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Introduction

 The Afghanistan War has been going on for decades, yet there are still refugees fleeing and soldiers trapped in the never-ending conflict. After 18 years, over 100,000 American and Afghani soldiers as well as citizens have perished due to the war. With almost 2.5 million registered refugees leaving Afghanistan since the beginning of hostilities in the early 2000s, the country has the highest refugee population in all of Asia. The cause of this devastating war lies not only in geopolitical power struggles, but also in fundamental cultural misunderstandings; its root cause is not solely radical Islam as is often portrayed in the West, but perhaps more significantly an ethnic retaliation to American’s intrusion in tribal politics.

Definition of Key Terms

**Guerrilla**

 A guerrilla is a soldier or a member from a small organization that engages in irregular warfare, including ambushes, sabotage, raids, petty warfare, hit-and-run tactics, and mobility to attack larger rivals. This nomenclature is most often applied to a fighting force with numerical inferiority in combat against a technologically superior foe.

**Jihad**

Often referred to as “holy war,” Jihad means a struggle or militant campaign against the enemies of Islam. Many also describe that Jihad is more than a holy war. There are three different types of such conflicts: 1) an internal struggle of the believer to maintain faith and respect towards Islam as much as possible; 2) the struggle of the society to build a fully faithful Muslim community; 3) a holy war, or the struggle to defend Islam with force when necessary.

**Mujahideen**

 The mujahideen are a group of Muslim guerrilla fighters engaged in Jihad. The word became prevalent in the English language beginning with the Afghan-Soviet War in the 1980s.

**Tribal Politics**

Also known as Political Tribalism, the term has become a commonly spoken-about subject, especially in recent years. Tribalism refers to how humans commonly hold loyalty to their ethnic group and naturally prejudice others. In the Afghanistan War, it is used to understand the ethnic tensions in the country, and what caused and can solve the conflict.

History & Developments

The Soviet-Afghan War

Soviet Invasion

 After World War II, relations between the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, also known as the Soviet Union or USSR, worsened. The tension between the two countries led to the Cold War, or the geopolitical conflict between the Western countries led by the US, and the communist countries of Eastern Europe led by the Soviet Union. The Cold War took place around the world, one significant flashpoint being in Afghanistan.

 In 1978 the Afghanistan president and his family were brutally executed in a military coup as left-wing officials overthrew them. The Soviets later declared a twenty-year treaty to support the two Marxist-Leninist parties and subsequently replaced the government on December 24th, 1979. Within months the Soviets met a backlash by the citizens. The Soviets attempted to interpret the situation through Marxist terms, describing the political turmoil as “proletarian revolution.” The Soviets were in many ways oblivious to local ethnic politics in Afghanistan. Viewed in hindsight, it was less a proletarian revolution and more that the coup was an inflection point in a longstanding, festering feud between two ethnicities: the rural Pashtuns and the urban Tajiks.

         In the 20th century, Afghanistan – being a heavily mountainous and rural territory – was already comparatively lawless, lacking established central governmental authority, and Soviet domination only made matters worse. Within months rival warlords fought and executed over 50,000 people fighting for dominance over the broken nation. During that time, the US teamed up with Pakistan and coordinated Pakistani-mujahedeen in an attempt to defeat the communist-backed rival faction. Over the course of a decade of attrition and violence, the Soviets lost control of the country and were eventually defeated by the American-backed mujahedeen forces on February 15th, 1989, afterward retreating from the state. Viewing the result in Cold War context, the US government was thrilled, celebrating their victory against communism heedless of the ethnically rooted civil war they played a significant part in.

 **Pakistan in the War**

 Tribal politics plays a huge role historically in Afghanistan, both during the fighting of the 1980s and today. The country has four major ethnicities: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. The founder of Afghanistan was a Pashtun, and from 1747 to 1973, the Pashtuns ruled the country and called it their own; even today the terms “Pashtun” and “Afghan” are used interchangeably. On the east and southeast of the state lies Pakistan, ruled by the Punjabs. Although Punjabi people represented more than half of the population and ruled the country for many centuries; they saw the Pashtuns as a threat. Even after the Independence of Afghanistan, many Pashtuns lived along the Durand Line, the border drawn by British colonists in 1893 between the two states. The Punjabi government feared the Pakistani-Pashtuns’ nationalism and irredentism as there was twice the amount of Pashtuns in Pakistan (24 million) than in Afghanistan (12 million). When the US reached out for support for Pakistan’s anti-Communist dictator, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, it was the perfect opportunity for the manipulation of ethnic politics in Afghanistan.

