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Afghanistan: Intrahistory and Perspectives of a Misunderstood Conflict

At some point the Afghans will have to ride their bikes alone...

Mr. Secretary, there is no bike!

US Ambassador Khalilzad to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld¹.

Summary

The international mission in Afghanistan must be understood historically and prospectively. Support for the Northern Alliance altered the Afghan-Pakistani ecosystem, a key part of the Sino-Indian regional balance of powers. Besides, the reconstruction policy encouraged corruption and forgot the socio-economic function of opium, both discrediting the Afghan government. Finally, the US withdrawal must be considered under the strategic rivalry with China.

Keywords

Afghan-Pakistani ecosystem, national reconstruction, international aid.

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¹ Khalilzad, Z. (2016). *The envoy. From Kabul to the White House*. Macmillan.

Introduction

The withdrawal of US troops and the end of the last international intervention in Afghanistan has been the subject of considerable criticism, both journalistic and military, and has prompted numerous geostrategic analyses of its impact on the global chessboard. The majority of opinions assimilate the withdrawal to a defeat and the confirmation of the beginning of a new post-American era, in which China could consolidate itself as the new hegemon. These conclusions, however, seem to skip over some historical lessons since, for example, despite its defeat in Vietnam, the United States ended up as the victorious power from the Cold War. And Afghanistan was precisely one of the geographical enclaves in which this historical passage was written, with the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Why did the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam not lead to a US military decline, while the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan led to the fall of the Iron Curtain? The answer to this question should allow us to interpret whether the US withdrawal from Afghanistan could be, this time, synonymous with its definitive military and economic decline, a scenario already sketched by Emmanuel Todd (2002) almost two decades ago². At the same time, will the US withdrawal from Afghanistan mean China's continental consolidation? The Asian giant certainly has investments in neighbouring Pakistan through its "Belt and Road" initiative and could extend them to Afghanistan. But is there any guarantee that a single country, albeit the world's second-largest military and economic power, can achieve the success that has eluded a consortium of Western states for nearly two decades? Beyond the myth of Afghan invincibility, it is important to analyse the causes of the US withdrawal. For this, it is crucial to have a historical perspective, allowing for a comparison between the Soviet and US withdrawals, despite the time lag, and, above all, to understand the complex regional balance of power of which Afghanistan is only one component. For this reason, this article will analyse issues that complement the already abundant literature on the Afghan question: the impact of the vestiges of the Cold War on today's Afghanistan; the complex Afghan-Pakistani ecosystem and how it fits into the regional balance of power; the problems of corruption and drug trafficking in Afghanistan's accelerated modernisation; and the possible geopolitical impact of US withdrawal in the region and its strategic rivalry with China. The methodology to be used will be theoretical and descriptive, based on a review of specialised literature, especially the available official documentation, the autobiographies of political, military and diplomatic officials involved in the mission, and the literature of the experts who advised them. The aim is to avoid an ethnocentric assessment of the conflict, to incorporate indigenous views, and to provide an overview that allow lessons to be learned.

² Todd, E. (2002). *Après l'empire: Essai sur la décomposition du système américain*. Gallimard.

Afghanistan. Tomb of empires?

Afghanistan has historically been *a country trapped by geography*³. Its borders were marked according to the interests of the British and Russian empires in the 19th century, regardless of local realities. The western provinces of Herat, Nimruz and Farah, for example, were once Iranian, but after the Anglo-Persian war they were attached to Afghanistan. This has not prevented strong cultural and religious ties from surviving, as 10 percent of the Afghan population is Shiite, the official Iranian religion. However, the biggest territorial dispute is the Afghan-Pakistan border, which also divides the territory of the Pashtun ethnic group, the country's political and military elite. The border runs along the 2,670 km Durand Line, which was established in 1893 to separate British India from Afghanistan. Although it was a formal agreement with then Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, no subsequent Afghan government has recognised its legitimacy, which has historically conditioned diplomatic relations between the two countries. Afghanistan thus appears to be a geographically artificial state, the *result of national insecurities and geostrategic interests*⁴.



Image 1. The Durand Line, Afghan-Pakistani border (not recognised by Afghanistan) Source: Weaveravel

Afghanistan is not a state in the modern sense of the term, but rather a feudal space where ethno-provincial ties predominate and where the national government has hardly

³ Tadjbakhsh, S. (2020). Appearance before the International Relations and Defence Committee. House of Lords. 28 October.

⁴ Paliwal, A. (2020). Appearance before the International Relations and Defence Committee. House of Lords. 28 October.

any resources to finance itself and defend its territorial sovereignty. In fact, the country has little in the way of a primary road network connecting Kabul, the capital, to the main provincial cities (*where the roads end, the Taliban begin*⁵). There is also no railway network, but only one railway with Uzbekistan. This serious historical shortfall has been partly compensated for by a well-established network of air hubs (Kabul, Jalalabad, Herat, Shindand and Mazar-i-Sharif), which, however, cannot make up for the serious deficiencies in ground infrastructure. This asymmetry can be explained by the country's culture of warfare: making it difficult for invaders to get supplies by taking advantage of the lack of river connections, which has traditionally facilitated ambushes.

However, it would be misleading to equate Afghan feudalism with medieval Europe, as it is a more modern version, incorporating capitalist functions alongside the traditional functions of the nobility. Warlords do not only provide security in a war-torn country, they also provide citizens with basic services and rulers with votes⁶; in other words, they occupy political space. The origin of Afghan neofeudalism is economic, as ethnic groups have historically controlled two of the country's main sources of income, drugs and mining, making the establishment of a strong central state impossible⁷. The opium trade is estimated to be equivalent to 6-11% of official GDP, almost twice as much as legal agricultural production, and is one of the main generators of employment for the population and income for groups such as the Taliban⁸. Mining, meanwhile, is largely illegal, marked by the unofficial extraction of the country's rich natural resources that are exported by smugglers across the unguarded borders with Pakistan. It is this regional financial autonomy that has made it difficult to establish a strong central power, which has historically been misinterpreted by great powers such as the UK, the USSR and the USA as weakness of the country as a whole.

Afghanistan, due to the traditional absence of a consolidated central power, is a country structured around the *nafuz* (*auctoritas*) of its leaders, which allows them to have social influence. Louis Dupree (1976), considered the first Western historian of Afghanistan, already pointed out that the unpopularity of the leaders imposed by the British Empire had been the main reason for their failure (they reinstated as emir an unpopular Shah Shuja, dethroned twice before, in 1809 and 1834)⁹. Surprisingly, this mistake has

5 Attributed to Karl Eikenberry, General and former US Ambassador to Afghanistan.

6 Abbas, H. (2014). *The Taliban revival: violence and extremism on the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier*. Yale University Press. "For Karzai, those warlords who controlled the terrain, especially customs revenues, were useful allies. In some cases, (...) they received prominent positions in the government in exchange for the fulfilment of US objectives". P. 86.

7 Gaston, E. (2020). Appearance before the International Relations and Defence Committee. House of Lords. 7 October.

8 De Lauri, A. (2020). Appearance before the International Relations and Defence Committee. House of Lords. 7 October. To put this in context, tourism in Spain accounts for 12 % of GDP.

9 Dupree, L. (1976). *The first Anglo-Afghan war and the British Retrial 1842: the functions of history and folklore*.

been repeated in the last two foreign occupations. Soviet rule thus relied on weak central institutions and a marked absence of charisma in its leaders. In the international occupation, the last president, Ghani, was a World Bank technocrat with no recognised *nafiz* and no political experience, and his predecessor, Karzai, was aligned with warlords and drug traffickers, and his brother was involved in several corruption cases¹⁰.

