, there are signs that sanctions have not completely cut off commercial ties between Taliban and at least one of the Arab states. At the beginning of April 2000, Taliban signed an agreement for the purchase of 5,000 mobile phones with a company in the United Arab Emirates.

Private individuals from Arab states are probably less ambivalent regarding Taliban (and bin Laden) than are their governments. The militia and the terrorist are both thought to be supported by private Saudi money. However, Arab citizens evidently provide Taliban with more than financial support. Osama bin Laden's 055 Brigade brings together on Taliban's side Islamic militants from various parts of the world. A young Afghan, who trained at a camp in the north-western Afghan province of Kunar during winter 1999-2000, said he saw men from Chechnya, Sudan, Libya, Iraq, Iran, Cuba, and North Korea in the camp.[119] In 1999 the UN envoy to Afghanistan described this as an "extremely dangerous" development (a comment reinforced by subsequent events in Chechnya and by the role of Islamic – and particularly Wahhabi - militants in them).[120] Thought to number around 400-500 in 1999, this unit seems to operate separately from the Pakistanis. It played a part in the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998.

Turkey

Motives Behind Turkish Involvement in the Afghan Conflict

Turkey's democratic and secular recent history makes Taliban anathema to Ankara. During a visit to India at the end of March 2000, Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit argued that his country had demonstrated that "Islam and democracy are compatible."[121] Turkey is worried about regional stability, and in particular is committed to the stability of Central Asia. Although Ankara's expectations of burgeoning economic ties with the Central Asian states have been disappointed, Turkey shares common ethno-cultural roots with much of the region. Thus, it will share Central Asian worries at the security threat posed by Taliban. In addition, Turkey is one of the routes by which heroin produced in Afghanistan reaches Europe. One of the topics of discussion in Ecevit's meetings with Indian officials was increased narcotics production in Afghanistan.

Turkish Involvement in the Afghan Conflict

Turkey has been a long-time ally of Pakistan, but the policies of the two countries seem to be diverging, and not solely on the issue of support for Taliban.[v] Prior to the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif, Turkey had been a staunch supporter of Dostum, but it was apparently only in August 1998 – after the city's capture - that Turkey for the first time called for action against Taliban. Ahat Anidcan, the Turkish Minister of State for Foreign Affairs,

[v] Despite a lobbying effort by Islamabad, Pakistan was omitted from Ecevit's itinerary during his visit to India in March 2000. Ecevit said that he was "not happy" with military rule in Pakistan.

urged that "The Taliban should be stopped in Afghanistan, otherwise it is likely to cause worrying results in the region."[122] Nearly two years later, the same message emerged from Ecevit's discussions with the Indian government. The Indians and Turks agreed to intensify their co-operation in Central Asia. The two sides expressed concern over human rights violations in Afghanistan and the increasing narcotics production there, and affirmed that there can be no military solution to the problems of Afghanistan. Ecevit declared that "the present regime in Afghanistan is an anachronism out of tune with the modern world," and stated that Turkey and India must "find ways to help Afghanistan become a modern state."[123] Turkey has also persuaded Israel that Taliban is a security threat to the region.

United Nations

The UN has been heavily involved in the Afghan situation for the past two decades. Between 1980 and 1987, the General Assembly demanded the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan on no fewer than nine occasions. When Soviet troops did finally withdraw in 1989, the move was monitored by the UN Good Offices Mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan (UNGOMAP).[w] More recently it has regularly pointed to the cost of external involvement in the continuing conflict in the country. The UN plays several roles in Afghanistan – promotion of the peace process, humanitarian assistance, de-mining co-ordination, promotion of human rights, and so on – and these sometimes work at cross-purposes.

The UN has played a key role in attempts to resolve the Afghan conflict. In part this is a result of the limited diplomatic presence in Kabul. In part it derives from the UN's co-ordinating role in the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Afghans. From 1994, successive UN special envoys have made numerous attempts to bring the warring sides to negotiate, usually to have one or other faction reject their proposals. Holding most of the country, Taliban is tempted to push for final victory, whereas the Northern Alliance wants to recover lost ground (an especially salient motive given the ethnic divisions between the two sides).