During the invasion of the Soviets in Afghanistan the 1980s, America was still stinging from the political fallout of the Vietnam War during the previous two decades. It, therefore, refrained from any direct military involvement — instead, the US armed the anti-Soviet Afghan mujahideen under the control of Pakistan’s dictator. Zia’s goal was to have Afghanistan dominated by radical Islam. He used the classic divide-and-conquer strategy, separating the Pashtuns into two groups: the Sunni Muslims and the ones who are more secular. Zia then shrewdly empowered the Islamist Pashtuns to build Islamic schools throughout the Pashtun region to grow extremist views among Islamist young men. Zia planned to destroy Pashtun nationalism by radicalizing Pakistani-Pashtun Muslims to kill more moderate Afghan-Pashtuns. The rise of the Taliban proved Zia’s success.

 **The Rise of the Taliban**

   As with the Vietnam conflict previously, US foreign policymakers did not comprehensively understand the ethnic dynamics of the country and saw the Pakistan-supported mujahideen as “freedom fighters” battling against communists.  They didn’t realize their action helped fueled the anti-American identity in the Islamic fighters, and continued to fund Pakistan with a total of over $5 million worth of military weapons and ammunition. The US, at the time, was either oblivious to or downplayed the risks of how one of the recipients of their funds was Mullah Mohammad Omar, the founder of Al-Qaeda.

         After the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, a classic power vacuum ensued, and America left Afghanistan in a brutal civil war, as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia incessantly financed their preferred Afghan jihadist leaders. By 1996, the Taliban already took over two-thirds of the country and the capital of Kabul.

         The Taliban grew by popularity due in large part to its ethnic identity and religious convictions. After the Pashtun’s 200-year rule ended, the Soviet supports the Tajik minority as they helped them to control the country’s government. The once-dominant Pashto culture and language were fading from the media, and discrimination against Pashtuns worsened. The Taliban took hold of such fear to their advantage and approached tribal leaders and villages promising for the restoration of Pashtun dominance without the need for conflict. The only times where the Taliban met with resistance was the areas of non-Pashtuns and moderate Afghans, as Pakistan’s divide-and-conquer strategy had worked perfectly. Some Afghans found the Taliban’s extremist fanaticism repulsive and were also afraid of “Pakistanization” for the Taliban’s close ties with Pakistan. Nonetheless, the jihadist ethnic identity helped them recapture cities in minimal time.

In 1998 the Taliban with finance and weapons were able to seek their revenge against the Tajiks. They first massacred an estimated number of 2,000 Uzbeks and Hazaras for the execution of Pashtuns in 1997, and later attempted to starve another 160,000 Tajiks. The Taliban also started to enforce Islamic laws, most especially the laws restricting the freedom of women in accordance with strict interpretation of some aspects of the Quran. They also destroyed other religious property such as the ancient Buddha statues in Bamiyan Valley. Observing the turmoil, America finally began to doubt their “alliance” with the Taliban. America and the Taliban’s rivalry eventually became clear when Osama bin Laden officially announced its goal to eliminate the American population in all countries possible.

Leading up to 9/11

  The civil war between the Soviets and mujahideen became the perfect opportunity for the rise of Osama bin Laden. In 1996, the Taliban seized the capital, Kabul, from the atheist and Christian party and implemented strict Islamic law. While fighting the communist party for the dominance of the country, the Taliban viewed Osama bin Laden’s charisma as an opportunity to achieve dominance and welcomed him to the country. Bin Laden later created his organization, Al-Qaeda, with the main headquarters in the state and helped the Taliban win control over 90% of the Afghan territory by the summer of 2001. While the Taliban is a political movement for the Pakistan and Afghanistan Pashtun region, Al-Qaeda has different goals as a global terrorist movement fighting against the US for vengeance of perceived corruption in Islamic territory.

         On September 11th, 2001, Osama bin Laden led nineteen men to hijack and crash four US commercial airplanes into the Twin Towers in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The atrocity led to a total of 2,977 deaths and many more injuries. This situation provided the context for America to initiate plans for war in Afghanistan, and President George W. Bush demanded the Taliban to deliver all the leaders of Al-Qaeda hiding in Afghanistan. This demand was rejected by the Taliban.

The war with the Taliban

 The US Invasion

In response to the acts of terrorism, America sent troops to Afghanistan within months from the atrocity and largely defeated Taliban forces within 75 days. Behind the triumph was the alliance between the US and the Northern Alliance, an organization led by Pashtun’s enemies, the equally brutal Tajiks, and Uzbek warlords. One of the prominent episodes by the warlord commanders in the Northern Alliance was the case of the deaths of 1,500 Taliban prisoners; these prisoners were packed into shipping containers to starve and suffocate. Brutal episodes spread to the public persuading Pashtuns – most who were first resisting the extremists – to support the Taliban, and saw many local commanders as “America’s warlords,” or puppets for achieving US control.

