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AFGHANISTAN AND THE REGIONAL POWERS

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===== Rasul Bakhsh Rais

Afghanistan's location at the trijunction of the three strategic regions of South, Southwest, and Central Asia both raises its importance for its neighbors and makes it vulnerable to their adverse influences. Since the military intervention of the former Soviet Union in 1979, the factors of regional and international power politics have added an important dimension to the internal politics of Afghanistan. Much of this has been continually manifested in the patron-client relationships between the Afghan parties and external powers.

The central argument of this article is that external intrusions into Afghanistan are rooted in the internal confrontations among the Afghan groups who are divided along ethnic, religious, and regional lines. The quest for power compelled Afghans of all political orientations to seek foreign support and friends, but certainly at the loss of some freedom to act independently. This was true of the Marxist regime that invited in the Soviet troops and also of the groups who took up arms against it. Whatever the rationalization for foreign connections, these are never completely divorced from the interests of the suppliers of weapons and money, who are no more altruistic than those involved in the struggle for power. Among the regional states, Iran and Pakistan have been most affected by the Afghan conflict, and in turn, have influenced the politics of the resistance. After the disengagement of the superpowers, Teheran and Islamabad have emerged as major players in shaping a postwar political settlement.

What role did the Islamic regional states play in strengthening the Afghan resistance against the former Soviet Union? What factors shaped India's Afghan policy? How will the regional powers play out their rivalries

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in Afghanistan, and what will be the impact of the independence of Central Asian states and the fall of the Marxist regime in Kabul on the security of the region? This essay will attempt to answer some of these questions in light of the stakes that regional states hold in developments within and around Afghanistan.

Pakistan

Although the Afghan resistance groups—the *mujahideen*—had broad-based domestic support, their war against the Kabul-Soviet forces might have ended in failure without the active involvement of Pakistan. Islamabad took a defiant position against Moscow, making it clear that it would not accept Soviet aggression, and in fact, no amount of intimidation and threats deterred Pakistan from pursuing a policy directed at expelling the Soviet forces from Afghanistan. We will address the questions of why Pakistan offered itself as a front-line state against a formidable superpower that had an image of invincibility, what role it played in the guerrilla strategies and politics of the Afghan resistance, and how it has influenced the political settlement.

A Soviet consolidation in Afghanistan would have posed a major threat to Pakistan's security. Pakistani policymakers were acutely aware of the long-term impact of a Soviet-dominated Afghanistan on its border security, ethnic nationalism, and eventually on domestic politics. In the past, Moscow had supported Afghanistan's position on the Pushtunistan issue,¹ recognized India's occupation of Kashmir, and more disturbingly, gave strong indications of encouraging secessionist movements inside Pakistan. Alarmed by this evaluation, Pakistani leaders confronted their limited options: acceptance of the geopolitical reality of Soviet occupation, or confrontation by mobilizing international support for the Afghan resistance and equipping and training their guerrilla forces. Both of these choices were potentially dangerous for the future security of the country. Involvement against the Soviet forces carried the risk of bringing the Red Army over Pakistan's western borders. Even without moving forces on the borders, the Soviet Union had the missile and aircraft options to teach Pakistan a lesson. While appeasement could have bought Pakistan temporary peace and even earned Soviet economic and military assistance, Islamabad's real security and its political relations with the Gulf states and the West would have been compromised. In developing its confrontation-

1. Kabul had insisted on revision of the Durand Line, the Pak-Afghan border that was demarcated by the British in 1893, and the creation of a new state for the ethnic Pushtuns in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province.

ist strategy, Pakistan took full advantage of the political and social difficulties under which the Soviet interventionist forces had to operate.

Starting with limited support to the *mujahideen*, Pakistan's commitment to resisting Soviet aggression gradually grew stronger with each political and military setback the Soviet forces received in their quest for pacification. In the international arena, Moscow faced almost universal condemnation from Western powers and the Third World alike, which gave tremendous diplomatic strength to Pakistan's Afghan policy. Intensification of the Cold War and the willingness of the United States to support anticommunist insurgencies around the world considerably raised the level of Pakistan's strategic relevance. Islamabad was, therefore, much encouraged in its support of the Afghan resistance when the Reagan administration decided to upgrade the U.S.-Pakistan security relationship by the commitment of \$3.2 billion in economic aid and military sales.

From the Western point of view, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan posed a serious threat to the West's vital interests in Southwest Asia. The Arab allies of the United States were genuinely apprehensive of a Soviet move so close to their region. Although doves and hawks debated the future military and political effects of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan beyond the Khyber pass into Pakistan and in the direction of the Gulf, a consensus emerged on assisting the Afghan resistance and its prime backer, Pakistan.

As Western concerns converged with Pakistani interests in getting the Soviet forces out of Afghanistan, their common strategy became premised on the notion that raising the costs of occupation would compel Moscow to consider withdrawing. However, at the time they initiated aid to the Afghan resistance, American policymakers were not sure whether that strategy would succeed. Most of the Western and regional observers had tended to see the Soviet adventure through the experience of Eastern Europe, and they had little hesitation in concluding that Moscow would maintain its hold over Afghanistan no matter what the costs. On the other hand, Pakistan had no better option than to oppose the Soviets, leaving the larger questions of victory and defeat to the dynamics of the conflict itself.