It is Afghan neo-feudalism that also explains the absence of a professional army; the apparent lack of fighting spirit, so often commented on during the Taliban reconquest, is understandable because of the alternative social and family tasks that non-professional warriors have to undertake, as the CIA noted in a 1980 memo¹¹: *The main loyalty of most Afghans is to their villages or extended families (...) men leave the battlefield because they have more important matters at home*. This attitude is what facilitated the Soviet defeat and the recent US withdrawal, but it also explains the rise and consolidation of Al Qaeda in the region: Osama bin Laden did not accept Afghan pragmatism, so he recruited Arab fighters for the *jihād* against the USSR, who, once it was over, settled in Pashtunistan for good¹².

However, it should also not be forgotten that pre-Soviet Afghanistan was beginning an indigenous process of modernisation led by the king, who controlled the army, the tribes, and the bureaucracy, and who sought to establish a parliamentary monarchy. The Communist coup d'état of 1978 installed a republic and undertook a failed agricultural reform, creating inefficient smallholdings that reinforced, rather than abolished, pre-existing vassalage and tribal relations, now converted into the ultimate support network¹³. This accelerated modernisation also seemed to ignore the fact that monarchies, because of their feudal origins, more readily admit a hierarchy of territorial sovereignties than a nation-state¹⁴. The insurrection against the new republic, perceived by the population as an intolerable self-colonisation, initiated a period of war that has lasted more than 40 years, in which nationalism has been linked to Islam but with a particularity: the Afghan Islamic parties, due to the war, operated more in rural areas than in the cities, so their structures have been strongly conditioned by clans and ethnicities¹⁵. Consequently, *all politics in Afghanistan is, in extremis, local*¹⁶.

10 Behzad, R. (2011). La estructura social en Afganistán [The social structure in Afghanistan]. IEEE Opinion Paper. "The main problem lies in the weakness of Hamid Karzai's government. In fact, there is no emblematic figure with enough power to run the country". P. 12.

11 Memorandum 309 of 8 August 1980. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frusi1977-80v12/d309>

12 Musharraf, P. (2006). Op. cit.

13 Grötzbach, E. (1985). The land reform of 1979 and its aftermath.

14 Bouthoul, G. (1971). La guerre. PUF.

15 Centlivres-Demont, M. (2015). Afghanistan: Identity, Society and Politics since 1980. DOI: 10.5040/9780755607433

16 Collins, J. J. (2011). Understanding War in Afghanistan. Washington, D.C., National Defense University Press. P. 13. A view that coincides with Ruiz, J. (2021). The role of regional actors in the

How could a quasi-feudal country with no consolidated central power defeat the Soviet empire, the leading military power of the time, and trigger its subsequent global collapse? Despite the myth enshrined by the British of Afghanistan as a tomb of empires, history confirms the importance of US support in creating a Soviet Vietnam. In a declassified memo, adviser Brzezinski suggested to President Carter that, in order to achieve this and prevent the USSR's advance into the Indian Ocean, the following steps should be taken¹⁷:

- a) supporting the Afghan resistance;
- b) reassuring Pakistan and encouraging it to help the rebels, which would require, in return, a reconsideration of the policy of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons;
- c) encouraging China to help the rebels;
- d) arranging with Islamic countries both a propaganda campaign and a covert action campaign to help the rebels;
- e) denouncing Soviet actions in Afghanistan to the UN as a threat to peace.

The effectiveness of this combined strategy is borne out by the facts, as the USSR eventually left Afghanistan in 1989. However, the success of the Afghan campaign had three lasting effects: initiating the collapse of the Soviet empire, establishing Pakistan as the first (and so far only) Muslim nuclear power, and consolidating the Afghan-Pakistani terrorist ecosystem.

Certainly, the seeds of Soviet decline lay in its technological backwardness vis-à-vis the West, but the Afghan failure symbolised the failure of the Brezhnev doctrine, according to which every socialist country had to be kept, even by force, in the Soviet orbit. This imperialist vision, unbecoming of a self-styled Marxist power, had provoked the reticence of several socialist governments and the moral discredit of the USSR, especially after the occupation of Czechoslovakia (1968)¹⁸. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan made its renunciation of imperialism visible, so its satellite countries felt liberated and the Iron Curtain collapsed. However, what for Western democracies was a triumph of liberalism, for the Muslim world was a victory of Islam over communist atheism, bringing glamour to *jihad*, such as that in Kashmir against India and, in 2001, against the international occupation of Afghanistan.

Why did an originally moderate Islamic country like Pakistan generalise a restrictive interpretation of its religion? Because of the coincidence of General Zia's political inter-

Afghan peace process. *Revista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos*. N.º 16, pp. 221–250: “... the Taliban insurgency is more about nationalism than global jihadism”.

¹⁷ Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter. (26 December 1979). <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v12/d97>

¹⁸ Valenta, J. (1980). From Prague to Kabul: The Soviet Style of Invasion. *International Security*. Vol. 5, 2 (Autumn).

ests, since Bhutto's detractors—a symbol of secular democracy—defended the implementation of *Sharia* (Islamic law), inspired by the Iranian Revolution (1979), as did the Saudi leaders, with whom the dictator collaborated in covert operations against the Soviet occupation, as recognised by Musharraf (2006)¹⁹ and Bhutto herself (1988)²⁰.

A second, less talked-about effect of the anti-Soviet struggle was the rise of Pakistan as the first Islamic nuclear power as, in exchange for its cooperation, the US had to temporarily lower its non-proliferation demands²¹. With the Cold War and *jihad* over, subsequent sanctions on Pakistan for its first nuclear test plunged the country into a deep economic crisis and were seen as US disloyalty for not having sanctioned India's earlier tests.

Finally, the third effect of the anti-Soviet *jihad* was the consolidation of the terrorist ecosystem to fight the Afghan government. As Kasuri (2015), a former Pakistani foreign minister, summarises: *Zia turned a blind eye to mujahideen activities, such as selling arms on the Pakistani market and trafficking drugs to finance their jihad. By remaining unnecessarily involved in Afghanistan after the end of the Soviet withdrawal and subsequently jumping on the Taliban bandwagon, Pakistan lost the opportunity to provide important alternative routes for Central Asian trade and fossil fuel supplies to South Asia and the rest of the world.* Given its importance, this ecosystem will be analysed in the following section.

The Afghan-Pakistani ecosystem

As discussed above, Afghanistan is a geographically artificial state, geographically marked according to Western criteria that do not correspond to the indigenous reality. Its analysis must therefore dispense with political borders and pay attention to the anthropological spaces that are the *real actors of history*²², the forces that explain the repetition of events in the same places. For this reason, it is important to analyse the region from a non-state-centric perspective, as *no two states in the modern world share a common fate as much as Afghanistan and Pakistan*²³.

19 Musharraf, P. (2006). In the line of fire. Simon&Schuster. "The hardline mullahs and their seminaries received official sponsorship from Pakistan, the United States, Saudi Arabia and other allies during this period, and were accused of producing indoctrinated fighters against the Soviet Union. Therefore, no one complained when President General Zia ul-Haq introduced regressive Islamisation in the country, with Islamic laws and courts to operate in parallel with the normal judicial system". P. 162.

20 "Zia consistently used Islamic rhetoric to justify his repressive measures and terrorise some segments of society"; Bhutto, B. (1988). Autobiographie. Hachette. P. 428.

21 Telegram from Ambassador Hummel to the State Department. (18 May 1978) Islamabad.

"To continue to mortgage our entire relationship with Pakistan on the issue of non-proliferation, despite what has happened and may happen in the wake of the Kabul coup, will be to promote the erosion of our last remaining instruments of influence and prestige". Afghanistan (*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XII*). Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State.

