

POST-9/11 NATION-BUILDING IN AFGHANISTAN: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONTESTED ROLE OF THE REGIONAL STATES

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Abstract

This study examines the role of regional players in the violent state collapse of Afghanistan (first in 1996 and then in 2021), with a focus on the complex relationship between internal vulnerabilities and external interventions (from 1979 to 2021). Afghanistan's strategic location as "the heart of Asia" has made it vulnerable to foreign interventions that repeatedly undermined its sovereignty and stability. Understanding these regional subtleties is crucial for informing future policy approaches and breaking cycles of external interference. The research employed a qualitative methodology, using both descriptive and analytical approaches, to examine historical patterns through secondary data sources, including academic literature, government reports, and publications from international organisations. Data analysis employed thematic content analysis and historical comparative analysis across three periods: the Soviet era (1979-1989), the civil war period (1989-2001), and the post-9/11 intervention period (2001-2021). The findings suggest enduring patterns of regional engagement, with Pakistan's reported strategic depth policy, Iran's sectarian considerations, and various competing regional interests appearing to contribute to challenges in Afghanistan's stability and governance. Internal governance challenges, such as ethnic tensions, corruption issues, and institutional weaknesses, may have created vulnerabilities that external actors were able to influence. The study concludes that Afghanistan's state failures stem from complex webs of regional interventions that exacerbate internal weaknesses. Recommendations emphasise addressing both internal governance challenges and managing regional competition while fostering constructive cooperation among neighbouring powers for a durable peace and a self-sustaining state in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan; Regional intervention; State failure; External interference; Proxy conflicts.

Introduction

The strategic position of Afghanistan as a nexus of South, Southwest, and Central Asia has earned it the nickname "the heart of Asia" and "the cockpit of Asia" due to its centrality in regional geopolitics (Rashid, 2000; Salahi, 2022). This geographical advantage, which was later to be a blessing and a curse to the Afghan state, ushered in a new dawn for the state. The fact that Afghanistan has served as "the best nodal point" between Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia, and China (Dulat, Durrani & Sinha, 2018) has immense potential of the region connectivity and economic integration but has also put the country into the risk of foreign interventions and proxy wars which have only served to destroy sovereignty and stability of the nation time and again.

These two aspects of the relationship between Afghanistan's domestic politics and foreign interventions exemplify one of the most persistent problems in contemporary international relations. With Afghanistan, the two issues have been interrelated since the 19th century, namely internal political inabilities and external interferences with the nation by regional and global powers seeking to pursue their strategic interests (Ramzan et al, 2021). Such a volatile situation has led to frequent state falls, especially in 1996 when the Taliban first took control and recently in August 2021 when the withdrawal of the international troops and the Taliban takeover of Kabul took place.

The contemporary Afghan state, founded in 1747 under Ahmad Shah Durrani, was remarkably resilient in holding its ground over approximately two centuries, despite being shaken by numerous internal uprisings and the challenges posed by foreign invasion (Saikal, 2004). The Durrani Empire successfully united the various tribes of the Afghan people under a monarchical system that maintained relative stability until 1973, when King Zahir Shah was deposed by Mohammad Daud Khan, who subsequently declared the Republic of Afghanistan (Kakar, 2006; Rahi, 2020). This was a tumultuous period marked by alarming political changes and interventions by foreign powers, ultimately leading to the state's failure.

Regional players have specifically been crucial to the (de)stabilisation of Afghanistan since the late 20th century. The Soviet invasion in December 1979 initiated a ten-year proxy war that significantly altered the regional balance of power and established traditions of external interference that persist to this day (Coll, 2004). Afghanistan has fallen afoul of competing interests that interfere with its internal affairs, such as those of Pakistan, Iran, India, China, and the republics of Central Asia, which, in most cases, favour various factions, thereby disintegrating the fabric of Afghan society (Rashid, 2000). The entry to these regional forces has been compounded by the activity of international forces, especially the United States, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, which are seeking to use their proxies in Afghanistan to further their strategic interests.

