

The Game for Afghanistan

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Recently, Afghanistan has come to the attention of the world. The name "Afghanistan" is heard everywhere, yet very little is known about the nation that rests in the heart of Asia.

I was born in Afghanistan and was fortunate to enjoy a few years of its peace in the mid 1970s. What do I remember of Afghanistan? I remember our home in Kabul, the capital. I remember a modern society with roads, schools and all that a modern civilization has to offer. I remember rich arts and the wonderful music playing on the radio. Happiness. Joy. Love.

All that changed quickly.

I also remember the first Soviet tanks rolling into Kabul on a cold December morning in 1979. I remember the gray-eyed teenage Soviet soldiers in the streets with fear.

We were all scared. It was an uneasy time. War. Destruction. Death.

Due to the turmoil and bloodshed, my family and I decided to leave Afghanistan. We trekked for five days and five nights and made our way out of the country. As a child, you have confidence in your parents and those older than you. You never expect them to be scared. But I saw awful fright in the eyes of my parents and older sisters. Their fearful eyes during our journey still haunt me today.

In the 1980s America was accepting thousands of Afghan refugees. We were happy to make it to America where two of my uncles lived and worked; they had come to the study in the early 1970s, but could not return because of the war. Little did we know that our family along with the thousands of other Afghan families in the US and around the world was mere statistics of the Cold War— just numbers.

The war, dubbed the "Afghan-Soviet War" continued with the Soviets backing an Afghan communist regime and the US backing the Mujahideen or anti-Soviet "freedom fighters".



Today we have another “war” upon Afghanistan. And why is Afghanistan involved yet again? Yes, we know the basics: Taliban. Bin Ladin. Terrorism.

Before I address these questions, we need to step back into time. It is noted that history is the best teacher and guide. So, let's see where the roots of these conflicts rest.

History of the Great Game:

Let me take you back to the early 1800s where the “Great Game” begins.

Czarist Russia wanted to expand its borders south into Central Asia and reach what Peter the Great called, “the warm waters of the Indian Ocean.” However, the “warm waters” were controlled and ruled by British India. And the British would defend her crown jewel, India, at any cost.

In the center of these two nations was the kingdom of Afghanistan.

Stage 1 of the “Great Game”: Siege of Herat 1837 – 1838

The first act of European intervention in Afghanistan was Russia's plan to attack the western Afghan city of Herat, named “The Gateway to India.” Russia persuaded the Qajar Shah of Persia (Iran) to attack the city with the aid of Russian soldiers.

To match the move, Britain sent an agent to help the Afghans defend the Herat. The city was defended, and the British, determined to keep Persia away, landed a fleet of ships in the Persian Gulf to show Persia she should think twice before attacking Afghan soil.

Stage 2 of the “Great Game”: 1st Afghan-Anglo War 1839 – 1842

Britain, still determined to defend her Indian colony, invaded Afghanistan in 1839 because she felt the king, Amir Dost Mohammad, was siding with the Russians. The British invaded and installed a puppet king.

The puppet king and British occupation did not last. Britain was defeated. The former king was replaced, and Afghanistan was now under indirect British influence.

Stage 3 of the “Great Game”: 2nd Afghan-Anglo War 1878 – 1880

Again, Britain invaded Afghanistan for the same reasons as before; the new king, Amir Sher Ali, was thought to have favored the Russians. This time Britain attempted to break Afghanistan into three parts: The north to Russia, the west to Persia and the south to British

India. However, this plan was not executed because the British were defeated again—for the 2nd time.

A few years later, Czarist Russia, signed with Britain to end Russian involvement in Afghanistan's affairs. Thus, the British had complete influence of the affairs of Afghanistan.

Stage 4 of the “Great Game”: 3rd Afghan-Anglo War 1919

This was a brief war, lasting a few months. But it was the war of independence for Afghanistan. The British were defeated again— for the 3rd time. Afghanistan was granted independence, which meant control of her foreign affairs.

The years, which followed held rapid to moderate modernization of Afghanistan.

Despite this, Afghanistan was still deeply involved in the Great Game.

Stage 5 of the “Great Game”: Communism vs. The West or “The Free World”

This time, Afghanistan was the buffer state. Iran and Pakistan were friends and allies of the US and the West. Afghanistan tried to play the card of neutrality. Yet, she had to also perform a balancing act between receiving support and aid from the Soviet Union and the US. On the other hand, the US did not believe Afghanistan to be an asset. When Nixon visited Afghanistan in the 1950s, he reported that Afghanistan was the type of country that the US could live without.