In December 1993, the General Assembly asked the Secretary General to send a special mission to Afghanistan to explore how the UN could facilitate national *rapprochement* and reconstruction. The United Nations Special Mission in Afghanistan (UNSMA) continues to fill this role, although its work was severely curtailed when its Kabul office was closed in 1995, due to the security situation in the capital. The Personal Representative of the Secretary General is the head of UNSMA, and he announced in February 2000 that a decision had been taken that he should be based in the region, with Islamabad as his base of operations. He said he planned to fill the political posts in UNSMA, to open an office in Tehran, and to reopen the one in Kabul. In the meantime, the UNSMA civil affairs unit, approved in December 1998, had become operational. It has offices in Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif, and in early 2000 the Special Representative was planning to open new offices in the Northern Alliance area (possibly

[w] UNGOMAP's mandate ended in March 1990. An Office of the Secretary General in Afghanistan and Pakistan remained, headed by the Personal Representative of the Secretary General.

Feyzabad) and in Bamiyan, where the humanitarian and human rights situation had been of some concern for several years.[124]

The UN has sponsored a number of peace initiatives, some of which have appeared promising. In March 1999 both Taliban and the opposition seemed to accept a UN-brokered power-sharing arrangement (the deal also included a token prisoner exchange). Like earlier peace initiatives (which tend to occur in the early months of the year, before the weather facilitates combat operations), this one collapsed within days. Like the Americans, the UN may have begun to look at alternatives to finding an accommodation between the two main belligerents. A Security Council presidential statement of 7 April 2000 (when Canada held the presidency) backed Zahir Shah's plan to convene a grand council of influential Afghans to seek a negotiated settlement.

In addition to promoting a negotiated settlement, the UN special envoys have also mediated more short-term issues. For instance, for months in late-1997 the UN and its sister organisation, the World Food programme, negotiated with Taliban to allow relief convoys to enter the blockaded Hazarajat. In fall 1998, the special envoy secured the release, over two months, of several dozen Iranians held by Taliban after the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif.

The UN's search for a negotiated settlement has been conducted through the medium of both its own officials and of other groupings. One of the latter is the "Six-Plus-Two" group, set up by Annan in October 1997. However, even the UN Secretary General has criticised the "Six-Plus-Two" as ineffective.[125] In addition, the UN has indirectly criticised the "Six-Plus-Two" for its role in arming the two sides.[126]

Another medium of international mediation is the OIC, a grouping headquartered in Saudi Arabia and which Iran chairs during 2000. Interestingly, Afghanistan's seat in the OIC is held by a representative of Rabbani, mirroring the UN's exclusion of Taliban.[x] Despite this apparent tilt, the organisation has played an active role in trying to resolve the conflict in Afghanistan. Thus, a new round of talks, begun on 7 March, was conducted under the auspices of the OIC, endorsed by the UN, and attended by the UN's new special envoy for Afghanistan. The OIC played a central role in arranging a prisoner swap in May 2000. For its part, Taliban has tried to use the OIC to deflect some of the international hostility towards it. When the US increased the pressure on Afghanistan to surrender bin Laden during 1999, Taliban reaffirmed its intention not to force him out of the country. Instead, it offered a compromise, proposing that the OIC monitor his activities.

The UN's negotiating role has been complicated by its sometimes difficult relations with Taliban. One of the main sticking points in the relations between the UN and Taliban is the issue of recognition. When the militia seized Kabul in September 1996, they entered UN premises, where former Communist president Najibullah was being

[x] The Rabbani faction also holds Afghanistan's seat on another regional group, the Economic Co-operation Organisation, which comprises the five Central Asian states, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Turkey.

sheltered, and murdered him. This spectacle engendered an international furore. As a result, when the issue arose of whether Taliban or the former government of Burhanuddin Rabbani should have Afghanistan's seat in the General Assembly, a number of key states where Rabbani still had diplomatic representation opted to maintain the *status quo*. Thus, since 1996 Taliban's attempts to secure a UN seat have been frustrated. As usual, in October 1999 the General Assembly credentials committee accepted the credentials of the Northern Alliance, rejecting the Taliban submission.