The immediate aims of Pakistan in assisting the *mujahideen* were twofold. First, it wanted to enable the ill-equipped Afghan guerrillas to fight effectively, and second, it had to find a way to shelter, feed, and defend the millions of refugees who were escaping Soviet atrocities. Maintaining the refugee camps was essentially a humanitarian gesture but it also served the military purpose of recruiting guerrillas. Many critics of the Pakistani and U.S. policy cynically termed the insurgency operations as directed toward "bleeding" the Soviet Union, which was capable of "bleeding" the last Afghan in order to stay in the country. They counseled accommodation of

Soviet interests and compromise on the issue of the USSR military presence in Afghanistan. But in hindsight, leaving the Afghans to fend for themselves would have been morally wrong, politically inept, and strategically catastrophic for Pakistan.

By strengthening the resistance, Pakistan acted in its self-interest because bogging the Soviet forces down was its first line of defense against Soviet expansionism. But raising an army of guerrillas and deploying it along many fronts under different local commands in a covert fashion presented difficulties. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), by all accounts, did an effective job in planning and implementing insurgency operations against the Soviet forces. Other than some control over the level of escalation, all matters pertaining to the selection of strategic targets as well as the field commands and operations were left to the Afghans, and the Afghan guerrilla commanders also participated in the strategic decision-making of the ISI. This is not to suggest, however, that all areas were directly or equally affected by ISI decisions. Many Afghan commanders, the more prominent of whom were Ahmad Shah Masud and Ismael Khan, acted more independently and conducted operations according to the situation around them. But all of them received substantial amounts of weapons from Pakistan at one time or another.

The distribution of arms to the various guerrilla factions by the ISI has been controversial. While officials associated with the agency have asserted that arms were allocated on the basis of operational effectiveness, moderate groups and the United States have accused Pakistan of favoring the fundamentalist factions, more specifically the Hizb-i-Islami (Islamic party) of Gulbadin Hikmatyar, the current prime minister of Afghanistan.² For an outsider, it is hard to determine what would constitute an objective criteria for operational effectiveness, but it seems that much was left to the discretion of the Pakistani strategists. The Americans, who contributed substantially to the war efforts of the resistance, favored a direct supply of weapons to field commanders, while Pakistan, to have better control over the resistance, did not want to cut off the intermediary role of the Peshawar-based political groups. However, serious differences did emerge between the two countries in the final stages of the Afghan War when the Soviets indicated a willingness to withdraw their forces. The American sponsors of the resistance wanted to dump the "fundamentalists," reportedly the darlings of the ISI, and encourage moderate groups. These tensions partly reflected divergent perceptions on a political settlement and the character of the post-Marxist regime.

2. Brigadier (ret.) Mohammed Yousaf, *Silent Soldier: The Man Behind the Afghan Jihad*, General Akhtar Abdur Rahman Shaheed (Lahore: Jang Publishers, 1991), pp. 74–81.

The guerrilla strategies of the Afghan resistance should be seen in conjunction with the diplomatic efforts of Pakistan and its Western allies to seek a negotiated withdrawal of the Soviet forces. The strategy of raising the price in Afghanistan rested on the assumption that the USSR could be forced to enter into serious negotiations. And it worked. It did not take Pakistan long to learn that the *mujahideen* option was viable, as its advocates had argued from the start.³ As the resistance fighters got better equipped and some of the Afghan groups learned the value of organization and of modern guerrilla warfare tactics, cracks in the Soviet war machine began to appear. Further, the Soviet advantage in conducting its counter-insurgency operations was lost when the U.S. and Pakistan introduced the Blowpipe and Stinger anti-aircraft missiles in 1985. The Soviets finally concluded that they could neither stay in Afghanistan indefinitely nor win a war of attrition. The low-intensity conflict stalemated the military situation, which ate away at Soviet morale and resources. No less important were the political transitions that took place in the USSR after the death of Brezhnev, the architect of the Afghan adventure. The new leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, began to realize the futility of the war in Afghanistan; he wanted not only to cultivate a new image of the Soviet Union but also devote attention and resources to domestic restructuring. In the new thinking, too many Soviet lives and rubles had been wasted in defense of the Afghan "revolution." Also keen on seeking a new relationship with the West, Moscow became serious about extricating itself from the quagmire, and the improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations further paved the ground for a political settlement in 1988.

