

Great Power Withdrawals from Afghanistan

by

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Class of 2014

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT: A

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved--OMB No. 0704-0188

The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 15-04-2014		2. REPORT TYPE STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Great Power Withdrawals from Afghanistan				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Colonel Patrick L. Gaydon United States Army				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Dr. Larry P. Goodson Department of National Security and Strategy				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College, 122 Forbes Avenue, Carlisle, PA 17013				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution A: Approved for Public Release. Distribution is Unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Word Count: 9505					
14. ABSTRACT On four occasions in the last two centuries, great powers have conducted military withdrawals out of Afghanistan. Each time, these powers left mechanisms in place that protected their national interests. Despite the perception that both the British and Soviets suffered disastrous defeats, each still retained enough leverage to attain some of the objectives for which they went to war in the first place. The US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) coalition is poised to make the fifth such withdrawal by the end of 2014. Can it also achieve similar strategic objectives? Each of these four departures from Afghanistan occurred in a geopolitical environment of competition between great powers: the Great Game and the Cold War. External competition will surely continue to influence post-2014 Afghanistan, as multiple regional and world powers have national interests at stake. This paper examines the lessons from the four previous great power withdrawals, in the context of Afghanistan's long-running, competitive geopolitical environment. It also considers which of the lessons remain applicable in the post-2014 regional geopolitical environment.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Great Game, Cold War, Geopolitics, Realism, Strategy, Anglo-Afghan Wars, Soviet-Afghan War					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 48	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT UU	b. ABSTRACT UU	c. THIS PAGE UU			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (w/ area code)

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract

Title: Great Power Withdrawals from Afghanistan
Report Date: 15 April 2014
Page Count: 48
Word Count: 9505
Key Terms: Great Game, Cold War, Geopolitics, Realism, Strategy, Anglo-Afghan Wars, Soviet-Afghan War
Classification: Unclassified

On four occasions in the last two centuries, great powers have conducted military withdrawals out of Afghanistan. Each time, these powers left mechanisms in place that protected their national interests. Despite the perception that both the British and Soviets suffered disastrous defeats, each still retained enough leverage to attain some of the objectives for which they went to war in the first place. The US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) coalition is poised to make the fifth such withdrawal by the end of 2014. Can it also achieve similar strategic objectives? Each of these four departures from Afghanistan occurred in a geopolitical environment of competition between great powers: the Great Game and the Cold War. External competition will surely continue to influence post-2014 Afghanistan, as multiple regional and world powers have national interests at stake. This paper examines the lessons from the four previous great power withdrawals, in the context of Afghanistan's long-running, competitive geopolitical environment. It also considers which of the lessons remain applicable in the post-2014 regional geopolitical environment.

Great Power Withdrawals from Afghanistan

On four occasions in the last two centuries, great powers have conducted military withdrawals out of Afghanistan. Each time, these powers left multiple mechanisms in place that protected their national interests. Afghans drove British forces out twice in the nineteenth century, and British forces left on their own accord after the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919. Yet, at the strategic level, Great Britain succeeded in maintaining Afghanistan as a buffer state that blocked any threats emanating from Central Asia against British India. In 1989, the Soviet Union conducted a deliberate withdrawal, leaving an Afghan government and security apparatus that surprised the world by outliving the Soviet Union itself, which dissolved in 1991. The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) did not collapse until April 1992, certainly only because its lifeline, the flow of Soviet subsidy, dried up. These examples demonstrate that those departing powers still retained enough leverage to attain the objectives for which they went to war in the first place. The American-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) coalition is poised to make the fifth such withdrawal by the end of 2014. Using these previous withdrawals as an indicator, the United States should also be able to achieve its strategic objectives despite departing Afghanistan.

Each of these four departures from Afghanistan occurred in a geopolitical environment of competition between great powers: the Great Game and the Cold War. External competition will surely continue to influence post-2014 Afghanistan, as multiple regional and world powers have national interests at stake. This paper examines the lessons from these four previous great power withdrawals, in the context of Afghanistan's long-running, competitive geopolitical environment. It also considers

which of these lessons remain applicable in the post-2014 regional geopolitical environment.