22 Todd, E. (1990). L'invention de l'Europe. Éditions Seuil.

23 Hasan, K. (1962). Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations. Asian Survey. Pp. 14-24.

There are two backbones that would constitute an Afghan-Pakistani ecosystem: the Kabul (or Kunan) river basin and the territory of Pashtunistan. The Kabul River and its tributaries flow through several Afghan provinces before entering Pakistan and eventually flowing into the Indus, Pakistan's only river basin. In addition to being the base for crops, it is a natural artery connecting the two countries, which was already used by Alexander the Great to invade India. Of the nine rivers shared between the two countries, the Kabul is the most significant; it irrigates 12 % of Afghanistan's land area and provides 26 % of the annual national flow, but including Pakistan, the river basin supports almost 25 million people. The two countries also have a very similar economic structure, with agriculture generating 25 percent of Afghan GDP and 19 percent of Pakistani GDP. For this reason, climate change, which has reduced rainfall in the region by 60%, and decades of war, which has left 80 % of Afghanistan's rural population without access to clean water, could be the source of hostilities²⁴. Indeed, there is a thesis that the 1978 socialist *putsch* in Afghanistan was instigated by the tribes most affected by the severe droughts of the 1970s²⁵.

The second backbone of the ecosystem is the Pashtunistan region, the land of the Pashtun ethnic group, which straddles the Afghan-Pakistan border, divided by the Durand line mentioned above. The Pashtuns have historically been the leaders in both Afghanistan and Pakistan²⁶ because of their tribal rather than feudal organisation, based on a traditional Athenian-like direct democracy, which has given them greater autonomy from the authorities²⁷. The pre-Soviet Afghan monarchy had the support of the Pashtun tribes in both countries (Pakistan did not exist at the time) because they were united, not only culturally, but also in their animosity towards the British²⁸. With Pakistani independence, both governments engaged in a contest for full annexation of Pashtunistan, which weakened them and made possible the socialist *putsch* and subsequent Soviet occupation of Afghanistan²⁹. Probably as a result of this experience, parts of the Pakistani military establishment have advocated a confederation with Afghani-

24 Devasher, T. (2016). *Pakistan: Courting the Abyss*. HarperCollins.

25 Aziz, K. (2013). Need for a Pak-Afghan Treaty on Management of Joint Watercourses. *Criterion Quarterly*, 2, p. 4.

26 Karachi, the former capital, is the city with the largest Pashtun community.

27 Khan, I. (2011). *Pakistan: A personal history*. Bantam press. Khan is currently Pakistan's prime minister.

28 Nor has a common nationalist sentiment, in the Western sense of the term, prevailed among tribes on both sides of the border. Indeed, in 1960, a USSR-instigated invasion of Pakistan by Afghan tribesmen failed when the Pakistani Pashtuns did not go along. This failure reaffirmed US diplomacy in recognising the official status of the Durand line as the border. Memorandum 175 from the Secretary of State to the President. (15 October 1960). Office of the Historian. US State Department.

29 The possibility had already been hinted at by US diplomacy two decades in advance: "This dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan prevents the two countries from adopting a joint defence programme against possible Soviet aggression". Telegram from the Ambassador to Afghanistan to the Department of State. (1953). *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, Africa and South Asia*, Volume XI.

stan (sometimes referred to as “strategic depth”), rejected by the leadership because of its geopolitical implications³⁰.



Image 2. Major ethnic groups in Pakistan Source: University of Texas.
https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/pakistan_ethnic_80.jpg

The Afghan-Pakistani ecosystem is a centrepiece in a complex balance of power in the Indian subcontinent that involves not only Afghanistan but also three neighboring nuclear powers: Pakistan, India and China. The historical circumstance of Pakistan and India being born on the same day has made comparisons and rivalry inevitable. In its first decade of existence, for example, India had consolidated a democratic path with a constitution, two general elections (1952 and 1957) and an army guardian of the system, while Pakistan had neither a stable government nor capital³¹ and had not been able to hold elections for lack of a constitution. This is partly explained by the fact that Pakistan’s delimitation was very weak from the outset, as its founding was justified more in the idea of protection (an Israel for Muslims in Hindu-dominated British

30 For example, Bhutto (1988), after the Soviet withdrawal, proposed demanding Afghanistan’s recognition of the Durand line as the official border in exchange for support for a smooth political transition; the Pakistani military establishment, however, advocated a confederation between Muslim brothers. Prime Minister Bhutto rejected the proposal because it “would give the Indians an excuse to intervene in Afghanistan”. P. 548.

31 The initial capital of the new state was Karachi, the birthplace of Pakistan’s founder. It was not until almost two decades later that a new capital, Islamabad, was built.

India) than self-determination for a colonised territory. The absence of common history, culture, language, or ethnicity in the territories that would eventually constitute the new Pakistani nation meant that ethnolinguistic impulses were more powerful than Islam³². As Wali Khan said, *I have been a Pashtun for 6,000 years, a Muslim for 1,300 years and a Pakistani for 25 years*³³. The Indian-backed independence of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, and Pashtunistan's dispute with Afghanistan created an identity crisis in a young nation³⁴. The result has been, over the years, a Pakistani policy of suspicion of India, marked by belligerence, which has ended up weighing down both the country itself³⁵ and Afghanistan, as *Pakistan's persistent efforts to destabilise Afghanistan are deeply rooted in Islamabad's paranoia about India*³⁶.

	HDI position	Average annual growth HDI (1990-2019)	Life expectancy	Expected years of schooling	Average years of schooling	Gross national income (2017 ppp)
China	85	1.47	76.9	14.0	8.1	16,057
India	131	1.42	69.7	12.2	6.5	6,681
Bangladesh	133	1.64	72.6	11.6	6.2	4,976
Pakistan	154	1.13	67.3	8.3	5.2	5,005
Afghanistan	169	1.83	64.8	10.2	3.9	2,229

Table 1. Comparison of human and economic development. Source: Human Development Report (2020)

As can be seen in the comparative table, according to the UN Human Development Index, India (131) and Bangladesh (133) have reached a similar level of progress, clearly outstripping Pakistan (154) and Afghanistan (169). With India's growth path entrenched, Afghan and Pakistani leaders have often relapsed into their historic spiral of self-destructive rivalry. It was the US refusal to stop supporting Pakistan that prompted Afghanistan's socialist turn and its subsequent Soviet occupation (1979). The Afghan government at the time feared that an economically and politically stable Pakistan could undermine its strategy of linking Pashtunistan to Kabul. During the subsequent civil war, Pakistan supported the Taliban and India supported Kabul to prevent an Afghan government close to Islamabad. Pakistan currently fears that a stable Afghan government would invest in infrastructure, especially hydro-energy, which would affect a country traditionally subject to water shortages, blackouts and, recently, high energy prices; for Islamabad, as long as Afghanistan is a weak

32 Devasher, T. (2016). Op. cit.

33 Hilton, I. (2001). The Pashtun Code. *The New Yorker*. 3 December.

34 Haqqani, H. (2018). *Reimagining Pakistan: transforming a dysfunctional nuclear state*. HarperCollins. Haqqani, a former Pakistani ambassador to the US.

35 According to Haqqani: "Pakistan's recurrent economic crises are partly a product of the widespread disdain for economic activity in a culture that extols the virtues of the warrior rather than the trader". Haqqani, H. (2018). Op. cit.

36 Khalilzad, Z. (2016). Op. cit.

country, the Durand border will be maintained and Pakistan will have more water for its agriculture.