The Geneva Accords were a face saver for the Soviet Union as it could pretend that it was not defeated but had pulled out its forces as the result of a negotiated settlement. However, the Accords left unresolved the crucial issue of replacing the Marxist regime in Kabul. Under Pakistani prodding, the *mujahideen* endorsed the Accords but they did not end their military offensives. With the departure of the Soviet forces in February 1990, some of the *mujahideen* groups, apparently on the advice of Pakistan, intensified their operations around Jalalabad but eventually failed to take the city.⁴ This temporarily raised the confidence of the Najibullah regime in Kabul that it could survive *mujahideen* attacks without the direct involvement of Soviet forces. But dependence on Soviet economic and military assistance remained critical to Najibullah's survival, as is evident

3. Tahir Amin, *Afghanistan Crisis: Implications and Options for the Muslim World, Iran, and Pakistan* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1982).

4. Rasul Bakhsh Rais, "Afghanistan After the Soviet Withdrawal," *Current History*, March 1992, pp. 123-27.

from the fact that his regime collapsed on April 16, 1992, within three months of the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The *mujahideen* parties based in Peshawar just across the border in Pakistan and the internal commanders in Afghanistan confronted three central but extremely difficult tasks as they took power from the collapsing regime: (1) forming a broad-based transitional government, (2) reviving and restructuring the state authority, and (3) reintegrating all the regional centers of power by bringing them under some influence, if not control of the central state apparatus. The most important and somewhat complex problem before the *mujahideen* was the formation of an interim government that would take control of Kabul. From Pakistan's point of view, a broad-based coalition was a prerequisite to any orderly changeover from the communists. It was also necessary to dispel the notion that the *mujahideen*, while good at fighting, lacked the political skills and experience to form and run a government on the basis of power-sharing. Thus, through Pakistani mediation, a coalition government had been formed in exile in February 1989 to fill the power vacuum that could result from the sudden collapse of the Marxists.

But the coalition showed very little unity among its component elements from the start, and neither the internal commanders nor the Iran-based Shiite groups accepted its legitimacy. Pakistan, which had been so enthusiastic in setting up the interim government, politely refused to extend recognition, saying it was "premature."⁵ And as it had been elected only for one year, the interim government lost whatever credibility it had when the Soviet troops left in February 1990. Practically, it ceased to exist as efforts to reconstitute the Shura (the consultative assembly that had elected the interim government) failed and the constituent parties decided to quit.

With the disintegration of the Najibullah regime, formation of yet another interim *mujahideen* government became urgent. Pakistani authorities once again played a central role in shaping an agreement—the Peshawar Accord. Although the real political power in Kabul had already passed on to the forces of the northern coalition, ten of the *mujahideen* parties based in Peshawar concluded an agreement on a transitional ruling council on April 24, 1992. This agreement, brokered by Pakistan, attempted to restructure a legitimate government in three phases over a period of two years.

The fundamental weakness of the Peshawar Accord was that only the *mujahideen* parties operating from Pakistan signed it. No other Afghan parties nor even groups that controlled territory inside the country participated in the deliberations. In all respects, it was a poor substitute for the

5. *Dawn* (Karachi), February 27, 1989.

U.N.-negotiated peace settlement, as the latter could have integrated all types of Afghan groups. By limiting political power to the *mujahideen*, the Accord provided no basis for attracting wider support or claiming national representation. However, with all its shortcomings, it did provide a good starting point for initiating a new political process. After all, a resolution of the chaotic conditions nurtured by the 15-year-long civil strife would require more than mere legal documents or just one political accord.

While the transfer of power from the first interim president, Mujaddedi, to Burhanuddin Rabbani was accomplished without much difficulty, the second phase of the transition—convening a Shura-i-Hal-O-Aqd (Council of resolution and settlement) and electing a new president on December 29, 1992—landed the country in a serious political crisis. An effective boycott of the council session by some Pushtun political groups and Shiites raised afresh the question of the Rabbani administration's political legitimacy. The failure to implement the Peshawar Accord in its true spirit resulted in constant armed clashes, with major battles between Jamiat forces and Shiite groups, on the one hand, and Jamiat and the Hizb-i-Islami of Hikmatyar on the other. Many ethnic, sectarian, and personal elements have been at play in the quest for power in Kabul. Consequently, inter-*mujahideen* conflict has caused tremendous damage to the city and its population over the past year and a half, perhaps more than it suffered during the entire period of the Soviet-Afghan War.

Although the current phase of conflict in Afghanistan has many dimensions, such questions and issues as who would head the important ministries, disarm the *mujahideen* groups in and around Kabul, raise a national army, and more importantly, reconstitute the Afghan state have undermined the ability of the Jehadi forces (participants in the resistance) to share power. To resolve these festering and lingering disputes, another accord was arranged by Pakistan on March 7, 1993, known as the Islamabad Accord, which attempted to define clearly the powers of the president and prime minister and give a clear time frame for holding elections for a constituent assembly. The Ministry of Defense has been replaced by a Defense Council that comprises representatives of all factions and would function under the direct control of the president. The provision in the accord for the formation of such a council was rejected by Ahmad Shah Masud, who criticized Pakistan for applying pressures to sign an agreement that he has argued would serve the interest of his rival, Hikmatyar.⁶ Further negotiations were held among the Afghan parties at Jalalabad to form a cabinet and sort out remaining differences on the Defense Council that produced yet another agreement on May 20, 1993.