Afghanistan's Geopolitical Environment

Afghanistan's location and geography have indelibly marked its history. It lies precariously on the western flank of the Himalayas at the crossroads between central Asia, the Indian sub-continent, and the Iranian plateau. For eons, traders along the ancient Silk Road crossed or skirted Afghanistan to get to their markets. Armies transited Afghanistan to get to one of the three regions mentioned above. Viewed as a hinterland, few great powers saw value in occupying Afghanistan outright; rather, they viewed it as a buffer. Great powers believed they could control Afghanistan from the outside in order to prevent adversaries from threatening their interests.¹

Afghanistan, like every other state, resides in a unique geopolitical neighborhood, and this deeply influences how it behaves and how other states behave towards it. Daniel Deudney wrote that the most prevalent modern definition of geopolitics is "realism with an emphasis upon geographical factors."² He further elaborated that geopolitics describes "great-power competition in geographically remote regions of the world,"³ exactly the situation that Afghanistan has found itself in for the last two centuries. Furthermore, Joseph Nye described the current state of global conflict and cooperation, writing, "International politics remains a realm of self-help where states face security dilemmas and force plays a considerable role. There are mitigating devices such as the balance of power and international norms, law, and organization, but they have not prevented all wars."⁴ Recognizing this, and the potential benefits gained by all players if Afghanistan stabilizes, could world and regional powers find a way to cooperate towards a common interest in stabilizing Afghanistan? Can the

international community find institutional solutions to Pakistan's problems that persuade it to become a good-faith partner in stabilizing Afghanistan? The answers to these questions will certainly influence the future of both Afghanistan and the region.

History tells us that cooperation in Afghanistan's geopolitical neighborhood is not the norm. From the nineteenth century to the present day, external powers engaged in competition and power politics across the region in pursuit of their own interests. Both the Great Game and the Cold War, described below, brought great power competition to geographically remote Afghanistan.

The Great Game

A classic competition described by realism emerged in the early nineteenth century. By this time, the British Empire had long since established its colonies. It possessed the world's preeminent naval force and controlled about a fourth of the world's landmass and population.⁵ Its economic prosperity relied heavily on its control of the Indian sub-continent. Initially, the British East India Company controlled India, but in 1773, Great Britain "decided that India was too important, fragile, and vast to be administered by a private company."⁶ Thus, Great Britain sent a Governor General to oversee India because it feared other great powers would threaten its interests there. It had no intention of allowing other states to compete in its arena.

During this period, the Russian Empire found itself blocked to its west and southwest by the other great powers of Eurasia. Consequently, it pursued expansion to the east and south towards Central Asia, the only direction it would not run up against another great power. It was widely believed by the other great powers that the Russian Tsar desired what he did not have, a warm-water seaport. By the 1830s, as Russia established control over Central Asia and also formed an alliance with Persia, the British

became alarmed. Tamim Ansary described the view from London: "For Britain, the issue wasn't just a port or two; the very source of British power and wealth seemed at stake. India must be defended! Russian expansion must therefore be blocked! At all costs, Russia must not be allowed to take Afghanistan!"⁷ Thus, Afghanistan found itself wedged between these two empires which were engaged in this game of high politics.

An on-again-off-again competition ensued that spanned much of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The British dubbed the competition 'The Great Game.' Matthew Edwards wrote that 'The Great Game' described the "struggle for political dominance, control, and security conducted by two imperial powers over land and populations whose value lay in their location between the Russian and British Empires."⁸ Competition intensified as both great powers used Central Asia, and Afghanistan in particular, as the terrain on which to compete.⁹ The contest, however, avoided direct confrontation. Instead, as Larry Goodson wrote, both sides engaged in "war by proxy" and "diplomacy by intrigue."¹⁰ But, on two occasions in the nineteenth century, this competition drove British military interventions into Afghanistan. In both instances, Afghans reacted to push the British out, but not without bending to British interests.¹¹

The First Anglo-Afghan War

The First Anglo-Afghan War began in 1838. Within Afghanistan, Dost Mohammed Khan, a strong leader by Afghan standards, had crowned himself Emir in 1826. In comparison to the Afghan Empire that Ahmad Shah Durrani established in the mid-1700s, Dost Mohammed assumed control of a much smaller and fragmented kingdom. Durrani's empire included not only most of modern day Afghanistan, but also extended into modern Iran, Pakistan, and India. Dost Mohammed's realm consisted

only of Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif. Peshawar had fallen to the Sikhs. Kandahar belonged to the new Emir's Pashtun relatives. Herat also remained independent of Kabul.¹²

Before the expansion of the Russian Empire into Central Asia, this "divided, chaotic" situation in Afghanistan suited the British just fine. Britain believed that a strong, united Afghanistan could pose a threat to India just like Ahmad Shah Durrani's dynasty had during the previous century.¹³

Two key events changed British India's strategy and precipitated its decision to deploy military forces into Afghanistan. First, Persians, with Russian support, laid siege to Herat in 1837.¹⁴ Second, although British India already had its own diplomatic envoy in Kabul, the British became extremely concerned when a Russian envoy arrived in Kabul and met with Dost Mohammed. According to Stephen Tanner, "now that the Russians were coming (as the British convinced themselves), an Afghanistan that was either hostile or fragmented had to be corrected."¹⁵ Back in Calcutta, this news set off Governor General Lord George Eden Auckland's alarm bells.