         America was soon inclined to favor the Tajiks and Uzbeks and excluded the majority of the population. Moreover, America eventually abandoned ethnic diversity in the new American supported Afghan army, with 70% of the workforce represented by the Tajiks minority. The phrase “they get the money, we get the bullets” spread throughout the Afghans as the marginalization of local interests worsened. The Americans segregated moderate Afghans, as they were possible associates with the Taliban for their clan ties and ethnicities.

         After the fall of the Taliban on December 6th, 2001, the US lost attention in Afghanistan as turmoil in the nearby state of Iraq started to escalate.

         In April 2004, US president Bush announced a promise of financial assistance for training and equipping Afghan security forces and to restore stability (on American terms) to the country. On May 1st, 2003, the US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced an end to major combat in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, elections were held in Afghanistan again for a rightful leader, and on October 9th 2004 the country announced Mohammed Karzai as winner of a full five-year term, a result that was disputed in many quarters.

 Phase II: Taliban Resurgence

   In the early months of 2005, the Taliban reemerged with new tactics in addition to previously used efforts such as suicide bombings and covert explosives. In 2009, newly-elected US president Barack Obama made the decision of temporarily increasing the quantity of US troops in Afghanistan, in the hope that within the next few years security responsibilities could be handed over to the Afghan military and police. In 2010, a Taliban insurgency swept through the country, gaining control of the major cities of the eastern and southern regions of Afghanistan, and reinforced Islamic laws to the majority of the country.

         Starting at the beginning of 2012, the US and the Afghanistan government sought solutions through peace talks in ways to prevent further violence. However, despite the rising death tolls – particularly of Afghani citizens – in the past decade, in 2014 the Pentagon declared an end to American Afghanistan combat operations. Nevertheless, NATO’s (see below) and the US’s combat mission formally ended in December of 2018 and became the longest war fought, with current president Donald Trump withdrawing half of the remaining 14,000 troops. Hostilities and American troops remain, despite any formal proclamations.

Geopolitics

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

 NATO, a Cold War military alliance headed by the United States and European countries, was in charge of the mission of the International Security Assistance Force in December 2014. The organization seeks to transfer the Afghan national defense and security forces through sponsorships of many countries to help end the atrocity of the Afghanistan War.

The Taliban

  Also known as the Taliban and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan – the Afghani-based Sunni Islamic fundamentalist political movement and military organization encompasses troops of guerrilla soldiers to fight in the holy war. First supported by the Pakistan government, the Taliban was first founded mostly by Pakistani Pashtuns during the Soviet-Afghan war. The Taliban holds extreme jihadist ideologies that were first condemned by moderate Pashtuns and other Afghan minorities. However, today, the organization is filled with a diversity of people fighting for the dominance of their country. The Taliban currently has gained control over roughly two-thirds of the country, urging Islamic laws more than it has ever been.

United States of America (USA)

 The US first backed Pakistani and Afghani mujahedeen to battle against communism, through the alliance between the Pakistan government in the 1980s. After the attack on 9/11, during the eight years between 2001 to 2009, President George W. Bush continued to challenge and attempted a defeat of the terrorist group through economic and military aid among other solutions. The United States continues to support the country of Afghanistan during recent years while slowly shifting the responsibility of security to the Afghan police and security forces.

Afghanistan

 Afghanistan consists of four major tribes: the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, and was ruled by the Pashtuns since the independence of the country. At the beginning of the 20th century, Afghanistan was a moderate and secular country with strong western influence. After the Soviet-Afghan war, the country fell apart with a brutal civil war between the US-backed government mostly consisting of Tajiks the rival tribe of the Pashtuns and the Taliban. Eighteen years after the war’s commencement, the government of Afghanistan still seeks long-term solutions with varying degrees of urgency. The government continues to maintain a friendly relationship with the US while preparing for the withdrawal of US forces in upcoming months.

Al-Qaeda

 An organization created by Osama bin Laden in the late 1980s, initially designed to support and recruit Muslims to fight against the Soviet Union during the Soviet-Afghan War. Later after the withdraw of the Soviet Union, Al-Qaeda continues to fight against the foreign presence in an Islamic land, particularly American soldiers. When brought into Afghanistan by the Taliban military, it has helped the Taliban with the war effort and control of the country.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The Ring Road

 American president George W. Bush stated that, “Where the road ends in Afghanistan, the Taliban begin… in other words, roads promote enterprise… enterprise provides hope… hope is what defeats this ideology of darkness.”