However, beyond the pure balance of power, the Afghan-Pakistani ecosystem that has sheltered the Taliban during the two decades of Western occupation has its origins in the US policy of supporting Pakistan in its fight against Soviet Afghanistan, discussed above. While undoubtedly successful in the primary objective of collapsing Soviet space, the specific policies caused two of the biggest problems in today's Afghanistan through the Pakistani communicating vessel: arms and drug trafficking³⁷. The almost free access to weapons (the Kalashnikov culture) has allowed the maintenance of Afghan neo-feudalism; the sale of drugs, the financing of the Taliban³⁸. As for Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, it was fear of a possible extremist uprising that for years prevented the US from intervening in Pakistan to capture Bin Laden and the other al-Qaeda leaders, and delayed military withdrawal for a decade³⁹. Dictator Musharraf had warned President Bush about the violation of territorial sovereignty as a trigger for the possible fall of his government⁴⁰. For this reason, the pursuit of terrorists was delegated to Pakistani forces, who were, admittedly, remarkably successful, with the capture of ringleaders such as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Abu Zubaydah, Abu Faraj al Libbi and even the father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb, A.Q. Khan, under suspicion of collaboration with North Korea⁴¹; however, the raid against Bin Laden had to be executed directly by the US in 2011, without official Pakistani support⁴².

Pakistan's crucial role in the *jihad* against the godless Soviet empire has been little understood in Western media. Certainly the dictator Zia ul-Haq was its main instigator in order to perpetuate himself in power with Western help. Thanks to the support of the more radical *mullahs* in the provinces bordering Afghanistan, the Pashtuns adhered to their puritanical interpretation of Islam. History confirms that, unlike Napoleon or Hitler, Pakistan, with invaluable American help, succeeded in overthrowing

37 Kasuri, former Pakistani foreign minister: "Zia turned a blind eye to mujahideen activities, such as selling arms on the Pakistani market and trafficking drugs to finance their jihad. By remaining unnecessarily involved in Afghanistan after the end of the Soviet withdrawal and subsequently jumping on the Taliban bandwagon, Pakistan lost the opportunity to provide important alternative routes for Central Asian trade and fossil fuel supplies to South Asia and the rest of the world". Kasuri, K. M. (2015). *Neither a hawk nor a dove. An Insider's Account Of Pakistan's Foreign Policy*. Penguin books.

38 It is estimated that 65 % of the Taliban's income comes from opium, even though its cultivation is against Islam.

39 Bolton, J. (2020). *The room where it happened*. Simon&Shuster.

40 Bush, G. W. (2010). *Decision points*. Crown Publishing Group.

41 According to Khan (2011), in contravention of Article 4 of the Constitution, which prohibits the extradition of untried residents.

42 Musharraf noted in his memoirs that Bin Laden could be in Konar (northern Afghanistan) where there were Saudi settlements, as he did not enjoy the support of Pakistani tribes. However, he was killed in Abbottabad (northern Pakistan), where Umar Patek, the perpetrator of the 2002 Bali bombings, had been arrested months earlier. Musharraf, P. (2006). *In the line of fire*. Simon&Schuster.

Russia and was one of the architects of the end of the Cold War. The Afghan *jihad* is therefore incomprehensible without incorporating the crucial Pakistani role. Afghanistan and Pakistan must therefore be seen as communicating vessels. It is precisely the neglect of this ecosystem by foreign powers that has made both the success of Afghanistan's modernisation policies and effective international counter-terrorism impossible. Indeed, several analysts have criticised Pakistan's double-dealing in the war on terror, forgetting the motivations that led the country to support it initially and reinterpret it later. When the Bush II administration demanded Musharraf's support for the international coalition, it forgot the issue of Pashtunistan and the fact that the Taliban are Pashtuns, the second-largest ethnic group in Pakistan. Their rivals were the Northern Alliance of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, supported by Russia, India, and Iran and, after 9/11, the US. Pakistan had been a Western ally during the Cold War not for ideological but for strategic reasons, to gain a geopolitical foothold in the face of a socialist India and a Soviet Afghanistan (*the last bastion of the free world*, according to Thatcher) and for support for its nuclear programme. In the case of 9/11, the reasons were economic and budgetary, not ideological: support for the fight against terrorism gave Pakistan access to international credit on very favourable terms, which allowed it to cut its annual foreign debt by half, sanctions were lifted, it was granted funds for counter-terrorism operations, it received billions of dollars in aid, and the US opened its domestic market to Pakistani products and services⁴³. In addition, bank remittances from Pakistani migrants skyrocketed after 9/11 as the US pursued the traditional method of *hawala* transfers, also used by terrorist networks to fund themselves. In 2004, Pakistan recorded a surplus in its balance of payments for the first time when in 1999 it was a bankrupt state⁴⁴. Thus, once the country was economically liberated from its external dependence, its leaders were able to adopt a policy closer to their strategic interests, namely to bring the tribes under state control, to secure a pro-Pakistan Afghanistan and a pro-China alliance to rival their Indian antagonist⁴⁵. It was the year in which military operations were launched against the tribals, who voted against Musharraf in the 2002 elections, and against those Taliban who had declared *jihad* against Pakistan, sparking a revolt that had to be put down with US support⁴⁶; it is also the year from which Taliban attacks against NATO forces are even supported⁴⁷.

43 Bush, G. W. (2011). Op. cit.

44 Musharraf, P. (2006). Op. cit.

45 Abbas, H. (2014). Op. cit.

46 President George W. Bush acknowledged: "Over time, it became clear that Musharraf would not or could not deliver on all his promises. Part of the problem was Pakistan's obsession with India. (...) Pakistani forces pursued the Taliban much less aggressively than they pursued al-Qaida. Some members of the Pakistani intelligence service maintained close links with the Taliban. Others wanted an insurance policy in case the US left Afghanistan and India tried to gain influence there. Whatever the reason, Taliban fighters fleeing Afghanistan took refuge in the tribal regions of Pakistan". Bush, G. W. (2010). Op. cit. P. 213.

47 Alexander, C. (2011). *The Long Way Back: Afghanistan's Quest for Peace*. HarperCollins. (former Canadian Ambassador to Afghanistan).

It is important at this point to understand why Pakistan supports the Afghan Taliban without fearing its own Talibanisation. This is mainly for two reasons, according to Khan (2011), the current Pakistani Prime Minister: a) the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan are already almost independent (e.g., they have their own judiciary and police, overwhelmingly Pashtun, and almost none of the federal laws apply)⁴⁸; b) the Afghan Taliban *succeeded not because of their ideology, but because they promised the people the rule of law after years of war, atrocities, and corruption by warlords*⁴⁹. Pakistan, unlike Afghanistan, is a de facto military republic, where the army is the guardian of the nation. Moreover, terrorist groups are seen by the military establishment as *a force multiplier and leverage for its influence*⁵⁰. Thus, international counter-terrorism has been used by Pakistan's dictators not only to entrench themselves in power, but also to impose a state presence in the historically autonomous tribal territories. However, despite close geographical and cultural ties, it seems a Pakistani miscalculation to imagine a Taliban Afghanistan as a satellite of Islamabad. In fact, the previous Taliban government (1996-2001) never recognised the Durand Line as an official border. For this reason, the majority opinion among political leaders is that the strong common ecosystem will sooner or later force the two governments to normalise their relations and reach agreements on the basis of sovereign equality. As Afghan President Ghani said, *the problem is not peace with the Taliban; the problem is peace between Pakistan and Afghanistan*⁵¹.