As a result, Afghanistan fell in the hands of the Soviets. The USSR granted money and aid to train the Afghan army. This Soviet influence infiltrated the army officer corps, which began to show signs of communist support.

In the 1960s, Afghanistan experienced a light form of democracy, dubbed *Democracy-e-now* or “New Democracy”; this marked the constitutional monarchy period.

Because of the lack of democratic structure and opportunities for the growing educated middle class, communism began to take form. As a result, underground communist parties and other political groups became active.

These events were a catalyst to the final take-over of the communist government in the late 1970s, which invited Russia to invade Afghanistan.

Stage 6 of the “Great Game”: Afghan – Soviet War 1979 – 1989

The Soviet invasion sparked the interest of US affairs in Afghanistan. The US changed its policy and sent billions of dollars to Afghanistan via Pakistan's military intelligent service, the ISI. This time it was not to help build roads, schools or dams. It was cold cash for military aid.

The US supported and armed the anti-Soviet “freedom fighters” or Mujahideen. The war caused death, destruction and disintegration of the Afghan nation.

However, the Soviet Union eventually received a bloody nose smeared with the death of two million Afghans. With the defeat of the Soviet Union, there was the consequent end to communism and the break down of the Iron Curtain.

Once the USSR left, America's interest in Afghanistan also faded.

Stage 7 of the “Great Game”: The War for Oil

The 1990s were a violent and unstable time for Afghanistan and its people. According to some sources this period was more uncertain than the Afghan – Soviet War: the CIA trained Mujahideen were now fighting for power amongst themselves. This civil war destroyed cities, roads and every form of civil society. The number-one funded CIA man, Hekmatyar and his followers, rocked the city of Kabul to rubble.

Women were raped. Men were tortured. Children were killed. Homes were looted.

The civil war was additionally fueled by Iran and America's allies: Pakistan and Saudi Arabia; each nation supporting its own feuding faction inside Afghanistan.

Due to this type of mayhem, terrorist camps were flourishing and encouraged by individuals such as Osama bin Laden.

To combat the Civil War, and restore order, a new breed of fundamentalists came into the picture. This group was trained in *madrassas* or fundamentalist religious schools inside Pakistan. Pakistan's ISI trained and aided the new movement, which became known as the “Taliban”.

The Taliban were to pacify Afghanistan, open roads for trade in the new former Soviet Republics and more importantly reach the rich oil fields of Turkmenistan, not for the benefit of Afghanistan, but for Pakistan and various international oil companies.

Along with pacifying the country, they resurrected the stone age through their fundamentalist regime: women are not allowed outside the home; music, film, sports, books and all other forms of entertainment, media and self expression are not allowed; men are forced to grow beards.

In the beginning, the US government supported the Taliban. American's friend and ally, Pakistan promoted and financed them. The US government used the oil company UNOCAL as a form of diplomats to the Taliban.

It was not until lobbying from Western feminist groups about Afghan women's human rights that the US backed away from the Taliban regime. But Pakistan was given a free hand to do what it pleased with the Taliban, the affairs of Afghanistan and the fate of the Afghan people.

The US government changed its policy further with the Taliban for harboring the terrorist Osama bin Ladin. Sanctions were slapped on Afghanistan. The Taliban did not suffer but the Afghan people did.

In retaliation for the destruction of the US embassies in eastern Africa in 1998, the US fired rockets in Afghanistan on old CIA built military camps, which were used during the Afghan – Soviet War.

Again Pakistan, America's friend and ally, was given full rights to do what she wished with Afghanistan.

Stage 8 of the “Great Game”: The War Against Terrorism

We find Afghanistan in the middle of war and destruction—again.

Afghans in the SF Bay Area, the largest community of Afghans in the US, agree that bin Ladin and his followers need to be removed from Afghanistan, and a government by the people, for the people should be formed to put an end to the hell inside their homeland.

The SF Afghans also express the pain and agony at what America experienced on September 11th. Afghans felt it more keenly because the same types of events have unfolded in Afghanistan for the past 20 years. Afghans have been terrorized: over two million people have died, and thousands are dying each day because of war, starvation, and drought and by a barbaric regime.

Afghans know suffering.

And now America is a direct player in the Great Game.

America wants to put an end to terrorism, and Afghanistan is the place to start. But when America does take action and removes the virus of terrorism, will America turn its back on the Afghan people, again? Will America allow her allies such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other nations like Iran to take a free hand and do what they wish with Afghanistan and its people?

Will Afghanistan be a distant land again? And will Afghans remain a voiceless people, whose cries for help are never heard?

When will this "Great Game" end?

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