         Within weeks of the September 11th attacks, the US successfully drove the Taliban and Al-Qaeda out of Kabul, changing the primary strategy of the US military forces from combat to rebuilding and defending the country. However, the Hindu Kush Mountains and deserts cover most of the country; hence isolating communities and making it difficult to unify the nation. To solve the issue, the US plans to rebuild the Ring Road from the remains of the efforts of the Soviet Unit back in the 1950s. The road was created to connect the four main cities: Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Kandahar, and Kabul.  In 2003, multiple countries and organizations funded the reconstruction of the road, including the US, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Japan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, with a total investment of $1.5 billion US dollars. According to the United States Agency of International Development, the project was promising with the benefits of quicker transportation and was seen as crucial to extend the influence of local government.

         In 2001, the US government decided the road would need $3 billion US dollars to finish the project, and the price kept on increasing. In 2016, it was estimated that it is likely to cost more than $8 billion to replace the country’s road infrastructure, with 95% of the roads destroyed, and 85% maintained poorly.

 In 2003, due to the sudden emergence of the conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan became a second priority, and the Taliban took advantage by implanting traps and landmines. After the withdrawal of the US troops by Obama’s decree, the reconstruction of the unfinished project shifted towards the flawed Afghan military, which led to a significant loss of control of the country by the Taliban in the next few years. The Ring Road continues to deteriorate, and in 2017, President Trump made it clear “we are not rebuilding a nation again.”

**International Conferences**

 On December 5th, 2011, ten years after the first international conference on the Afghanistan war, multiple countries and organizations met in Bonn, Germany, to discuss the future of Afghanistan’s government. During the meeting, the Afghan President Hamid Karzai announced the demand of $10 billion annually for the next decade to restore the infrastructure and security in the country to prevent future corruption. However, the conference was unsuccessful, and it was unable to achieve its primary goal: to create the plan for Afghanistan’s transition from war to long-term recovery.

**Previous Peace Talks**

  In January of 2012, the Taliban offered a deal to open an office in Qatar, demonstrating the acceptance of peace talks that the United States sees as a crucial part of the solution to stabilize Afghanistan. Despite the efforts to make plans for future meetings, the Taliban retracted the offer while accusing Washington of reneging the promises for steps for trade for prisoners.

         There were no clear diplomatic breakthroughs evident from 2012 until this year, as negotiations between the Taliban and the US have perhaps been the closest for ending the war. These negotiations rely on the United States withdrawing their troops from Afghanistan in exchange for the Taliban to stop protecting other international terrorist groups on Afghan soil.

**Relevant treaties and events**

* Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement
* Security Council resolution 1917 (2010) [on extension of the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)] S/RES/1917(2010) 2010-03-22
* The situation in Afghanistan : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly A/RES/64/11 | 2009-11-09
* Emergency international assistance for peace, normalcy and reconstruction of war-stricken Afghanistan A/RES/60/32[B] | 2005-11-30
* Question of human rights in Afghanistan : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly A/RES/55/119 | 2000-12-04
* Security Council resolution 1214 (1998) [on the situation in Afghanistan] S/RES/1214(1998) | 1998-12-08
* Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance : emergency international assistance for peace, normalcy and reconstruction of war-stricken Afghanistan : the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly. A/RES/50/88[B] - A/RES/50/88 | 1995-12-19

Possible Solutions

 The first solution is to **encourage classes for foreign troops in Afghanistan to understand the group dynamics and tribal politics in the country.** By understanding the culture of the country in its totality and complexity, soldiers may interact with tribal leaders and attain trust and empower local communities. This solution will help the moderate civilians and the victims of the war to reject extremism and assist the local troops for further attacks with more knowledge. This solution is based by a strategy placed in the Iraq war, that led to the “Awakening,” or the significant development in the number of tribes and citizens rejecting Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups in the country. Reports have shown how the movement decreased civilian deaths by 45% within six months and gained the support of many civilians of the nation.

         The war in Afghanistan is about the ethnicities excluded in the government; Pashtuns are underrepresented in the government and in the peace process between the organizations. To **urge a diverse representation in the Afghan National Army and government** would mean to hire secular Pashtuns. This might be able to prevent the rising number of soldiers joining the Taliban to battle their rivals. In the future, there must also be the inclusion of religious Pashtuns to create a more stable government that will be able to gain the trust of all the citizens of the country, to the greatest extent possible subverting local interests to those of the nation as a whole.

         Another solution is, of course, to continue the **peace talks.**The peace talks must remain consistent between the Taliban and Afghanistan. As history has made it clear that unless there is an agreement, the Taliban or Al-Qaeda will never be defeated, and will always continue their holy war. Such a deal, of course, will not be easily achievable due to conflicting intentions and desires from all parties. With requirements to reserve and respect Islamic traditions, without any human rights violence, including women rights.

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