Another source of contention between the international body and the Afghan militia has been the imposition of sanctions. Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, on 14 November 1999 the UN imposed sanctions on Afghanistan for its failure to hand Osama bin Laden over to the US or to a third country to stand trial for the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings (Security Council Resolution 1276). The sanctions require all states to freeze Taliban's overseas assets, as well as crimping the external operations of Ariana Airlines. In mid-June 2000, the Security Council was considering new sanctions, while trying to ensure that they would be "Taliban-specific" and avoid hurt to the general population. Inevitably, Afghans have denounced the UN as an American puppet.

For its part, the UN was annoyed in 1998 when the Taliban appeared to be using camps for displaced persons as recruiting centres. In addition, UN personnel and facilities have periodically been attacked, further straining relations. As mentioned, Taliban forces invaded UN premises in Kabul in 1996 to seize Najibullah. An attack on a UN official by the governor of Kandahar in March 1998 led the UN to withdraw its staff in the city and suspend its humanitarian operations in southern Afghanistan. The August 1998 US cruise missile strikes on targets associated with bin Laden prompted a UN withdrawal from Afghanistan, during which an Italian military advisor was murdered in Kabul and a French diplomat wounded. When Ismail Khan escaped from a jail in Kandahar in March 2000, Taliban personnel raided UN offices searching for him, damaging property and intimidating staff. In response, the UN again closed its offices in Kandahar and ceased all humanitarian assistance activities in southern Afghanistan. Given these precedents, the concern is that if new sanctions are imposed, Afghan anger could again endanger UN personnel. This would impede efforts to contain the drought in Afghanistan, the worst in thirty years and one affecting half the nation.

In addition to its part in promoting peace in Afghanistan, the UN has played an important humanitarian role in the country. For example, in early December 1999, the UN negotiated a cross-front-line operation to provide for some 60,000 displaced persons in the Panjshir Valley, a surprising success given that the valley is Masud's main base. United Nations de-mining teams escorted each of the five convoys that delivered the supplies. In early June 2000, the UN negotiated a three-day ceasefire to permit the implementation of a polio vaccination campaign. Several UN agencies have been involved in a range of relief activities in Afghanistan, including help for displaced persons in Kabul, winter assistance for families in one of the northern provinces under Taliban control, and a bakery project in Mazar-i-Sharif. The UN has tried to use its capacity to provide assistance as a lever to encourage an end to the conflict, warning in May 2000 that major donors might cut off future humanitarian aid if fighting resumed.

Finally, by March 2000 the mine action programme co-ordinated by the UN had cleared 442 square kilometres of mined areas, leaving an estimated 716 square kilometres to be cleared.

Other External Parties

Other international organisations as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have also played an important role in bringing humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan (more then half Kabul's population benefits in some way from NGO handouts). Such organisations have also shared the UN's experience of turbulent relations with Taliban. For example, in September 1997 the European Union Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs was detained by Taliban, an act that again provoked an international uproar. Just as the UN's work in co-ordinating humanitarian relief has not spared it Taliban attack, so NGOs working in Afghanistan have had sometimes volatile relations with the militia, often on the basis of gender. In July 1998, Taliban ordered international NGOs in Kabul to relocate to a ruined polytechnic campus. Many of the NGOs regarded this as an indirect expulsion order, and chose to leave. In June 1999, Taliban issued a decree designed to safeguard NGO personnel, but relations between the militia and such organisations do not appear likely to improve significantly in the foreseeable future.[127]

IMPACT OF EXTERNAL INVOLVEMENT ON THE AFGHAN CONFLICT

After the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998, Taliban seemed on the verge of complete victory. Within days, Masud's headquarters at Taloqan fell, and a large number of his troops surrendered. Taliban then went on to overwhelm the Shi'a Hazaras and seize their capital of Bamiyan. Yet Masud retained his base in the Panjshir Valley, and his front lines remained near Kabul. Within months he had recovered some of the lost ground and restored access to his logistics base in Tajikistan. Taliban failed to make progress in 1999. The well-informed Anthony Davis claimed that a major Taliban offensive in July was "massively supported by ISI."[128] Still, after initial success, an opposition counter-attack won back lost ground and made additional advances. With Taliban casualties numbering over 3,000 morale was low, and one Western military observer commented that "Militarily, they're worse off at the end of this year than at the end of last."[129] Taliban launched another offensive in March 2000, but it was half-hearted and achieved no worthwhile results. Similarly, new offensives in July 2000 initially gained ground but were subsequently repulsed by the Northern Alliance.