It is because of the role of Pakistan, which is also a neighbour to Afghanistan, and which has a significant Pashtun population on the sides of the Durand Line. Pakistan's pursuit of the policy of "strategic depth" against India has consistently contributed to the patronage of various Afghan groups, the most prominent of which is the Taliban. It thus forms a complex web of codependency that has both aided and weakened Afghanistan, both as a state and society (Rahi, 2020). The patron-client relationship between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, on the one hand, and the Afghan Interim Government (AIG), on the other, failed when jihadi leaders engaged in a severe internecine war. Ignoring ground realities in imposing a government on a sovereign nation also highlights the shortcomings of the patron-client relationship in the realm of Afghan politics (Saikal, 2004). In the same way, Iran has been motivated to play a role in Afghanistan by its fears of Sunni extremism, and the need to defend Shia minorities, especially the Hazara group, and in many cases has been on the other side of Pakistani interests.

The attacks on mainland US on September 11, 2001 (9/11), which were presumably planned in Afghanistan, turned international attention towards the country. This phase of the post-9/11 period saw an unprecedented increase in international engagement in Afghanistan's reconstruction. However, the region has been left to its own devices as various stakeholders sought to advance their interests at the expense of broader, wider developments in the stabilisation process (Kakar, 2006). The change in tactics by the Bush administration, as it transitioned from fighting Al-Qaeda to nation-building, introduced new opportunities and dilemmas for regional actors in their efforts to shape the course of Afghanistan (Manfred, 2008). The inability of the international community

to properly coordinate regional key players and deal with their real security fears led to the final crumbling of the Western-supported Afghan government in 2021.

The paper presents an in-depth analysis of how regional actors have contributed to the stability or instability of Afghanistan over the past few decades. The analysis also examines how Afghanistan's geo-strategic position has predisposed it to foreign interventions, particularly given that, since the 19th century, the two interconnected challenges co-existing in Afghanistan have been the challenges of internal political instability and the challenge of foreign intervention (Dulat, Durrani, & Sinha, 2018). Drawing on the motivations, strategies, and impressions of the main regional forces, the paper examines the complex interactions that have failed to bring inclusive peace and development to Afghanistan, a country that has witnessed the breakdown of its state in 1996 and August 2021 (Salahi, 2022). The discussion focuses both on the destabilising power of competitive regional interventions and the possible contribution of constructive regional cooperation to Afghan stability.

These regional subtleties are important both in understanding the turbulent history of Afghanistan and in guiding future policies that might be effective in breaking the pattern of cyclical interventions by foreign powers and legitimising indigenous Afghan-based responses to Afghanistan's problems. The historical pattern shows that even during periods of relative stability, such as under the Durrani Empire (1747-1826), Afghanistan's strategic location continued to attract external interest and intervention (Tanner, 2009). The lessons learned from Afghanistan's experience with regional (de)stabilization efforts offer valuable insights for conflict resolution and state-building initiatives in other strategically located but politically fragile states, particularly given Afghanistan's role as "the best nodal point" connecting Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia, and China (Dulat, Durrani, & Sinha, 2018).

Literature Review

The foundation for analysing Afghanistan's state failures draws from Rotberg's work on failed states. Rotberg (2003) defines state failure as the inability of a state to exercise power across its territory, resulting in governance vacuums that become safe havens for terrorist groups and non-state actors. This framework proves particularly relevant to Afghanistan, where the collapse of central authority in both 1992 and 2021 created opportunities for various factions to fill power vacuums. He emphasises that state failure poses existential challenges to the international system, as failed states threaten regional and global peace. His analysis of the causes of failure, including internecine warfare, the inability to provide public goods, and legitimacy loss, provides a comprehensive understanding of Afghanistan's trajectory.

Nation-building literature offers additional theoretical context. Dobbins et al. (2008) analyse U.S. nation-building approaches in Afghanistan, comparing them to successful post-WWII reconstruction in Germany and Japan. However, Etzioni (2012) provides a critical perspective, characterising such efforts as "the folly of nation-building," particularly where external powers fail to understand local dynamics. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2008), nation-building relates to the creation of nationhood in common whilst doing away with the ethnic division, where successful mobilisation is crucial but does not lead automatically to peacebuilding.