6. *Muslim* (Islamabad), April 24, 1993.

Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia worked together to bring all the Afghan factions to Islamabad, and the three powers will also act as guarantors of the accord. Iran's deputy foreign minister, Prince Turkey Bin Faisal of Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif worked in tandem to resolve differences among the *mujahideen*. Contrary to the expectations of some resistance groups, Pakistan had also invited representatives of General Dostam to attend the talks,⁷ but due to *mujahideen* opposition, did not insist on their formal participation in the parleys. This suggests that Islamabad may prefer a more inclusionary approach than the *mujahideen* are willing to accept at the moment. The latter have argued they should reach an accord among themselves first and involve Dostam and other Afghan elements in the next stage of political reconciliation.

The Islamabad Accord symbolizes the degree of Pakistani interest in normalizing the political situation in Afghanistan. The role of Pakistan will not be limited to negotiating ceasefires or power-sharing arrangements, as it will have to participate in the reconstruction of the country, work hard on seeking diplomatic recognition for the new government, and keep its borders open. Islamabad has vital interest in the peace and stability of Afghanistan. Success or failure here will largely determine the course of Pakistan's interactions with the Central Asian states, which it values deeply.

India

India had given special attention to Afghanistan as a part of its efforts to block support for Pakistan among the Islamic countries. Not only was Afghanistan adjacent to South Asia but it also had disputes with Pakistan on the boundary question and the creation of an independent state of Pushtunistan as a homeland for the Pushtun ethnic group. Because of its rivalry with Pakistan, India gave political support to Afghanistan, encouraging Kabul to pursue a confrontational strategy. At the same time, Islamabad did not handle relations with Kabul with care, allowing a very important neighbor to drift away toward India.

Afghanistan's leanings toward India and, later, the development of closer ties with the Soviet Union had negative effects on its relations with Pakistan. Kabul's participation in the Moscow-New Delhi axis was considered hostile and menacing by Pakistan, and the ruling elites in Kabul failed to understand the long-term costs of Soviet penetration through economic and military assistance programs. India was a strong advocate of Third World collaboration with the Soviet Union, and during the Cold

7. Ahmad Rashid, "Fatal Flaws," *Herald* (Karachi), April 1993, p. 52. Dostam controls militia forces in the North that formerly served the Najibullah regime.

War such a tilt toward Moscow was both fashionable and considered important leverage by a large number of postcolonial states. Apart from the overlay of common friendship with the Soviet Union, India had its own rationale for courting Afghan leaders who were estranged from Pakistan.

India's position on the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan clearly demonstrated the centrality of Pakistan to its regional strategy. Even from India's definition of regional autonomy and its declared interest in keeping its proximate areas free of extraregional interference, the Soviet military action constituted a dangerous intrusion. But contrary to dominant world opinion, India accepted Moscow's justification for its aggression, and New Delhi remained consistent in supporting the Moscow-backed Marxist regimes in Kabul during the entire period of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. India was the only country outside of the Warsaw Pact bloc that maintained normal relations with the Afghan puppet regimes.

India's main concern was with the revitalization of Washington's security links with Pakistan, which it considered against its interest in maintaining a "natural" balance of power in South Asia. Although Pakistan had effectively used its Afghanistan leverage to modernize some elements of its defense forces with U.S. assistance, it never achieved the capability to threaten India's preponderant military position in the region. India was also critical of U.S. policy on the matter of Pakistan's nuclear program, accusing Washington of turning a blind eye to Islamabad's quest for a nuclear option. Many in the West and India had thought that the United States, by using the carrot of economic and military assistance, would contain Pakistan's nuclear program, and India and its supporters in the U.S. insisted on making the continuation of aid to Pakistan conditional on nuclear restraint.

India did not see its interests threatened by the Soviet war in Afghanistan, nor did it consider the Soviet march into Afghanistan as constituting a serious threat to the societies beyond the Khyber Pass. Such an assessment differed widely with the conventional view of Afghanistan as a geostrategic buffer between Central and South Asia, and privately, many Indians condemned the Soviet offensive and recognized the dangers of the conflict spilling over into other parts of the region. But the Indian governments, on the contrary, felt comfortable with supporting the Soviet efforts at pacification.

Given the brutal nature of the Soviet military campaigns, the conflict could not remain confined within the boundaries of Afghanistan. The war acquired regional and even global dimensions after Moscow moved its forces into the country. Pakistan was the first to feel the consequences as millions of Afghans took refuge in its territory. An increase in drug production and the proliferation of weapons are some of the unintended con-

sequences of the Afghan War, and these have begun to affect Indian society as well. The political and psychological fallout can be seen in the Punjab and Kashmiri insurgencies. With the gun culture, the whole region has witnessed new levels of political violence.