Despite the huge disparity in the territory under Taliban control (usually thought to be 80-90 percent of the country) and that under Northern Alliance control, and the dramatic military successes enjoyed by the militia up to 1998, the two sides are not as ill-matched as might be supposed.[130] In fact, Davis concluded that in mid-1999 Masud's forces were stronger than at any time since the loss of Kabul in September 1996. A series of failed Taliban offensives since July 1999 reinforce his point.[131]

The relative stalemate of the period since Taliban's capture of Mazar-i-Sharif illustrates the role played by outside assistance. One of the main ingredients of Taliban success was bribery. For example, the critical battle that tore apart Northern Alliance defences in July and August 1998 was the fall of Maimana. Taliban's capture of that city was aided by the paid defection of two opposition commanders. Five weeks later, the Uzbek defenders of a key position outside Mazar-i-Sharif left the road to the city open when some of their leaders were bribed. Clearly Taliban's "cheque-book strategy" was more persuasive than ethnic ties. One warlord in central Afghanistan, Bashir Salangi, changed sides three times in the space of about fifteen months in 1997-98. Although the rather disparate Northern Alliance still experiences defections – as, apparently, does Taliban - it is noteworthy that the militia's headlong advance has been checked in the two years since official Saudi funding was cut. (The Iranian military exercises in September 1998 not only probably diverted Taliban forces at a crucial time for the opposition, they also likely blocked, temporarily, one of Taliban's major narcotics export routes, thus reducing funding from that source also.)

Even more crucial to the changing fortunes of the two sides has been the provision of personnel and equipment. Earlier it was noted that estimates of the numbers of Pakistani volunteers in about mid-1999 ranged from 3,000-5,000 up to 8,000. The real significance of this contribution, however, is shown by relationship to overall Taliban strength. The calculation of 3,000-5,000 Pakistanis was accompanied by an estimate of total Taliban strength of below 15,000, meaning that up to one-third of Taliban's forces comprised Pakistani volunteers.[132] Rashid also estimates that students from the Pakistani *madrassahs* comprised some 30 percent of Taliban's military manpower in 1999.[133] Western aid workers in Maimana estimated that 25-50% of some Taliban units involved in the key 1998 battle were Urdu-speaking Pakistanis.[134] Resistance to Taliban conscription drives, even in the movement's Kandahar heartland,[135] only increases its reliance on Pakistani volunteers. As noted earlier, it is unclear whether the number of Pakistani volunteers (or fighters from other countries) has declined significantly in 2000.

On balance, it is likely that whatever their number, the foreign volunteers remain an important asset to Taliban, given the militia's recruiting problems. An American academic, who served as Special Envoy to the Afghan Resistance in 1989-92, recently claimed that

> "The popular enthusiasm that greeted earlier Taliban offensives has failed: Pushtun youth are no longer volunteering to join the Taliban, and Pushtun fighters are leaving the Taliban's ranks, gravitating back to their southern tribal areas."[136]

Rashid has reported that Taliban have experienced recruiting problems even in their heartland.[137] In addition, there have been reports that the militia is greatly over-stretched. The numbers of troops involved in many of the battles are surprisingly small, and the rapidity with which successes are reversed by counter-attacks suggests that Taliban lacks the manpower to hold its gains. The need to maintain security in the Uzbek and Hazara

regions captured in 1998 depletes Taliban strength further, particularly given opposition attempts to stir up guerrilla warfare in Taliban's rear.[y]

Both sides have large arsenals of tanks, towed artillery, and multiple-rocket launchers (in mid-1999 Masud was thought to have some 50-60 main battle tanks[138]). Taliban has had a decided advantage in air power, which it used to some effect in the July 1999 offensive. External sources would undoubtedly be needed for spare parts, maintenance, and training, as well as for logistics support and new equipment. The Northern Alliance's external backers may not be able to supply personnel, but they have tried to ensure that the opposition makes up in equipment what it lacks in manpower. In this regard they have not been entirely successful, and there have been signs during 2000 of ammunition shortages among opposition forces.[139] The opposition's supply line is also more easily severed than that to Taliban. For instance, the militia have made repeated efforts to seize Imam Sahib, a key town on the Afghan-Tajik border. It fell three times between August 1998 and March 2000, only to be recaptured on each occasion, usually very quickly.