Regional Interventions and the 1992 Collapse

A scholarly examination of Afghanistan's 1992 state collapse reveals the critical roles of regional players in sustaining conflicts. Braithwaite (2011) demonstrates how the Najibullah regime's survival for over three years after Soviet withdrawal was ultimately undermined by withdrawn

Soviet support combined with continued external backing for mujahideen forces. By late 1991, the Republic of Afghanistan retained authority over only 10% of its national territory, yet continued to resist due to superior Soviet-supplied weaponry and economic support. Steel (2012) emphasises that the discontinuation of Soviet aid merely exacerbated pre-existing problems, including foreign interference from Pakistan, Iran, and the United States.

Pakistan's role emerges as particularly significant in the literature. Gibson (2015) documents how Pakistan provided sanctuary and support to mujahideen groups, fundamentally altering conflict dynamics. The fall of Khost after an eleven-year siege, in which vital supply lines to Kabul were disrupted, marked a key moment in the decade-long war. Loyn (2009) and Jones (2008) provide detailed accounts of how Pakistan's sanctuary provision and Peshawar training facilities became crucial to the sustainability of the insurgency. By 1985, each of the seven main mujahideen groups had maintained headquarters in Peshawar, where Pakistani authorities guided the insurgency (Kalinovsky, 2011).

Multiple factors drove Pakistani involvement, including shared ethnic ties with Pashtun populations, security concerns about Soviet expansion, and the pursuit of strategic depth against India (Akhtar, 2008). Pakistan's fears of encirclement with the Soviet Union, potentially controlling Afghanistan while India remained hostile, created compelling strategic rationales for supporting mujahideen. Historical tensions over the Durand Line and Pakhtunistan issues provided a security-related justification for intervention (Rubin, 2002).

Iran's complex role reveals hedging strategies reflecting sectarian concerns and geopolitical calculations. Amstutz (1986) and Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (2023) document how Iran initially provided limited resistance support but later developed sophisticated conditional aid policies for Shia mujahideen groups. The literature reveals Iran's dual approach: simultaneous assistance to mujahideen groups and humanitarian aid to the Najibullah government (Cordovez & Harrison, 1995). Iran's motivation stemmed from protecting Afghanistan's Shia minorities, particularly Hazaras, while preventing the emergence of a Soviet-aligned government on its eastern border.

American involvement transformed Afghanistan into a critical Cold War battleground. Shroder (1981) documents limited pre-1979 U.S.-Afghanistan interaction, with economic assistance totalling only \$21 million in 1977. However, the Soviet invasion made Afghanistan a strategic priority, driven by fears that Soviet success would threaten Persian Gulf oil supplies (Tomsen, 2011). Scott (1996) and Braithwaite (2011) document how American aid grew from \$30-40 million annually in the early 1980s to billions by the late 1980s, totalling approximately \$9 billion by 1991. This support was channelled through Pakistan, giving Pakistani authorities substantial influence over resource allocation (Khalilzad, 1991; Yousaf & Adkin, 1992).

Internal Governance Failures and External Exploitation

The literature consistently emphasises how internal governance failures created external exploitation opportunities. Barfield (2010, 1984/2022) analyses how the PDPA's misguided social transformation approach, including land reforms and secularisation, created widespread opposition that external powers could support. According to Edwards (2002) and Amstutz (1986), the rapid pace at which reforms were being implemented in the PDPA, often without the necessary data, led to uprisings in villages, which in turn laid the foundations for insurgency.

The PDPA's land reform efforts, which were modelled after the Soviet Central Asian template, failed abysmally, as the regime grossly ignored ground realities in Afghanistan. Majrooh (1983) and Sait (2013) note that the reforms disrupted conventional rural infrastructure and conflicted with traditional social norms, such as Pashtunwali. The uprooting of major landowners destroyed

most of the vital facilities in rural areas, such as seed purchasing and crop marketing. It also made radical changes to the land ownership laws of Afghanistan.