Whether or not Indian public opposition to the Soviet aggression would have lessened the agony of Afghanistan is no longer a relevant question. But there is no doubt that by siding with the Soviet Union, India was precluded from playing any constructive role in the conflict. Although some Indian leaders are said to have privately conveyed their displeasure to Moscow over its military action, they did not consider the issue serious enough to merit public denunciation.⁸ In its public diplomacy, New Delhi asserted that Pakistani aid to rebellion in Afghanistan had prompted the Soviet Union to use military force to defend a friendly regime. It opposed the *mujahideen* insurgency as an intervention against a "legitimate" government of a sovereign country.

India apparently had four concerns about Pakistan's support to the *mujahideen*. First, Pakistan was using the Afghan War to its advantage in seeking U.S. arms and economic assistance, and the military strength that it was building would be relevant only to its power equation with India and not usable against the USSR. Second, the Afghan conflict had made Pakistan an important regional player; by galvanizing international sentiment, Pakistan emerged as the most articulate and effective voice against the Soviet Union. Third, India feared that a *mujahideen* victory could take Afghanistan permanently out of its sphere. Finally, New Delhi did not want to cause any friction with Moscow over a war that it thought Soviet forces would win in the end. India's support, though limited, was valuable to the successive Marxist regimes that were widely castigated and regarded as pariahs in the world community. Delhi recognized all the regimes that were put in office by the Soviet Union, invited their leaders in a show of public support, extended economic assistance, and allegedly stationed its advisors to help man some of the sensitive military installations when the Soviet forces started departing from the country.⁹

India was wise enough not to be drawn into the Afghan conflict despite Soviet instigation and encouragement to put pressure on Pakistan's eastern borders in order to neutralize Islamabad's support of the *mujahideen*. Pakistani strategists had feared that India would oblige its Soviet allies by heating up tensions on the borders, but a number of internal and external

8. A fuller account of Indian policy is by Thomas Perry Thornton, "India and Afghanistan," in *The Red Army on Pakistan's Border: Policy Implications for the United States*, Theodore L. Eliot, Jr., and Robert L. Pfalzgraff, Jr., eds. (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1986), pp. 44-70.

9. Author's interviews with *mujahideen* leaders in Peshawar, June 1991.

factors constrained India from doing so. Delhi could not ignore Western opposition to the Soviet Union in a heightened Cold War climate nor the general sympathy and support for Pakistan as a "front line" state. Had India opted to engage Pakistan on its common border as part of a joint strategy with the Soviet Union, Western powers might have considered giving Islamabad a better range of weapons. Also, as the Afghan War dragged on and the chances of Soviet victory began to dim, the United States and other Western powers had better success in defusing Indo-Pakistani hostility.

Since the fall of the Najibullah regime in April 1992, coinciding with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of Central Asian states, momentous changes have taken place in the geopolitics of the region. The Moscow-Kabul-Delhi axis that Pakistan for four decades had considered a dangerous combination has ended. Although the political situation in Afghanistan remains unstable, Pakistan has emerged as an important power broker while India has lost its influence in the country. The *mujahideen* government seems to be reversing Kabul's policies toward India on the latter's disputes with Pakistan. The most important change in Afghan policy is on the Kashmir issue; unlike former governments, the *mujahideen* have endorsed Pakistan's position on the question of the Kashmiri right of self-determination.¹⁰ Although some Indians might dismiss this as another voice added to the Pakistani diplomacy, it portends new Islamic assertiveness on righting past wrongs. Afghanistan's relevance to the shaping of an Islamic geopolitics in the region due to its central location is far greater than is usually understood.

India's regional policy may be affected by three interrelated developments that have been in the making in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Marxist regime in Afghanistan. The first is the intensification of insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir. The struggle of the Kashmiri "*mujahideen*" has been inspired and influenced by the example of the Afghan resistance. It is also premised on the calculations of low-intensity conflict to force a favorable political settlement. Some of the Kashmiri militants, along with volunteers from other Islamic countries, fought against the Kabul-Soviet forces in Afghanistan,¹¹ and brought back with them not only fighting experience but also some valuable knowledge of guerrilla doctrines and organization. The flow of weapons from

10. President Burhanuddin Rabbani's speech on the anniversary of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, Kabul Radio (in Dari), 28 April 1993, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report, Near East-South Asia* (FBIS, DR/NES), April 30, 1993, p. 44.

11. According to General (ret.) Hameed Gul, former ISI director general, about 25,000 volunteers from Muslim countries participated in the Afghan War (Ahmed Rashid, "The Green Revolutionary," *Herald*, May 1993, p. 53).

Afghanistan, which India believes is taking place through Pakistani connivance, is also a matter of great concern to India; Delhi claims that the Kashmiri militants have some of their training camps in Afghanistan.

Second, India has expressed serious concern over the emerging phenomena of transnational Islamic movements. As "Islamic fundamentalism" has become a catchword in post-Cold War thinking on security issues, India has lost no time in clamoring that it also is threatened by resurgent Islam.¹² While this posturing is aimed at drawing itself closer to American strategic thinking, some of the Indian concerns are genuine. The home of 120 million Muslims, India is apprehensive of an Islamic "tide," as it may complicate the management of its internal communal tensions that have been on the rise in recent years.