Thus, in terms both of manpower and equipment, Taliban is probably the stronger, but when terrain, leadership, morale, experience, and other factors are included in the equation, the obstacles to Taliban completing the 1998 drive are considerable.

Both sides equally have significant weaknesses. Taliban's need to police the areas it has seized diminishes its manpower advantage. Whereas opposition troops are more "regular," a large proportion of Taliban manpower probably serves for short terms, and may not acquire the necessary training and experience (the opposition troops are thought to be individually superior). As for the Northern Alliance, in addition to the vulnerability of its supply line it is plagued by disunity. The collapse in 1998 was very largely a product of intense feuding within the coalition, particularly on the part of Dostum. The opposition recovery in 1999 probably owed something to the relative unity of command enforced on the Northern Alliance by the defeat and exile of some of its squabbling leaders, which left Masud the undisputed master of the anti-Taliban resistance. Now Dostum is back, along with his erstwhile deputy, General Abdul Malik (whose treachery enabled Taliban briefly to seize Mazar-i-Sharif in 1997). Although they have pledged to form a united front with Masud – and Dostum is said to have several thousand fighters - past history cautions against such unity lasting very long.

Neither side – Taliban especially – seems ready to discard the military option. Taliban evidently thinks that final victory remains within reach; the opposition wants to liberate the non-Pushtun populations from Taliban control. Given the strengths and weaknesses of the two sides, stalemate seems a more likely outcome than total victory, with each party gaining temporary advantages. This implies that the external backers of the two sides will maintain some level of support, simply to sustain such a stalemate or to exploit seeming success, probably without being able to provide the means whereby more lasting and decisive results might be achieved.

[y] Masud has said that he intends to harass and over-stretch Taliban in the north, as he did the Soviets.

CANADA AND THE AFGHAN CONFLICT

Canada has had a number of concerns related to the Afghan conflict: the search for a peaceful settlement, the need for humanitarian assistance, abuses of human rights (especially with regard to women), continued use of mines, external involvement in the war, the production and smuggling of narcotics, and so on. During Canada's presidency of the Security Council, some of these issues were summarised in a presidential statement (April 2000). In his address to the Security Council, Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy argued that perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the conflict is systematic violation of the human rights of women and girls (he reported that two years previously he had delivered some 5,000 letters from Canadians to the Secretary General expressing their concerns on the issue).

In his address, Axworthy also raised a number of security-related issues. He noted that while the UN mine action programme had made considerable progress, new mining was underway, "in flagrant violation of the Ottawa Convention" (which Afghanistan has not signed). Among actions he urged on the Security Council was consideration of measures to cut off the supply of weapons to the belligerents, as well as a search for ways of pressuring the warring factions to negotiate. Contending that Taliban harboured international terrorists, Axworthy noted that Canada supported the imposition of UN sanctions[z]

> "based on our strong position against terrorist acts and states or groups that harbour those who commit them, and the recognition that the sanctions were carefully targeted to hurt Taliban interests and ensure minimal impact on innocent civilians."[140]

By an unfortunate coincidence, within just over one month of Canada joining the sanctions regime a Canadian woman was embroiled in the hijacking of an Air India jet to Kandahar; the hostages were released after a week, with Taliban acting as an intermediary.[aa] At about the same time, a Canadian resident, Ahmed Ressam, was arrested in Washington State on charges including the smuggling of explosives from Canada into the US. A Canadian Security and Intelligence Service official told the *Globe and Mail* that Ressam had been trained in bomb-making at bin Laden's base in Afghanistan.[141]

Canada has been involved in a number of humanitarian assistance initiatives in Afghanistan. For example, in conjunction with the Security Council meeting on Afghanistan in April 2000, Canada announced a $300,000 contribution to the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Assistance to Afghanistan, to support the activities of local and non-governmental organisations involved in human rights training and programming. Earlier, in December 1999 it was announced that the Canadian International Development Agency would provide $400,000 to CARE Canada to help over 8,000

[z] Canada implemented the sanctions under Security Council Resolution 1267 of 15 October 1999, with effect from 14 November 1999.