Another source of outside manipulation was the ethnic and factional divide. According to Human Rights Watch (1991) and Kalinovsky (2011), political opponents were murdered in purge battles between Parcham and Khalq groups—killing rose to twelve people per night in Kabul in the early 1980s. The division of PDPA in 1967 indicated more profound cultural differences. Ma et al. (2024) and Ramzan et al. (2025) also highlight the impact of cultural differences. The Parchamis group was Kabul-based and spoke in Dari, whereas the Khalqis were rural-based and spoke Pashtu (Amstutz, 1986). Such divisions did not stop during the Soviet Afghan War, where each of the groups purged their opponents in terms of both governmental and military roles.

The 2021 Collapse and Contemporary Dynamics

The literature on the 2021 collapse of Afghanistan offers insight into how regional processes continue to influence state failure, as well as the adaptation to new intervention patterns. According to the reports by SIGAR (2022), the lack of participation by the Afghan government in negotiations between the U.S and the Taliban essentially weakened the legitimacy of the Kabul administration. Sopko (2023) captures how this exclusion made the Taliban's appearance seem like a government-in-waiting, whereby the Afghan government appeared to be forsaken.

The U.S.- Taliban signed in February 2020, signifying essential shifts in regional dynamics and practically legalised the Taliban, resulting in the sidelining of the Afghan government. Goodson (2001) observes that the exclusion of any negotiation had a considerable impact on the credibility of the Afghan government, and it was easy to notice how the rest of the world perceived the United States as helping the Taliban win instead of assisting its ally in Kabul.

Taliban propaganda campaigns successfully exploited this legitimacy gap, painting themselves as reformed and legitimate compared to the “corrupt and weak” Afghan government. Former Corps Commander General Sami Sadat's observations about the psychological effects of the Doha agreement on Afghan soldiers illustrate how external negotiations directly impacted internal morale and fighting capacity (SIGAR, 2022).

Corruption and State Legitimacy

Recent scholarship emphasises the role of corruption in undermining state legitimacy and creating opportunities for insurgencies. The 2017 ANDSF lessons-learned report describes how corrupt practices within security institutions reinforced warlord-loyal militias and undermined public trust. The analysis by Murtazashvili reveals how international aid flows ultimately created perverse incentives, where he notes that a state must obtain funding from international donors rather than local support. His statement that “money cannot win hearts and minds” proves to be true.

Literature published after 2001 indicates that the issue of corruption has become institutionalised in Afghanistan's political systems. The 2016 corruption lessons-learned report captures the fact that the Taliban existed as a source of legitimacy through castigating corrupt political elites who were involved in human rights violations. Sarah Chayes have illustrated the way foreign powers colluded with corrupt individuals in their partnership and has created the initial causes of impunity and a culture of corruption, thereby entrenching the efforts to build states (Chayes, 2016).

As revealed in this literature review, the state failures that have recurred in Afghanistan cannot be explained without looking at the intricate network of interventions in the region that have influenced the destiny of the economic and social behaviour of Afghanistan. As noted by the academic community, internal causes of weakness may exist. However, foreign intervention by regional and global powers has consistently exacerbated the weaknesses, leading to periodic

tendencies in terms of state, absurdity, and reconstruction that have distinguished modern Afghanistan's history.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to evaluate the influence that regional actors had on the (de) stabilization of Afghanistan in the context of both descriptive and an analytical approach which investigates how the complexity of interventions of foreign actors contributed to the formation of the state of Afghanistan between the period of 1979 and 2021. The study is guided by an interpretivist approach aimed at explaining why regional actors are intervening in Afghanistan, how they do so, and with what repercussions, by examining in-depth explanations of historical trends, policy choices, and their implications. The methodology adopts a case study approach, treating Afghanistan as a critical case for understanding how regional interventions can both destabilise and potentially stabilise fragile states. This approach allows for in-depth analysis of the multifaceted relationships between Afghanistan and its neighbours, examining both the immediate impacts and long-term consequences of external interference on state-building processes.