Finally, India has viewed the developments in Afghanistan and beyond as heralding a new strategic game in which Pakistan might be a central player. New Delhi apprehends that Islamabad might succeed in structuring an alliance at some point in the future among neighboring Islamic countries, including the Central Asian states. If this happens, access to military facilities in adjacent Islamic countries would put Pakistan in a better strategic position. But although Pakistan would try anything to counterbalance the Indian threat, forging such an alliance appears unrealistic. The alarmist Indian assessment of Islamic geopolitics is currently being projected to find a common ground for developing a deeper relationship with the United States.

Iran

In many ways, the dominant elite culture of Afghanistan is an extension of Persian culture. Afghanistan's official language, Dari, is a close variant of Farsi, and Iran's civilizational influences, although extending to a large part of Central Asia, are much deeper in Afghanistan. Sharing common cultures, religions, and civilizations injects a natural closeness among peoples divided by modern state lines. Afghanistan and Iran were at one time or another ruled by the same empires. Apart from these factors, Iran under the Shah dynasty attempted to draw Afghanistan into its sphere of influence through the provision of economic assistance and transit routes. It was a part of the Shah's strategy to cultivate Iran-centered regional security arrangements.

But when the Soviet forces intervened in Afghanistan, Iran was going through turmoil. Its new leaders were preoccupied with internal political restructuring and the war with Iraq. Nonetheless, their immediate reac-

12. An assessment on this issue is by Raju Thomas in *South Asian Security in the 1990s*, Adelphi Paper (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1993).

tion was not much different from that of Pakistan; they condemned the Soviet aggression, opened up borders to refugees, and extended material support to some resistance groups. But the basic framework of Iran's policy was different. Teheran rejected any justification for aligning Islamic countries with Western powers, preferring to rely on its own resources for assisting the Afghan resistance. It also attempted a delicate balance between supporting the Shiite Afghan resistance and maintaining a correct relationship with Moscow. Unlike Pakistan, Iran had a better working relationship with the Afghan Marxist regimes, which it used effectively in preventing reprisals by the Kabul-Soviet forces against the Shiite population in Afghanistan.

The revolution in Iran influenced the Shiite population of Afghanistan more than any other Islamic sect. The Shiites, here as elsewhere, acquired a sense of pride in revolutionary Iran, but more meaningfully, a fundamental change has occurred in the political make-up of the Hazarajat region where Shiites of the Hazara ethnic group form a majority. With inspiration and support from the Iranian clergy, the sheikhs (Islamic scholars) have gradually emerged as a powerful political force. Although they are part of a wider alliance of traditional Shiite elite and influential Syed (descendants of the Prophet) clans, the sheikhs play a dominant role. However, like other Afghan alliances, the Shiite coalitions have also been unstable and sometimes at war with one another.

Iran played a critical role in the evolution of the Shiite resistance groups in Afghanistan. Emissaries from Teheran, often religious figures, have mediated disputes among the Shiite groups that were the exclusive beneficiary of Iranian weapons and related support. In the initial phase of the insurgency, Iran also sent military advisors from its revolutionary guards to train Shiite guerrillas. But this role did not last very long because the Kabul-Soviet forces left the area altogether to concentrate on attacking the eastern provinces, the main source of threat.

Although Teheran claimed that unity among all the Afghan resistance parties was necessary if there were to be an effective political alternative for Afghanistan, Iran's support remained mostly confined to the Shiite factions. On occasion, it attempted unsuccessfully to cultivate closer relations with the Islamist Sunni parties, its failure in this regard probably due more to political than to sectarian factors. Iran did not pay much attention even to the Shiite parties until its war with Iraq ended; thereafter, it stepped up aid to its Afghan clients and became more actively involved in uniting them. Its efforts were crowned with remarkable success in March 1990 when eight Shiite parties met together for the first time in Teheran to develop a common political and military strategy and form an alliance under the Hizb-i-Wahdat (Unity party). The only exception was the Harkat-i-

Inqilab-i-Islami (Islamic revolutionary movement) of Ayatullah Mohseni who has serious political differences with Iranian leaders on the issue of keeping Afghan Shiite politics independent from Teheran. Mohseni had moved his headquarter to Peshawar in 1989, and his party is represented in the *mujahideen* leadership council and the government independent of the Iran-supported Hizb-i-Wahdat.

One major objective of Iran's Afghan policy was to seek greater representation for the Shiite parties in any future *mujahideen* government. The question of their adequate representation has remained divisive all along, and lack of agreement on this issue prevented the Shiite parties from joining the Pakistan-backed interim government in exile in 1990.¹³ The Pakistan-based parties reportedly refused to accept 25% representation for the Shiite groups on the Afghan Shura that had elected the interim government, contending that this figure overstated the proportion of the Shiite population in Afghanistan.¹⁴ Some extremist Sunni religious leaders such as Yunis Khalis are absolutely opposed to sharing power with the Shiites.