[aa] As noted earlier, the Indians thought Taliban was complicit in the incident.

primary school children, particularly girls, receive an education in Afghanistan. A similar contribution to Doctors Without Borders was intended to support a project to provide maternal and child health care in remote Badghis province. Canada also gave emergency relief aid to victims of a major earthquake in eastern Afghanistan in February 1998.

Canada has made a small military contribution to conflict resolution in Afghanistan. For instance, it contributed five military observers to UNGOMAP for the duration of the mission (May 1988 to March 1990), as well as one military advisor to the Office of the Secretary General in Afghanistan between 1990 and 1992. In February-March 2000, technical experts from the Canadian Centre for Mine Action Technologies (part of the Defence Research Establishment Suffield) went to Afghanistan to participate in a trial of metal detectors. A parallel, civilian, initiative was undertaken by the Ottawa General Hospital, in conjunction with an institute based in Kandahar, to fit a substantial number of landmine victims with prosthetic and orthotic devices, and to provide rehabilitation treatment.

As many countries, Canada's relations with Afghanistan are influenced by the drug trade. Hashish tends to be imported into Canada in multi-tonne shipments from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Yet despite Taliban having overtaken Burma as the world's largest opium producer, south-east Asia remains the principal source of heroin available in Canada.[142]

CONCLUSION

Afghanistan has a long history of repulsing direct foreign intervention, as the British discovered in the nineteenth century and the Soviets in the 1980s. However, external intervention in support of the warring factions in civil war is clearly a different matter. The involvement of external states and non-state actors in the contemporary conflict in Afghanistan greatly complicates the search for peace, and prolongs the instability in the country.

The rise of Taliban since 1994 has proven a catalyst of foreign involvement, although initially this was not obvious in that even some of the Afghan militia's current foes then saw redeeming features in it. In the mid-1990s, outside intervention very largely favoured Taliban, as Saudi Arabia, financially, and Pakistan, militarily, threw their support behind the militia. As Taliban gradually over-mastered the other principal factions in the Afghan conflict, its failings became more obvious to regional and extra-regional states, and some began more actively to assist anti-Taliban forces.

External assistance to the factions has waxed and waned according to the fortunes of the sides – Taliban's near approach to complete victory in the third quarter of 1998 seems to have given pause to the backers of the Northern Alliance – and there have been similar tides in the motives underlying such help.

As might be expected of a conflict that dates back nearly a quarter-century, security ranks high among the concerns not only of Afghanistan's six neighbours but also

of states further afield. In fact, it is the most common concern among all the external actors in the Afghan conflict. The worry in virtually all cases is of internal security rather than of external attack, since Afghanistan is incapable of the latter. Some states, such as Russia, its Central Asian allies, and India fear that a successful Taliban will be an exemplar and exporter of Jihad. Pakistan fears the return of its own citizens nurtured in Taliban militancy and Afghan training camps. Some of the Gulf States and the US are focused more specifically on bin Laden. Probably only Iran has little cause to worry about Afghanistan from a security perspective. However, Pakistan's security focus, as it relates to Afghanistan, extends beyond internal security concerns. Afghanistan provides Pakistan not only "strategic depth" but also a nursery to help keep alive the insurgency in Kashmir, thereby sustaining its half-century confrontation with India.

Only one state – Pakistan – thinks that it has important economic incentives for involvement in Afghanistan, and these hopes have atrophied. This aspect of Pakistani motivation is revealed, perhaps paradoxically, in Islamabad's willingness to absorb the high economic costs (through military assistance and lost tariff revenues) of backing Taliban. Another severe cost to Pakistan is international censure, a penalty which other outside sponsors of the Afghan factions do not bear to anything like the same extent (because of the direction – against Taliban – and scale of their involvement). For instance, backing for Taliban has eroded Pakistan's relations with Iran, its neighbour and a long-standing ally.