Accelerated modernisation, corruption and illegal economy in Afghanistan

Initially designed to overthrow the Taliban government and destroy the al-Qaeda terrorist network, the military mission eventually evolved into a civilian national reconstruction project for which foreign armed forces were not prepared⁵². Designed to ensure the defence of their fellow citizens at home, international missions expose troops to unprecedented challenges, in which an understanding of local realities is crucial⁵³. In the case of Afghanistan, it was not only about knowing the official languages (Dari, Pashto) and more than ten tribal languages, but also about capturing

48 In fact, Pakistani police have to enter without weapons or uniform. Abbas, H. (2014).

49 Khan, I. (2011). Op. cit.

50 Haqqani, H. (2018). Op. cit.

51 Quoted in Mutual distrust: the Af-Pak story. (12 July 2015). Daily Times,

52 As Condoleezza Rice, for example, acknowledges in her memoirs: "The cultural, political and geographical weight was in the southern Pashtun belt (...). While the CIA had well-developed relations in the north, there was much less contact with opposition leaders in the Taliban's southern stronghold". Rice, C. (2011). No higher honor. A memoir of my years in Washington. Crown Publishers. P. 66.

53 Elliott, C. (2015). High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Oxford University Press.

moods. After almost four decades of armed conflict, the population suffered from a *learned helplessness* syndrome, assuming the inevitability of conflict and the impossibility of rebuilding the country by their own means. As Khalilzad (2016) acknowledges: [President] *Karzai wanted to restore that lost world [pre-Soviet Afghanistan], but was strangely passive. I knew what had to be done. The problem was that he wanted the United States and the rest of the world to do it. (...) was channelling a broader cultural problem: the Afghan people had lost their self-confidence.*⁵⁴ This sentiment initially led to less local reluctance than expected, which was also helped by the fact that few troops were sent to avoid a sense of occupation among the population (following Dupree's advice)⁵⁵. The success of the purely military operation to dismantle the Taliban regime accelerated, in turn, the social transformation: schools accepted female students again, young people studied English and computers, there was no famine, no civil war and no Pakistani collapse, and the Afghan people defied Taliban threats by going to vote⁵⁶.

Over time, however, the proposed Western model collided with reality. One of the most representative cases was the creation of the Afghan army and its indigenous police force, projects not initially envisaged despite the scarcity of international troops deployed; only because of the deteriorating security situation were they considered the best alternative to further deployment of foreign troops. However, the provision of advanced Western weapons and management systems to a largely illiterate force without adequate learning capacity or institutional infrastructure created an unsustainable long-term budgetary dependency⁵⁷.

Another example of the failure of Western measures to adapt to Afghan tradition was the reform of the banking sector, inspired by the US model and in contravention of *Shariah* principles. The collapse of Kabul Bank in 2010, its bailout (equivalent to 6% of GDP) and the impunity of the elite involved (including President Karzai's brother), far from being a manageable banking crisis, became a symbol of the corruption of the Western system⁵⁸. As Ruíz Arévalo (2015) points out, *Afghanistan has taught us that the effect that corruption can have on post-conflict stabilisation processes cannot be underestimated; the combined effect of delegitimisation of governments and parallel strengthening of*

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⁵⁴ Khalilzad, Z. (2016). Op. cit.

⁵⁵ Dupree, L. (1976). Op. cit.

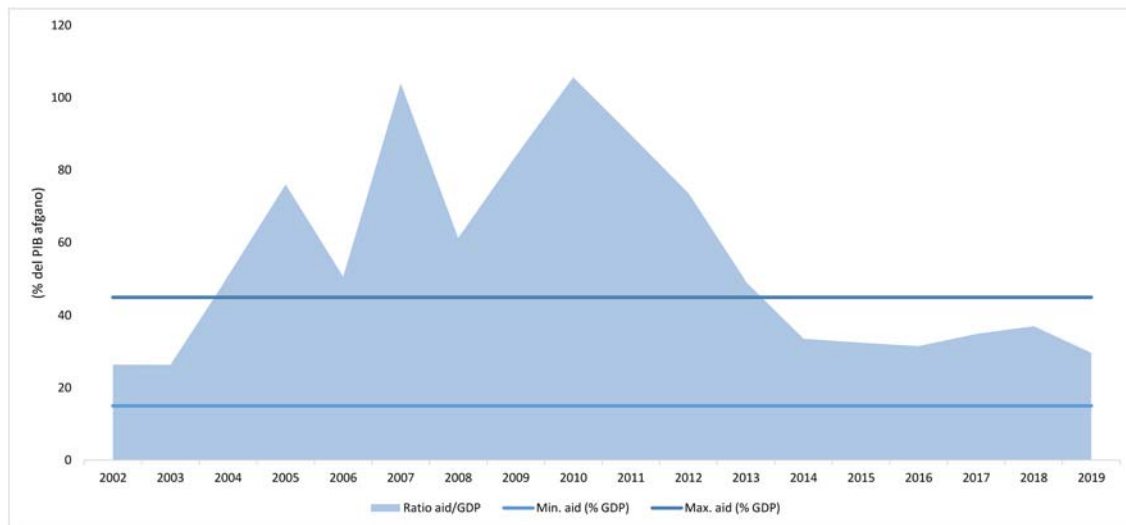
⁵⁶ This was the main window of opportunity missed to stabilise the country, according to Calvo Albero, J. L. (2021). Three missed opportunities in Afghanistan. IEEE Opinion Paper.

⁵⁷ Sigar. (2017). Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. P.V. September. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/sigar-17-62-ll.pdf>

⁵⁸ According to the report of the Independent Anti-Corruption Committee: "The cost of the Kabul Bank crisis should not only be understood in monetary terms, as the abuse of trust in financial and governmental institutions also has a social cost. This cost undermines the efforts of the government and the international community to build viable institutions in Afghanistan".

<https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2012/ijacmec-kabul-bank-inquiry.pdf>

groups seeking to subvert the established order can render any stabilisation effort useless⁵⁹; not in vain, in 2020 the country ranked 165 out of 180 countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2020 (173 in 2019) and has been repeatedly mentioned by the population as one of their greatest daily frustrations⁶⁰.



Graph 1. International aid to Afghanistan and recommended levels (2002-2019)
Source: SIGAR

There have been many causes of pervasive corruption; according to the UN, there is an underexplored link between violence and corruption as a driver of conflict. Also, the impunity caused by the state's inability to exercise its authority throughout the national territory. According to SIGAR (the Special Inspectorate General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, created by the US Congress), the inability to verify the veracity of invoices paid to companies on the ground due to insecurity perpetuated a climate of widespread corruption⁶¹. However, it would be wrong to attribute corruption to strictly indigenous issues. In fact, this debate would divert attention from the main cause, namely the structural incentives of society. The economic literature confirmed, more than two decades ago, that aid to ethnically diverse and decentralised states correlates with high corruption⁶². The explanation is simple: development aid agencies are accountable to the parliaments (and taxpayers) of their respective countries, so the local population, the beneficiaries of their activity, have little say. In a democratic state, citizens can influence the decisions that affect them; in a subsidised country, the elites isolate themselves and ignore the citizenry. *Politicians in Afghanistan do not*

59 Ruiz Arévalo, J. M. (2015). Corruption as a threat to post-conflict stabilisation. Lessons learned in Afghanistan. IEEE Opinion Paper.

60 Unama. (2020). Afghanistan's fight against corruption: Crucial for Peace and Prosperity. June.

61 Sigar. (2020). Quarterly report. 30-01-2020. www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-01-30qr-section2.pdf

62 Among others, Svensson, J. (2000). Foreign Aid and Rent-Seeking. *Journal of international Economics*; Schleifer, A. and Vishny, R. (1993). Corruption. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. 108.

represent the public (Clark, 2020); *corruption is “silent terrorism”*. *It siphons off money that should be spent on services for Afghans and undermines their trust.* (Lyons, 2020) have been statements in testimony before the British parliament confirming that Afghanistan has been yet another case of exogenous corruption⁶³. Indeed, former British ambassador to Afghanistan, Sir Richard Stagg, considered that *corruption may improve as Western involvement recedes*⁶⁴.