The study relies exclusively on secondary data sources to ensure comprehensive coverage of the complex historical and contemporary dynamics, drawing from academic literature including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and research monographs focusing on Afghanistan's political history, regional security dynamics, and state failure theories. Key sources include works by Braithwaite (2011), Steel (2012), Gibson (2015), and Rotberg's theoretical framework on failed states, supplemented by government reports and official documents from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), U.S. Department of Defense assessments, Congressional reports, and declassified intelligence documents that provide crucial insights into policy decisions and their implementation. The United Nations, World Bank, NATO publication and the regional organization publications including Shanghai Cooperation Organization or South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation publications can be used as additional points of view on the analysis, whereas the publications of think tanks and policy institutes including the Brookings Institution, International Crisis Group, or United States Institute of Peace offer a current analysis of the regional dynamics in Afghanistan.

The process of data collection was per a systematic literature review approach, where the researchers studied databases to cover the best understanding of the current evaluation on the topic of interest (Akram et al., 2022); conducting systematic searches on academic databases (JSTOR, Project MUSE, and Google Scholar) by using a combination of keywords, namely: Afghanistan, regional players, external intervention, state failure, and proxy conflicts. Primary sources were arranged chronologically to help understand how interventions in the region have developed since the Soviet invasion up to the restoration of Taliban power, making sure that various stages of the external involvement have been covered to the full extent and that sources, representing different national interests have been included so that no biased viewpoints are developed. The triangulation source was used to authenticate central assertions and occurrences, especially in delicate political and military operations, where various descriptions could have been made.

The data analysis used the thematic content analysis and historical comparative analysis to draw trends and patterns on the regional interventions in the three different time frames that included the Soviet era (1979-1989), the civil war and Taliban stage (1989-2001) and the post 9/11 international intervention phase (2001-2021). The analysis was conducted systematically based on the motivations, capabilities, and strategies of the most important regional actors about Pakistan,

Iran, India, China, and Central Asian republics to identify prevalent pattern of interventions that included proxy support, economic leverage, diplomatic initiatives, and security cooperation to analyze the extent to which they were effective and inadvertent consequences were witnessed. A comparative analysis of the regional processes that led to different outcomes, due to differences in the international environment, was conducted using process tracing to define a causal relationship between regional interventions and the outcome of the Afghan state. This analysis aimed to differentiate between proximate reasons and underlying causes of state collapse. The study employs a state failure framework developed by Robert, which serves as the primary analytical tool. It analyzes how the regional interventions helped to create or alleviate loss of territorial control, the failure to deliver public goods, and legitimate power shortcomings, as well as general geopolitical analysis including the theory of patron-client relationships to explain how external aid influenced internal Afghan processes and regional powers tried to use Afghan factions to reach their strategic goals.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The comprehensive analysis of Afghanistan's course from 1979 to 2021 reveals a complex pattern of national weaknesses and external interference that has led to recurring patterns of state failure. This discussion represents a synthesis of qualitative information of various sources on how regional actors have systemically destabilized Afghanistan by exploring three historical points of destabilization; namely, the Soviet period (1979-1989), civil war and the Taliban era (1989-2001), and the global intervention since (2001-2021). The finding shows that, as the heart of the Asian continent, Afghanistan's strategic position has had a dual impact, providing huge potential in terms of regional interconnectedness on the one hand, but also making it vulnerable to foreign interventions that have continued to destabilise its sovereignty and independence.

Regional Intervention Patterns and Their Impact on State Formation

The data indicate a regular trend of regional interference, which has fundamentally altered the political setting of Afghanistan throughout various eras of its historical past. The role played by Pakistan turns out to be so special because it sought after strategic depth of its own against India, and feelings of Pashtun nationalism. The discussion reveals that Pakistan—especially its intelligence apparatuses—provided hospitality to various Afghan groups and changed the nature of the conflict primarily over several decades. By 1985, there were seven primary mujahideen groups, each with its headquarters in Peshawar, and the Pakistani authorities had offered all-out support to the insurgents. This remained the case even under the Taliban regime—Pakistan became one of three countries to recognise the Taliban regime, along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, on May 25, 1997.