With one of the two major warring factions being strongly actuated by religion, it is hardly surprising that religion has been a motivating force in some external involvement. Saudi Arabia's initial support of Taliban seems to have stemmed from this source, while Iran's hostility to Taliban has owed much to the militia's attack on Afghanistan's Shi'a minority.

Narcotics smuggling and the burden posed on host countries by large refugee populations have also been influences on the policies of external actors in the conflict. Both issues particularly affect Iran, but drug smuggling is a major concern of the Central Asian states – especially Tajikistan – and of Russia, the latter largely because its troops police the Tajik-Afghan border.

Domestic political pressure only significantly affects Pakistan – where Islamist groups exert considerable pressure – and Iran, whose citizens want retribution against the killers of the consular staff in Mazar-i-Sharif, and thus would not tolerate their government being too accommodating towards Taliban.

In examining the motives – security, political, economic, criminal, religious, and so on – that prompt external involvement in Afghanistan, only one state scores high on almost every count: Pakistan. In addition, Pakistan is one of the few external actors that have a strong unofficial pressure acting on its policy: the willingness of its citizens, or of residents (Afghan refugees), to join the ranks of one of the warring factions in Afghanistan. It is likely that Islamabad can, with difficulty and at risk of reflux, put a

crimp in the flow of volunteers, but it probably cannot staunch it entirely. This situation constrains the government's ability to fashion a policy towards Afghanistan.

Pakistan is also unusual in being subjected to international pressure to change its Afghan policy. Its strenuous effort to rebuild its relationship with Iran is an indicator of the increasing degree to which Islamabad feels that pressure. Its own motives for intervening unquestionably direct it towards support of Taliban, but if a military stalemate is prolonged, those motives will likely become gradually less compelling, particularly if the cost (in international censure) increases further. However, Pakistan's preparedness to shoulder a considerable economic burden while helping Taliban suggests that it would take a great deal of international pressure to effect a significant (and not just rhetorical) change in Islamabad's Afghan policy. The ability of the international community further to increase the cost to Pakistan of its support for Taliban depends on the willingness of particular countries that for long were not especially engaged to become more consistently involved in the issue. The greater engagement of the US and, to a lesser degree, of China - as Pakistan's long-standing ally – would reinforce the pressure Islamabad already feels from Iran. There are signs of that increased engagement.

For now, both warring sides in Afghanistan still see profit from fighting. However, the two sides appear relatively evenly matched, and Afghanistan's history suggests that the longer Taliban controls particular areas, the more likely it becomes that it will generate revolt. Thus, the prospect of one or other faction winning complete control of Afghanistan in the short term is receding. In turn, this increases the potential of compromise solutions, such as the Loya Jirga.

For such a compromise to work, Taliban has to be given convincing evidence that total victory (which largely depends on outside support) is unattainable. It is unlikely to be given indications of substantially reduced external backing in the near term. As its abandonment of Hekmatyar in 1994 indicates, Pakistan is capable of shifting its policy on Afghanistan (although that was a minor shift compared with what is now being urged on Islamabad). However, while Pakistan might find a stalemate acceptable, it would not risk Taliban's defeat. That suggests that some level of Pakistani support for Taliban, both official and unofficial, will continue, encouraged by periodic Taliban victories. The external backers of the Northern Alliance have recovered their nerve since the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif. Thus they are likely to continue to give the alliance sufficient *materiél* support to be able to resist Taliban.

On the other hand, the more active engagement of the US, which has been less conspicuous in its support for the belligerents than most other external sponsors and is showing interest in the Loya Jirga idea, brings a new element to the conflict that might reinforce the prospects for compromise opened by military stalemate. Thus, there now exists the potential for a solution different to the complete victory of either Taliban or the Northern Alliance. If it makes ground it will be only gradually, just as it is probable that the two sides will give up their hopes of military victory reluctantly and that the external sponsors' backing for the warring factions will recede only slowly.

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