How can the bureaucratic system of development aid itself generate more corruption than local administration? The answer is *absorptive capacity*, the maximum amount of foreign aid that a state can manage, usually estimated at between 15% and 45% of the recipient country's GDP. It is a concept coined by the World Bank as early as 1949⁶⁵ which, however, has been complex to systematise due to the casuistry of each state. In this regard, it is worrying that there has been no practical progress in the development policy accompanying military stabilisation and reconstruction operations⁶⁶. Unfortunately, the Afghan case has been paradigmatic: the total volume of foreign aid far exceeded the recommended ceilings, even exceeding the local GDP in some years (2007: 103.9%; 2010: 105%); however, no public administration is prepared to manage foreign aid equivalent to its annual GDP; as Easterly (2006) states, *the rich have markets, the poor have bureaucrats* because, with the arrival of foreign aid, the sector that grows the most is the public sector, which has to justify to a foreign taxpayer the destination of the funds received⁶⁷. As Graph 1 shows, the US pumped enough money into the country to reform it completely. However, the principle of budget annuality seems to have created a counter-productive cycle of ambitious targets and short-term demands. The inability of Western societies to accept that there is no fast track to modernising a country was combined with the Afghan inability to digest massive foreign aid. Graph 1 also illustrates how much pressure the various US administrations have been under to deliver tangible mission results to the taxpayer, parliament, and journalists. Unfortunately, such an arduous task as the reconstruction

63 Kate Clark, Co-Director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network, and Deborah Lyons. Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in their testimonies to the International Relations and Defence Committee. House of Lords. 18 September 2020.

64 Stagg, R. (2020). Testimony before the International Relations and Defence Committee. House of Lords. 23 September.

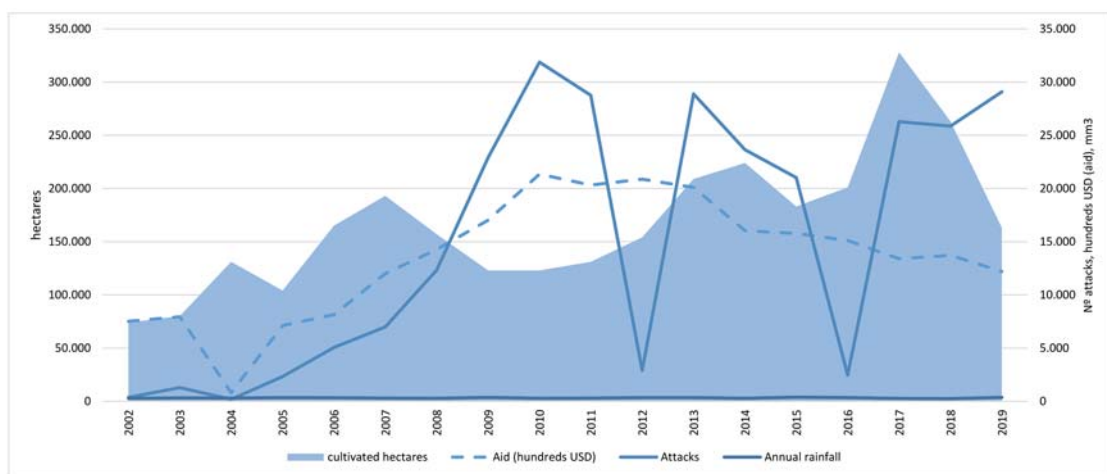
65 International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). (1949). Fourth Annual Report to the Board of Governors, 1948- 1949. Washington, D.C. P. 8.

66 “The main constraint on Bank financing in the development field has not been a lack of money but a lack of well-prepared and planned projects ready for immediate implementation”, the World Bank concluded in 1949. In 2021, 72 years later, the General Inspectorate for Afghanistan (SIGAR) came to a similar conclusion: “Demands for rapid progress encouraged officials to identify and implement short-term projects with little regard for host government capacity and long-term sustainability. US agencies (...) were judged (...) by the number of projects completed and dollars spent”. www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-07-30qr.pdf

67 Easterly, W. (2006). *The White Man's Burden: why the west's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good.* The Penguin Press.

of a country is incompatible with the political urgencies and demands of Western budgetary rules. As Ghani recognised before he became president of Afghanistan, *rather than being a catalyst for institutional capacity building, quick impact projects can become an instrument of division, resentment, and corruption*⁶⁸. Thus, rather than having a local origin, corruption was an imported phenomenon.

It is the absence of a strong administration that explains, in turn, the subsistence of an illegal economic stratum, based on the neo-feudalism of warlords and drug production. According to the *World Drug Report 2021*, Afghanistan produced 85% of the world's opium⁶⁹; unfortunately, more than two decades of international occupation have failed to reduce the opium-dependence of the Afghan economy, as Graph 2 demonstrates⁷⁰.



Graph 2: Opium cultivation, international aid, attacks and rainfall (2002-2019). Sources: UN, SIGAR

If neither insecurity nor droughts seem to explain the explosion of Afghan opium cultivation, what then is the reason for the prevalence of the illegal opiate layer? Despite general economic theories, which assume that opium cultivation is more profitable than other crops⁷¹, empirical analysis on the ground also refutes this thesis. In Afghanistan, apples or apricots can be more profitable even than opium, like onions in Pakistan or

68 Ghani, A. (2009). *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*. Oxford University Press. P. 215.

69 <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr2021.html>

70 Interestingly, there does not seem to be a correlation with violence or annual rainfall, but there is a stronger correlation between foreign aid and conflict, especially in the first decade of occupation.

As for the low correlation between drought and cultivation, this could be explained by some policies. The 1999-2001 drought coincided with the Taliban government's ban on opium cultivation, which eradicated almost 90% of opium production. Also, during the 2008 drought, the governor of Nangarhar issued a ban on opium cultivation.

71 Opium and its derivative, heroin, being addictive substances, from a strictly economic point of view, would be profitable products as they have guaranteed consumers.

garlic in Lebanon⁷². The origin therefore appears to be systemic. Mansfield (2001a) already observed in Afghanistan a negative correlation between opium cultivation and better access to land, water and agricultural markets, i.e., the more economic progress, the less opium cultivation⁷³. However, such a correlation does not imply, as reality has shown, that simply injecting money is enough to eradicate poverty and opiate cultivation. These are two parallel, non-intersecting strata: the legal, money-centred stratum and the illegal, opium-based stratum. In the illegal Afghan (and some Pakistani) stratum, opium is a store of value, replacing the function of money in the legal stratum, supported by a solvent state. As a low-weight, non-perishable product, cultivable year-round, with a stable consumer market, opium operates as a currency in the illegal stratum.

In addition to the fungibility of opium, a second impediment to its elimination is its role as credit collateral. In Afghanistan, a poor farmer wishing to borrow money must use the *salaam* system, whereby they sell their future harvest in advance for a price, usually half the present market value, to earn income to buy food, tools, and medicine during the winter⁷⁴. This informal system, valid for any agricultural product, is better suited to opium, as it is an annual crop, than to other seasonal fruits. The early sale of crops also forces indebted families to continue growing opium until they are able to pay off their debts⁷⁵. Consequently, the explosion of opiate cultivation in Afghanistan in recent decades could be a credit boom in which the collateral is not a real estate mortgage but the value of future harvests.