In the case of Iran, it is a complex hedging play, as sectarian and geopolitical considerations are at play. The evidence reveals Iran's two-headed policy during the Soviet Union's existence: supporting mujahideen groups and engaging in humanitarian activities towards the government of Najibullah. The drive of Iran was based on the preservation of the Shia minorities of Afghanistan, especially the Hazara, and the aversion to the appearance of the Soviet-aligned governments in its eastern front. Moreover, this defensive position was maintained even after 2001, when Iran first adopted a cooperative policy towards the Karzai regime but then switched to a more aggressive policy after the 2005 Iranian elections led to the assumption of power by a hardliner president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

As the analysis shows, the American presence essentially changed Afghanistan into a hotbed of the Cold War and subsequently the epicentre of the war on terrorism in the world. American aid

increased to billions during the late 1980s, reaching nearly \$9 billion by 1991, whereas in the early 1980s, the aid was between \$30 and \$40 million every year. Nonetheless, the U.S.-Taliban accord in February 2020 was a complete change in the game, since it effectively consecrated the Taliban in the region and condemned the Afghan administration as a sidelined player. The fact that the Afghan government was not considered in these negotiations impaired its legitimacy greatly, as people began imagining that the United States was helping the Taliban win as opposed to aiding its ally in Kabul.

The presence of China and Russia was less direct, but still significant, which led to proxy support and strategic competition in the region. The evidence indicates that India and Russia gave full backing to the Northern Alliance during the 1990s. In contrast, the interests of the Chinese had been mainly focused on restraining themselves from becoming one of the hotbeds of terrorism and extremism, capable of triggering effects in their Xinjiang region. Post 9/11 commitment to Afghanistan added a few more tensions in the region as India invested billions in infrastructure and training in Afghanistan, only to be seen as encirclement activity by Pakistan.

Internal Governance Failures and External Exploitation

The analysis reveals how failures of internal governance provided external actors with opportunities to exploit them, thereby initiating a cycle of state breakdowns. The wrong social change policy of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), encompassing the land reform program and secularisation, yielded general counter-pressure, which international forces could be encouraged to join. Attempts at land reform by the PDPA using Soviet Central Asian patterns also proved disastrous because of a lack of awareness of Afghanistan's social patterns. These reforms interfered with the rural provisionary infrastructure, as they were contradictory to entrenched social norms, such as Pashtunwali, and left the rural infrastructure deprived of basic facilities, including seed buying and crop selling.

Another side of foreign manipulation was the ethnic and factional divisions. The data is that there were violent purges between Parcham and Khalq groups; based on this information, in 1980-1981, there were 12 assassinations a night in Kabul. The split of the PDPA in 1967 represented more fundamental cultural divisions: the Khalqis, who were predominantly rural Pashto speakers, and the Parcham, who were mainly Kabul-based English-speaking Dari speakers. These divisions persisted throughout the Soviet Afghan War, with each faction purging opposing members from government and military positions, creating opportunities for external actors to support different factions.

The 2021 collapse reveals similar patterns of internal vulnerability exploited by external actors. President Ashraf Ghani's increasingly centralised decision-making, coupled with his detachment from reality, had significant consequences for Afghanistan's governance (SIGAR, 2022). There is evidence that suggests that Ghani personally involved himself in military decisions, appointing every commander with the rank of brigadier general and higher, while senior members of his administration appointed Afghan National Police commanders down to the district level across all 365 districts. This centralisation led to the sidelining of military officials with extensive experience, which had significantly weakened the state from within.