Iran was ambivalent toward the Pakistan-based parties for at least two reasons. Besides its antipathy toward Sunni Islam, it never felt comfortable with U.S. support of these Afghan resistance parties. Second, some of these parties, such as Itihad-i-Islami (Islamic unity) of Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf, have strong anti-Shiite biases, and the large number of Arab volunteers in their ranks made relations between Shiite and Sunni groups more difficult. Trained in Wahabbi (a puritanical Arab Islamic sect) doctrines, the Arab volunteers were hostile to the indigenous Shiite groups. Teheran was also apprehensive about the aligning of some parties with Saudi Arabia, as it did not want Saudi influence coming into its backyard through the Afghan resistance.

On the other hand, some of the Sunni parties occasionally accused Iran of interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs. They were not happy with the empowerment of the Hazara Shiites who had been an underprivileged minority before the war. Moreover, the Sunni resistance parties never appreciated Iran's growing links with the former Soviet Union or its close contacts with Najibullah. In dealing with the Kabul regimes, Iran's policies were somewhat pragmatic; for example, Iran facilitated Najibullah's brief visit to Mashed in November 1990 where he conferred with some of the *mujahideen* leaders, including Pakistan-based moderate Afghans.¹⁵

13. Rabbani interview in *Ukaz* (Jiddah), March 31, 1990, in FBIS, *DR/NES*, April 5, 1990, p. 36.

14. Author's interviews with Afghan resistance leaders in Peshawar, January 1990. Teheran reportedly was more uncompromising on this issue than were some of the Afghan Shiite groups themselves.

15. *Muslim*, November 26, 1990.

This indicated Iran's apparent willingness to support an independent deal by the Shiite parties with Kabul if the latter were to recognize and formalize their autonomy. But there was no evidence that Iran had reversed its policy of cooperation with Pakistan in seeking a joint settlement of the Afghan issue.

Since the fall of Najibullah, Iran has been an important backstage player in the formation of *mujahideen* coalition governments in Kabul.¹⁶ By negotiating power-sharing arrangements, Teheran expects to obtain a better deal for the Shiite groups that it has supported and eventually gain greater influence for itself. In these endeavors, Iran continues to cooperate with Islamabad in trying to stabilize the political situation in Afghanistan. The two cooperated in convening two trilateral conferences (Afghan resistance groups, Iran, and Pakistan) that brought Sunni and Shiite groups together to promote reconciliation. Beyond this, they have left it up to the Afghans to determine what suitable representative political authority they would create to reunify their country.

Improvement in Iran-Saudi relations in 1992 added another positive factor to common efforts to defuse the inter-Afghan power struggle. To avoid further bloodshed, they have attempted to restrain their clients in Afghanistan, and rivalry between Teheran and Riyadh has been somewhat muted by a common desire for stability. A triangular consensus involving Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia finally developed in support of the peace accords among the Afghan parties, and the three governments jointly brokered the Islamabad Accord in March 1993 and signed on as guarantors.

Although the support of these countries is crucial to restoring peace in Afghanistan, much depends on the internal players. The *mujahideen* parties are riven with fierce political and personal differences that complicate the role of external mediators. Their internal divisions may doom any political settlement and destabilize governing coalitions, which in turn will contribute to instability in relations with, and among other states of the region.

Central Asian States

The independence of the Islamic Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union has added a new factor to the politics and security of Afghanistan. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan not only share borders with Afghanistan but also ethnic, cultural, and religious affinity with its peoples. But most similarities end there. The Central Asian states have developed under different colonial circumstances and along different ideo-

16. Mushahid Hussain, "An 'Afghan solution' for Peace," *Nation*, April 27, 1992.

logical lines. Their world outlook appears to be vastly different from the more conservative, mostly tribal and backward Afghans. The questions of Islam, modernity, and social orientations of the elites must be taken into account in order to understand relations, now and in the future, among these neighboring Islamic countries.

The Central Asian elites perceive Islamist movements in the adjacent region as highly destabilizing at a time when they are groping for a new political identity. In a rapidly changing regional and international environment, they face growing demands for political participation and freedom, and they can no longer ignore the growing power of domestic opposition that has assumed an Islamic character. This is evident from the brief success of Islamic and secular democratic parties in removing the ruling establishment of Tajikistan in May 1992.¹⁷ In October the holdovers from the old order recaptured Dushanbe, the capital city, with assistance from neighboring Uzbekistan where Islamic parties are banned and where President Islam Karimov was obviously concerned about the Islamic party coming to power in Tajikistan. All the status quo-oriented Central Asian elites feel their legitimacy threatened by cross-border, transnational Islamic influences and the smuggling of weapons, particularly from Afghanistan.