Breaking this vicious circle is not easy, not with huge injections of money, and certainly not with crop eradication. In an institutionally weak country like Afghanistan, barter is more valuable than buying and selling, which prevents permeability between the illegal and legal strata; in these circumstances, only the richest can monetise opium in dollars, hence the injection of astronomical sums of money into the economy not only did not eliminate the illegal economy, but enriched the landowners⁷⁶. As for eradication, in the eyes of the poorest, it amounted to spoliation and their absolute marginalisation, as they were deprived of their only source of wealth. For landowners, it was a cartel war, as eradication was practised by warlords who used their institu-

72 Ward, C. and Byrd, W. (2004). Afghanistan's opium drug economy.

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/158651468767124612/pdf/311490PAPERoAF100SASPRon0051Dec0171.pdf>

73 Mansfield, D. (2001a). Alternative Development in Afghanistan: The Failure of Quid Pro Quo. <http://scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org/docs/nar-01-03.pdf>

74 Mansfield, D. (2001b). The Economic Superiority of Illicit Drug Production: Myth and Reality. <http://scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org/docs/>

75 De La Corte, L. and Hristova, H. (2012). Role of illicit trafficking in the AF-PAK scenario. IEEE Framework Document.

76 As Khalilzad (2016) criticises: "The UK was in charge of counter-narcotics, but its programme lacked the necessary capacity and resources, and was conceptually flawed. The British had initially decided to pay poppy farmers not to plant the illegal crop, which, of course, created perverse incentives to plant it in order to be paid to stop doing so".

tional legitimacy as members of the government to eliminate their competitors in the opium market; these were not really policies aimed at reducing drug consumption but at creating a shortage of supply to increase the price of drugs, which encouraged their cultivation⁷⁷. The result was an unrelenting insurrection, as Elliott recalls: *As the eradication programme progressed, many of the out-of-work opium farmers would become a source of dollar-a-day foot soldiers for the Taliban. When these amateur soldiers died in battle, resentment against the British among the families of the dead warriors only increased*⁷⁸.

Rather than money or eradication, the most effective measures should have been irrigation and fertilisation of the arid Afghan soil⁷⁹. Poorer farmers and labourers go into debt to buy fertiliser. Improving agricultural productivity would have been one of the most effective ways of emancipating the poorest strata of the country. Also the development of a less agricultural and more diversified economy, which would enable alternative sources of wealth; this is the strategy of alternative development. Unfortunately, despite massive aid investments over the past two decades, counternarcotics programmes have failed to address the root of the problem, namely the monetary function of opium in Afghanistan. *Devoid of a clear understanding of the multifunctional role of opium production and how to replace it, alternative development largely engaged in horse-trading, making offers of assistance to local authorities and elites within communities in exchange for poppy elimination.*⁸⁰

The failures of anti-corruption and anti-narcotics policies illustrate, once again, the inefficiency of international development aid, designed to achieve impossible grandiloquent goals and based on a bureaucracy incapable of understanding local mentality and culture. As SIGAR rightly summarises: *The US government clumsily imposed Western technocratic models on Afghan economic institutions; trained security forces in advanced weapons systems they could not understand, let alone maintain; imposed formal rule of law in a country that deals with 80 to 90 percent of its disputes through informal means; and often struggled to understand or mitigate cultural and social barriers to supporting women and girls. Without this prior knowledge, US officials often empowered power brokers who took advantage of the population or diverted US aid from its intended recipients to enrich and legitimise themselves and their allies. Lack of local knowledge meant that projects intended to mitigate conflict often exacerbated it, and even inadvertently funded insur-*

77 Priego, A. (2010). Drugs, instability and underdevelopment in Afghanistan: solutions to the vicious circle. IEEE Opinion Paper.

78 Elliott, C. (2015). Op. cit.

79 "Opium is one of the hardiest plants but also one of the most devastating to the soil". Priego, A. (2010). Op. cit.

80 Mansfield, D. (2020). Trying to Be All Things to All People: Alternative Development in Afghanistan. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004440494_006

*gents*⁸¹. Under these circumstances, which made the mission's civilian success impossible, Presidents Trump and Biden were forced to terminate it.

US withdrawal from Afghanistan and its impact on Central Asia

Despite the impediments to the mission's civilian success, most analyses have interpreted the US withdrawal from Afghanistan as a military defeat and a loss of influence in Central Asia to China, ignoring the asymmetry of the two countries' regional interests. The second world power's interests in Afghanistan are threefold: economic (exploitation of Afghan natural resources), geostrategic (border protection) and domestic (containment of Islamic radicalism). On the other hand, the US has had only specific motivations in Afghanistan: drug trafficking⁸², Soviet expansionism and terrorism. With the latter secured by the agreement with the Taliban, the US administration had no reason to justify an endless war that drained resources from domestic reconstruction projects. This section will therefore analyse what chances China has to succeed in a country where other military powers have previously failed, and how the withdrawal from Afghanistan fits into US foreign policy.

Afghanistan and the Sino-Pakistan alliance

To answer the first question, it seems appropriate to analyse the Sino-Pakistan alliance and its impact on Sino-Afghan relations. For Pakistan, China is the main ally, even more so than the US; in fact it was Pakistan that facilitated Nixon's famous visit to Beijing in 1972. This close relationship dates back to the very origins of the country, when China, unlike Afghanistan, immediately recognised the young nation at the UN, forging an anti-India alliance⁸³. This in turn explains the close defence ties: they jointly developed the Al-Khalid tank, the JF-17 fighter jet (a replacement for the US F-16) and several submarines; Pakistan is also the only country with military access to China's BeiDou satellite navigation system⁸⁴. However, this military pre-eminence is not without social contestation; although a security force was set up specifically to protect Chinese investments, it has not been able to prevent several terrorist attacks amidst a climate of strong criticism for the marked imbalance in economic relations

81 Sigar. (2021). What we need to learn: lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction. August. P. XI. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>

82 Before the Soviet invasion, the US even considered sending an expert on drug trafficking as ambassador to Afghanistan.

83 "The Pakistanis saw no contradiction in seeking an alliance with the West against communism while courting communist China as an all-weather friend because of their shared interest in containing India". HAqqani, H. (2018). Op. cit.

84 Defense Of Japan. (2021). https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021_EN_Full.pdf

(Pakistan is the most indebted of the 52 countries that make up the Belt and Road Initiative)⁸⁵. Nor has a recent scandal over high electricity tariffs charged to Islamabad by Chinese companies helped⁸⁶. However, all these adversities have not prevented the development of strategic projects such as ML-1, the railway that is to connect Karachi with the industrial Punjab to Peshawar, near Afghanistan, and which is to be financed almost entirely by China. The fact that the Pakistani military supports better connectivity with the world's second-largest military power when it could be an open door to invasion illustrates the extent to which rapprochement with China, as with the US, is driven by an obsession with countering India's power⁸⁷.

This military pre-eminence in Sino-Pakistani bilateral relations could, however, condition Afghanistan's decision to join the Sino-Pakistani economic corridor project, where even the chairman of the responsible agency is a retired general. For the time being, considering that the main Chinese projects in Afghanistan are copper mining in Ainak and oil in the Amu Darya river valley, perhaps China's diplomatic policy at the UN will be limited to supporting the Taliban regime in decisions of energy impact (as it has already done with Sudan or Iran, for example). However, the great remaining challenge for China is regional stability and, more specifically, forcing the Pakistani military establishment to give up its chimerical goal of parity with India. As discussed above, Pakistan's human and economic development has lagged behind India's, making it impossible to sustain costly defence investments. One possible scenario would be an Afghan-Pakistani confederation based on water security, allowing Afghanistan to start building dams on the Kabul River. The key, however, will be who provides the funds to pay for such infrastructure—China or India. For New Delhi, *water scarcity is one of Pakistan's biggest security challenges, along with terrorism and religious extremism*⁸⁸, so it may adopt a pragmatic policy and allow China to take the lead. Nor should one rule out possible support from Saudi Arabia in exchange for nuclear cooperation, a more worrying scenario⁸⁹.