Corruption emerged as a critical factor undermining state legitimacy and creating opportunities for insurgent groups. The 2017 Afghan National Defence and Security Forces lessons-learned report describes how corrupt practices within security institutions reinforced warlord-loyal militias and undermined public trust. According to the analysis, Afghanistan's weak state was sustained by financial flows that paradoxically maintained fragility. Due to the lack of a robust central

government, President Karzai operated through patrimonial resource distribution systems, which weakened rather than strengthened state institutions, while fueling corruption and protecting elite power domains.

The data reveals that the Afghan government's excessive centralisation, combined with its weak and corrupt structures, further exacerbated its legitimacy crisis. The result of the 2004 constitution was a government that was "barely distinguishable from the centralised monarchies and dictatorships" that characterised previous regimes. However, Afghanistan in 2004 had undergone significant changes from its earlier monarchical period, with multiple ethnic and regional groups capable of challenging the central authority. The political system had become "afflicted with an autoimmune disorder," where various factions' resistance to centralised authority threatened to undermine any state structure, regardless of the controlling ideology or leadership.

The Nexus of Regional Competition and State Collapse

This analysis reveals the existence of regional competition and the collapse of the Afghan state multiple times, indicating the influence of external rivalries that continuously disrupted any internal processes of stabilisation. According to the data, by the end of 1991, only 10 per cent of Afghanistan's entire territory was controlled by the Republic, and the resistance continued because they had better weapons supplied by the Soviets and financial support. The termination of Soviet aid only intensified the already existing issues, such as external influences from Pakistan, Iran, and the US. This trend was replicated in 2021, when the removal of external help also led to a collapse of the state within weeks.

The revival of the Taliban since 2001 is an example which shows that local actors had hidden proxy relationships despite international presence. Pakistan was also in favour of the Taliban leaders who were engaged in an insurgency against the U.S.-installed government in Kabul and followed a two-track policy of strong support for good neighbourly relations on one hand and relations with the insurgent groups on the other hand (Cho, 2018). Top Afghan leaders always blamed Pakistan as the source of arms, funds and safe havens to the Taliban, and it was possible to show that senior Taliban leaders had sought refuge in Pakistan, where they coordinated and attacked the Taliban (Wright, 2011).

The facts demonstrate that the interests of regional powers in achieving strategic aims through Afghan proxies created a competitive situation, which did not facilitate peaceful coexistence. The backing that Pakistan gave to the more conservative Islamist mujahideen groups like Hikmatyar, as opposed to the nationalist factions in Afghanistan, and its open backing of the Taliban movement was a part and parcel of its general policy of installing cooperative, Afghan governments (Rashid, 2000). On the same note, the considerable investment Afghanistan has received in terms of infrastructure and institutional development by India since 2001 was seen by Pakistan as a strategy to surround and neutralise it, which has once again triggered the proxy wars (Cho, 2018).

Through analysis, it becomes clear that Afghanistan's ethnic diversity has presented the country with numerous opportunities for regional manipulation. Every ethnic or tribal group historically competed based on political representation and control, and the groups usually held localised structures of power, such as militia leaders or warlords. Very long, regional powers, especially Pakistan, supported certain ethnic groups to achieve their geopolitical goal. In contrast, Iran paid attention to the security of the Shia minority, notably the Hazara people.

The lack of inclusive governance structures exacerbated these regional dynamics. According to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (2018), a significant percentage of individuals faced discrimination based on ethnicity by governmental officials (52%) and non-

governmental actors in the administration (10%). In contrast, ethnic prejudice had been carried out by the general population (38%). The ethnic discrimination during the tenure of President Ashraf Ghani was high as it made appointments based on ethnicity and tribal affiliations, not merit, which led to a sense of alienation that was open to manipulation by the regional actors (Constable, 2017). The economic interrelationships added more power to the regional impacts on Afghan affairs. According to the statistics, the U.S. Department of Defence estimated that security in Afghanistan requires approximately \$4.29 billion during fiscal year 2021, with the U.S. responsible for \$3.05 billion and the Afghan government for \$610 million (SIPRI, 2021).. Such reliance on foreign aid exposed Afghanistan to a situation where it could be influenced by regional manipulation, since various players had an opportunity to threaten to withdraw aid as a way of influencing policy decisions.