Although the *mujahideen* government in Kabul has sought to assure the governments of its Central Asian neighbors that it does not intend to align itself with their opposition forces,¹⁸ the republics' leaders are not willing to lower their guard. On the other hand, turmoil in Tajikistan has started to affect the northeastern parts of Afghanistan. Some 70,000 Tajik refugees have crossed the border into Afghanistan and Kabul has been seeking their early repatriation.¹⁹ The conflict in Tajikistan has been developing along ethnic and tribal lines that threaten to spread to other areas. The role of Uzbekistan, the presence of Russian forces, and their common support of the Popular Front of former communists has stirred religious and nationalist sentiments on the Afghan side of the border. Ahmad Shah Masud, a Tajik himself, has been accused of sending arms and ammunition into Tajikistan, a charge that has been forcefully refuted by the alliance of the

17. After weeks of protests organized by the opposition Democratic and Islamic Renewal parties, President Rakhman N. Nabiyev went into hiding on May 6 when the rebels took over the Parliament and state radio buildings in Dushanbe. Later they agreed to a coalition government, retaining Nabiyev as president until scheduled elections in December 1992, which were never held. The opposition took control of the key ministries of defence, interior, foreign affairs, agriculture, trade, and economy. *New York Times*, May 8, 1992.

18. Acting Deputy Foreign Minister Hamid Karzai's statement reported by AFP, Hong Kong, 20 May, 1992, in FBIS, *DR/NES*, 21 May, 1992, p. 35.

19. Voice of Islamic Republic of Iran, May 9, 1993, FBIS, *DR/NES*, May 10, 1993, p. 52.

Islamic Renewal and Democratic parties that opposes the rule of the Popular Front.²⁰ In mid-1993, there was some conflict between Russian forces on the Tajikistan-Afghan border and Tajik refugees from the opposition groups in Tajikistan that raised questions about Afghan-Central Asian relations.

Conversely, the role of the Central Asian states may acquire greater significance if the political problems among Afghanistan's groups become unmanageable. If the Pushtuns reestablish their dominance or deny autonomy to the ethnic regions, the Afghan Uzbeks and Tajiks may look toward their ethnic states across the border. So far, the Central Asian states have not attempted to exploit Afghanistan's internal divisions, nor have the ethnic minorities abandoned their Afghan identity. A regional consensus on respecting present state boundaries must be promoted to prevent the ethnic conflicts from engulfing neighboring areas.

Potential for conflict on ethnic, political, and security issues should not obscure the areas of common interest that have greater prospects of realization. With the barriers previously erected by Moscow now fallen, one might even see the transformation of the entire region—Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan—into a zone of economic and political cooperation. Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have already joined the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) founded by Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey that aims at economic integration. Efforts are underway to strengthen consensus on three priority areas: promotion of trade and development of commercial and financial institutions; cooperation in science, technology, communications, and human resource development; and establishment of a regional infrastructure for facilitating trade. Road communications between Uzbekistan and northern Afghanistan is quite well developed and may be extended farther down to seaports in Pakistan. Iran is keen on linking Mashed with Turkmenistan by rail, and Pakistan has shown interest in offering its communication lines by expanding existing capacity.

Two similar, but competing regional cooperation organizations—the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea cooperation zones—started by Turkey and Iran, respectively, have also attracted the Central Asian states. A summit conference of the heads of Central Asian states and governments, along with Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey, held in Ashkabad in May 1992 was a milestone.²¹ Since then, a wide array of bilateral cooperation agreements

20. Mushahid Hussain, "Turmoil in Tajikistan," *Newsline* (Karachi), November 1992, pp. 65–66.

21. At the end of the summit, construction of railways, roads, and telecommunications and cooperation in the development of mineral and energy resources were announced. See editorials in *Dawn* and *Nation*, May 12, 1992.

have been signed. A new economic bloc of non-Arab Islamic nations may emerge if present plans materialize.

A number of factors have necessitated a look in the direction of their Islamic neighbors by the Central Asian States. First is the disruption of traditional economic ties with Russia and other European republics of the former USSR, which had supplied almost all the manufactured goods and fuels to Central Asia in exchange for raw materials. With economic chaos and instability, these sources are no longer reliable. Second, Russia is re-orienting itself entirely toward Western Europe, leaving Central Asia to fend for itself. Third, the bulk of Western aid that has been committed to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has been channeled into the European member-states, mainly Russia.

But this does not suggest that final choices have been made. The influence of Russified elites, the Russian language, and the presence of an ethnic Russian minority will continue to promote Moscow-centered policies. Also, Russia has strong interest in keeping Central Asia within its sphere of influence, if not in reincorporating the region. Thus, the role of Moscow may add difficulties to any reorientation of Central Asia toward the Islamic countries of Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan. Another problem is that a consensus on economic and political forms as well as on state identity has yet to emerge in all the Central Asian states. Perhaps the dynamics of economic reconstruction in Afghanistan and Central Asia in line with regional and global trends toward marketization and liberalization may not only bring these countries closer to one another but also may inject some cohesiveness in their policies.

Conclusion

There is hardly an internal institution based on consensus in the country that could mediate the conflicts of interest among the warring Afghan factions. This role has fallen upon the neighboring powers of Iran and Pakistan. They have continually offered their services to resolve inter-Afghan problems, but a foreign role in negotiating accords and promoting consensus among groups involved in a power struggle, though valuable, has limitations. And prolonged foreign involvement, even in a mediatory role, may backfire as the groups who feel left out or inadequately represented in any power arrangement turn hostile.