Another factor to consider is the possible collapse of the Afghan formal economy, critically dependent on Western aid⁹⁰. As was the case with the first Taliban government, the countries that have formed the international coalition are unlikely to recognise the new Afghan government either. In addition to the diplomatic interlocation problems it may cause (as was evident after the 9/11 attacks, which reinforced Pakistan's mediating role), the immediate effect will be economic. The loss of aid

85 It should be remembered that China finances the infrastructures it builds with credits, which increases the public debt of the participating countries and makes it difficult to transfer skills to local workers.

86 Haqqani, H. (2020). Pakistan Discovers the High Cost of Chinese Investment. *The Diplomat*. 18 May. The cost overrun is estimated at \$3 billion.

87 Kasuri, K. M. (2015). *Op. cit.*

88 Devasher, T. (2016). *Op. cit.*

89 Khalilzad, Z. (2016). *Op. cit.*

90 Fitrat, A. Q. (2021). The Taliban Are About to Preside Over Economic Collapse. <https://www.barrons.com/articles/afghanistan-economic-collapse-central-bank-governor-51630358426>

revenues (60-70% of the budget) could bankrupt the Afghan central government. The US Treasury, true to protocol, could seize most of the Afghan assets deposited in its financial institutions, which could prompt similar actions by other states. Without access to money, the Afghan economy would be suffocated.

Far from being a problem for the Taliban, the collapse of the Afghan formal economy would allow the dismantling of the imposed Western order and a return to the traditional Muslim economic model, which rejects usury and economic bankatisation and advocates extreme *laissez-faire*, based on de-bureaucratisation. From an international perspective it would be the equivalent of an autarkic model, with little foreign trade and a strong deterioration of Kabul as a capital city, as was the case previously⁹¹. The problem could arise with the upsurge in the illegal economy, especially opium cultivation, the Taliban's main source of funding. In this context, China would cease to have economic influence in the country and would have to focus on geostrategic and security aspects. However, it should not be ruled out that, given its close alliance with Islamabad, Beijing would be more successful in the fight against terrorism than Washington. The outstanding issue would be the possible rescue of the formal Afghan economy⁹².

US foreign policy towards China

Having analysed the Sino-Pakistani relationship and its influence on the Afghan-Pakistani ecosystem, it is necessary to analyse the US withdrawal in the context of its foreign policy. Far from accepting the cliché of supposed Chinese ascendancy in the face of apparent American decline, the narrative of withdrawal should be interpreted in continental strategic terms, especially in the context of Sino-US conflict in the Taiwan Strait, the region with the greatest likelihood of direct confrontation between the two major contemporary military powers. During the international occupation of Afghanistan, China has not been a major donor, nor has it contributed militarily, a clear example of free riding, since, as a neighbouring nation, it has benefited for free from the regional stability guaranteed by the international presence⁹³. This circumstance has facilitated the concentration of pressure on the Taiwan Strait, where most of its troops reside, as it is considered the main vector of action. The international withdrawal from Afghanistan represents a change of scenery, requiring the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to deal

91 Marsden, P. (1999). The impact of the Taliban on the Afghan economy. DOI: 10.5040/9780755607433.ch-034

92 Egeland, J. (2021). Afghanistan Is Facing a Total Economic Meltdown. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/12/opinion/afghanistan-taliban-g20-aid.html>

93 Hass, R. (2021). How will China seek to profit from the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan. <https://www.brookings.edu/>

with multiple fronts, a circumstance that, according to some analysts, could make it difficult for the PLA to react ⁹⁴.



Image 3: Systemic collapse strategy. Source: Prepared internally based on Wuthnow (2020)

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan must therefore be interpreted in terms of geographical containment. China, unlike the US, has complex relations with its neighbors, most of them nuclear powers. The new scenario will require security arrangements with the Taliban, Pakistan, India, Russia and Iran, which could strain the Sino-Russian alliance. Although China is the main Pakistani ally, it is their common Indian antagonism that has forged a strong unnatural alliance between an Islamic republic and an atheistic communist state oppressing Muslim minorities; this ontological incompatibility will require China to keep a low diplomatic profile in its management of the Afghan-Pakistani ecosystem, which should divert attention (and tension) away from the Taiwan Strait⁹⁵. In turn, from a Muslim perspective, withdrawal from Afghanistan should reduce the Islamic world's hatred of the US

⁹⁴ Zhang, W. (2014). Silk Road and Security of China's West Border: On the Historical Conditions and Laws of the Rise of Forces in the Middle East and Suggested Responses. *World Economics and Politics*. 3.

⁹⁵ Wuthnow, J. (2020). *System Overload: Can China's Military Be Distracted in a War over Taiwan?* National Defense University Press.

and the West, while allowing Pakistan to fight Islamic terrorism with legitimacy and greater autonomy⁹⁶.

US foreign policy, moreover, will be conditioned by budgetary expenditures. Neither society nor parliament will accept costly interventions without direct benefits for a declining middle class. The wastefulness of the Afghan and Iraqi interventions have cemented the “America First” maxim⁹⁷. Consequently, the rivalry with China is likely to be settled by a dual strategy of geographic containment and economic protectionism, limiting both its territorial expansion (the annexation of Taiwan) and its commercial power⁹⁸. In this new context, the United States will only have to limit itself to forging strategic alliances aimed at blocking Chinese regional expansionism through a possible systemic collapse that forces its military to consider multiple conflict scenarios with several of its neighbours, most of them nuclear powers. The withdrawal from Afghanistan, therefore, should not be equated with a US decline similar to the Soviet one, but with a change of strategy and priorities for Asia.

Conclusions

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has been interpreted as the beginning of a post-American era and a possible Chinese consolidation, as was the case with the former USSR. However, the reality is more complex. Washington withdrew after achieving its main anti-terrorist objective (dismantling Al-Qaeda), while the USSR gave up on its geopolitical aspirations, unable to control a neo-feudal state like Afghanistan, a country with no army or central power, and with charismatic regional military leaders. This withdrawal did mark the beginning of US global hegemony, but it was mortgaged by the legacy of its anti-Soviet struggle: the emergence of Pakistan as an Islamic nuclear power in the most nuclearised region on the planet (along with China, Russia, and India); the legitimisation in the Islamic world of the *jihad* against infidels; the strengthening of Sino-Pakistani military cooperation, now converted into an anti-Indian alliance for control of Afghanistan; and the consolidation of the Afghan-Pakistani terrorist ecosystem, a key region for both countries’ water security and their territorial integrity. US withdrawal from Afghanistan would thus symbolise not military decline, but the impossibility of nation-building on the basis of the anti-Soviet legacy.

To this legacy should be added the ethnocentrism of Western bureaucracy, which saw development as a mere question of money, leading to corruption, “silent terrorism”

96 According to the current Pakistani president, the moment the “US leaves Afghanistan, the anti-American sentiments that fuel radical Islamism will dissipate, allowing Pakistan to deal with terrorism on its own terms”. Khan, I. (2011). *Op. cit.*

97 Bolton, J. (2020). *Op. cit.*

98 Castelltort, M. (2021). El posible conflicto bélico entre Estados Unidos y China: reconsiderando la «Trampa de Tucídides» [The possible war conflict between the United States and China: reconsidering the “Thucydides Trap”]. *Revista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos*.

because of local inability to absorb huge international donations, and drug trafficking because of ignoring the monetary function of opium in one of the world's poorest nations; the explosion of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan actually amounted to a credit boom whose eradication swelled the Taliban troops with desperate farmers.

The US withdrawal would therefore be a strategic retreat: to delegitimise Muslim anti-Americanism and bring about a systemic collapse in Beijing, by transferring to it the challenge of directly managing Islamic terrorism on its borders and forcing it to coordinate its Afghan policy with India and Pakistan, opposing nuclear powers, which could reduce tension in the Indo-Pacific and Taiwanese arenas.

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