No practical cooperation and conflict resolution instruments were given to regional organisations. Although Afghanistan is a member of several regional organisations, including the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and an observer member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), these institutions have not made significant progress in addressing Afghanistan's issues. Regional powers still sought bilateral affiliations and proxy policy instead of multilateral affiliations.

The water-sharing dilemmas with Afghanistan have brought extra tension and manipulation to the region. This is because almost all the neighbours of Afghanistan rely on water flowing into Afghanistan to practice agriculture, as Afghanistan shares borders with the Amu River to the north, the Helmand River in the southwest, and the Kabul River in the southeast. This dependency had brought about opportunities for cooperation as well as leverage that regional actors could exploit to acquire political influence.

The information suggests that, despite the unprecedented levels of international involvement in the post-9/11 era, it did not significantly impact the essential regional processes. The readjustment of the focus of the Bush administration by limiting Al-Qaeda warfare to nation-building offered new combinations of possibilities and difficulties to the actors in the region trying to influence the course of Afghanistan (Miller, 2010). The inability of the international community to organise the stakeholders well in the region and respond to their security grievances was a factor that led to the eventual fall of the Western-supported Afghan government in 2021 (Murtazashvili, 2023).

The discussion concludes that state failures in Afghanistan cannot be addressed without examining the intricacy of regional interventions that have persistently misaligned attempts at state-building. Even though the internal forces like ethnic divisions, corruption and underdeveloped institutions resulting in contradictions, regional and international powers constantly made these internal weaknesses worse, and the combination of such forces resulted in a series of failures in the capacity building of the state and thereby failure of the state itself, which has been a characteristic feature of the modern history of Afghanistan. The academic opinion suggests that stabilisation in Afghanistan requires not only solutions to internal government issues but also the ability to address regional rivalry and promote practical cooperation with other powers simultaneously. Lessons learned from Afghanistan's experience can help prevent failure in other regions, particularly in strategically placed yet politically vulnerable states. It is essential to note that establishing a resilient state requires starting with the necessary levels of regional cooperation, inclusive governance, and sustainable institutional building.

Conclusion

This analysis of the situation in Afghanistan since foreign intervention in the late 1970s indicates that it is impossible to comprehend the cycles of the state failure of this country without realising the manifold complexity between both domestic weakness and foreign interference of the regional and international powers. The evidence indicates that Afghanistan as the strategic geographic center of the continent of Asia, has had a dual position that has been both comprising of infinite promises of the regional connection and simultaneously placing the country in the limbo of a target of various foreign interventions that has continuously threatened the stability of the nation and its sovereignty. The evidence illustrates similar regional interference in three distinct variables: Pakistan's quest for strategic depth, Iran's sectarian interests, and the conflicting interests of many regional powers, which contributed to the development of a competitive nature that inhibited sustainable peace and the consolidation of the Afghan state. Internal governance failures, including ethnic divisions, corruption, centralised authoritarian structures, and weak institutions, created opportunities for external exploitation, as evidenced by the PDPA's radical reforms in the 1970s and 1980s and President Ghani's centralised decision-making leading up to the 2021 collapse. The analysis reveals that economic dependencies further strengthened regional influence, with Afghanistan's security funding requiring approximately \$4.29 billion in fiscal year 2021, highlighting the country's vulnerability to external manipulation through the threatened withdrawal of support. The failure of regional organisations to provide effective mechanisms for cooperation, combined with water-sharing challenges and competing proxy relationships, demonstrates how external rivalries consistently undermine internal stabilisation efforts. The consensus emphasises that Afghanistan's experience offers valuable insights for conflict resolution and state-building initiatives in other strategically located but politically fragile states. To prevent similar failures in future state-building endeavors, the international community must prioritize addressing both internal governance challenges and managing regional competition while fostering constructive cooperation among neighboring powers, ensuring that external interventions align with long-term development needs rather than short-term strategic interests, and establishing inclusive governance structures that accommodate ethnic diversity and prevent marginalization of any group.

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