Decades of War: Unfolding the History of Afghanistan

Terry Zhang
The terrain of Afghanistan is probably unique in the world. The Hindu Kush Massif has hindered the communication between the different parts of Afghanistan; while in the meantime the country is seemingly better connected with its neighbours through its less rugged borders. As a result, multiple ethnic groups intermingled on the land of the Hindu Kush Mountains, including the Iranian-speaking Pashtun (42%), Tajik (27%), Hazara (9%), Baloch (2%) people, as well as the Turkic-speaking Uzbek (9%), Turkmen (3%) people. Look at the following map showcasing how different ethnic groups are scattered across the whole country. Almost every ethnic group can be found in the neighbouring countries. The largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, Pashtun (shown in light yellow), is the second largest ethnic group in Pakistan. The Tajik, Uzbek, Turkmen people are the dominating ethnic groups in the neighbouring Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan respectively.

One may wonder: Why is Afghanistan a country in the first place? How was the border formed, oddly separating the same ethnic group apart?

The concept of Afghanistan as a nation didn’t form until 1747, when the Pushtun defeated the Persians and founded their very first own country, namely the Afghan Empire. During the heydays, the Empire ruled over the modern-day countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as part of Iran and India, ranked the second largest Islamic empire in the world after the Ottoman Empire. At that time, various people from different ethnic groups resided peacefully in the Empire.

Then it came to the 19th century, an era that has witnessed the expansion of the Russian Empire into Central Asia and the ruling of the British Empire in the Indian subcontinent. Stuck in the middle, Afghanistan soon became the buffer zone and battlefield between British India and the Russian Empire. From 1842 to 1921, British India and Afghanistan thrice, during which a border that deliberately divided ethnic Pashtuns apart was drawn in order to curb the mighty Pashtun forces. Although British India failed to conquer Afghanistan in the end, the border was kept and has shaped the territory of contemporary Afghanistan, as well as its history.

• Understanding Afghanistan

‘Afghanistan is “the Switzerland of Asia”.

Although no wise analyst would make use of such rhetoric nowadays, still this quotation from a former French diplomat is a good summary of the geography and demography of Afghanistan.

East of the Persians, south of the Turks, West of the Hindus, this landlocked mountainous country has long been the crossroad of cultures and a mélange of various ethnic groups. The following topographic map clearly illustrates the location of Afghanistan and its rugged terrain. The entire country is dominated by the Hindu Kush mountains, while a few basins along the border are shared with the neighbouring countries.

20 years ago, the 9/11 attack appalled the world. Thousands of people died. Shortly after the tragedy, the US declared a war over Afghanistan, followed by the collapse of the Afghan Taliban regime. 20 years later, 30th August 2021. With sweeping victories throughout Afghanistan, the Taliban has held power again. What has happened during the decades of war? How is Afghanistan related to terrorism? Who are the Taliban and why are the US troops unable to defeat them?

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No wonder why the government was doomed to collapse when the US troops left and ceased their support. In 2020, the Trump administration signed an agreement with the Taliban, calling for US troops to leave Afghanistan and the Taliban to cut ties with terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda. Having spent trillions of dollars in the Afghan war, the US didn’t want to be part of the game anymore. History repeats itself: Great Britain and Russia were stuck in the war and had never managed to conquer Afghanistan. And neither did the United States this time around.

The Afghan War: How did it end?

After routing the Taliban, the US established a pro-Western government, aiming to reconstruct the country ravaged by decades of war, while at the same time continuing to fight with the remnant Taliban insurgents.

There were accomplishments indeed: New schools, hospitals were built; women regained their social status, returning to work and school; and finally in 2011, Bin Laden was found and killed by the US troops.

But the war didn’t end immediately. The Taliban were never eradicated; instead they dissolved themselves into the rugged remote mountains of Hindu Kush, waiting for their chance to retake power. In the meantime, the pro-Western government was nearly as incapable as the Taliban of ruling the country. The government was riddled with corruption and inefficiency, even the first President, Hamid Karzai, was accused of bribery and cash smuggling. Some government officials were caught secretly colluding with the Taliban for personal interests, and some others gave up and fled to other countries.

Sharing a similar ideology, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda formed a close tie. Bin Laden offered $3 million dollars to the Taliban during the expansion of the Taliban in Afghanistan. In return, after seizing control of Afghanistan, the Taliban promised Bin Laden a land for training his militia - “Al-Qaeda” is literally translated as “the base” from Arabic.

It turned out that the Taliban had picked the wrong friend, and such choices would bear severe consequences. When Al-Qaeda attacked the US on 9/11, Bin Laden was hiding out in Afghanistan with the Taliban’s help. The US demanded that the Taliban hand over Al-Qaeda and Bin Laden. But the Taliban refused.

“The Taliban will pay a price.” the US President George Bush warned, three hours after the collapse of the World Trade Center.

The Taliban did pay the price. On 7th October 2001, the US started to attack Afghanistan, unleashing a heavy airstrike campaign. The Taliban were cleanly no match for the US troops. Within two months, the Taliban were swept out of power, with Bin Laden disappearing into the unknown along the Afghanistan-Pakistan borders.

• The Afghan War: What’s next?

On May 1st this year, the US withdrew 2500 troops from Afghanistan. On exactly the same day, the Taliban offensive against the pro-Western government began. Within three months, the Taliban swiftly captured 33 of 34 provincial capitals of Afghanistan. They easily made their way from the rugged rural mountain areas to the capital; on August 15th, the Taliban took control of Kabul. Fearing Taliban ruling in the past years, desperate Afghan citizens flocked to the Kabul Airport and foreign embassies, looking for whatever possibilities to leave the chaotic country with an uncertain future.

But this time, the Taliban were acting more gentle. “We want a good relationship with the US and the world”, says Zabihullah Muhajid, the Taliban’s spokesman. For a couple of times, the Taliban officials were interviewed by female journalists, which was unimaginable in the Taliban’s past reign. According to the Muhajid, the women will have their rights to work and study “within the bounds of Sharia law”, although it is unclear how the Taliban will interpret the law this time around.

Politics and ideology aside, there are more urgent issues. The economy of Afghanistan is at stake. Before the Taliban takeover, there were already around 18 million people in need of aid, a figure of almost 50% of Afghanistan’s population. The instability and sanctions caused by the Taliban takeover are making the situation worse. Foreign aid is currently cut off, which used to account for a good 40% of Afghanistan’s GDP. Afghanistan’s foreign reserves, reportedly around 9 billion dollars, were frozen by the United States. According to the World Food Program, 22.8 million could face acute hunger during this winter, with 8.7 million people at emergency levels. How will the Afghan people make it through the harsh winter this time?
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