Auckland conceived a plan to replace Dost Mohammed with Shah Shuja, a pliant heir to the Afghan throne whom the British had comfortably tucked away on a pension in Peshawar. Unlike Dost Mohammed who was not a birth heir to the Afghan throne, Shah Shuja was the grandson of Ahmad Shah Durrani.¹⁶ In October 1838, Auckland issued his Simla Manifesto which justified British India's reasons for moving military forces into Afghanistan. This document argued that British India's security required a trustworthy ally to its northwest, and Dost Mohammed did not fit this bill.¹⁷ To Auckland, Dost Mohammed was too strong to be trusted.¹⁸ Auckland additionally wrote that the purpose of his incursion was "to raise up an insurmountable...and lasting barrier to all

encroachments from the Westward and to establish a basis for the extension and maintenance of British influence throughout Central Asia.”¹⁹ British diplomat and historian Martin Ewans has cast aspersions at Auckland’s manifesto, describing it as “a patently dishonest piece of propaganda designed to blacken Dost Mohammed and whitewash Shah Shuja.”²⁰

Thus, the first British military incursion into Afghanistan occurred in 1838. Tanner wrote, “The Great Game for Central Asia ... burst into open warfare, with India as the prize and Afghanistan as the playing field.”²¹ British India deployed an army of 31,800 soldiers, consisting primarily of Sikh warriors alongside several hundred British officers, into Afghanistan to place its pliant king on the Afghan throne and block Russia’s route into India.²² As the British column approached Kabul, Dost Mohammed fled to the north, and Shah Shuja became ruler. For a time, Dost Mohammed led an army of northerners against the British but eventually sought terms and retired to exile in Peshawar on a British pension.²³ Although successful in installing its new puppet king, British India discovered that Shah Shuja could muster neither the support nor the security forces necessary to maintain power in Kabul. Consequently, British military forces remained in Afghanistan longer than originally intended.

Over the next three years, Afghan resentment grew against the occupiers. As the winter of 1841-1842 approached, Pashtun tribesmen rose up against the British and their Sikh-dominated army. Faced with a precarious situation in Kabul, the British attempted a retreat. Along their very insecure line of communications back to India, Pashtun tribesmen ambushed and thoroughly defeated the 4,500-strong British army in

a mountain pass between Kabul and Jalalabad. Only one man made it back to India that winter.²⁴

This defeat highlighted to Great Britain the cost of maintaining a permanent military presence in Afghanistan. But, with national honor at stake, the British sent an “Army of Retribution” back into Afghanistan in 1842 on purely a punitive campaign.²⁵ Once the British had doled out its punishment and restored some semblance of national honor, British troops marched back to India. Simultaneously, the British allowed Dost Mohammed to return to Afghanistan and regain his throne. In exchange, Dost Mohammed agreed to British control of Afghanistan’s foreign affairs. He also agreed that Kandahar and Herat would remain independent and that Peshawar would remain part of British India.²⁶

British Strategic Accomplishments During the First Anglo-Afghan War.

To this day, the First Anglo-Afghan War is remembered as a “disastrous defeat” for Great Britain.²⁷ However, this epitaph may have more to do with the memory of tactical defeat in the mountain pass east of Kabul than on strategic matters. This memory does not do justice to the strategic accomplishments Great Britain achieved as it disengaged. It placed a strong leader in power that prevented Afghanistan from becoming completely ungoverned. Great Britain paid Dost Mohammed a large subsidy that ensured his loyalty and allowed him to maintain his patronage networks. Most significantly, British India assumed control of Afghanistan’s foreign affairs, preventing it from entering into any alliances with Britain’s Russian foes. Ansary concurs, arguing that “you can’t exactly say the British lost the war,”²⁸ and offers the following explanation:

They came out of it with everything they had demanded going in, and they got what they really wanted: a buffer state to block Russian expansion. What's more, they left Afghanistan divided into three parts likely to stay busy fighting one another instead of marching south to threaten India. Plus, they kept Peshawar out of Afghan hands, which was important because Peshawar was in the plains east of the Khyber Pass, an excellent base for marching into India.²⁹

Described by Ansary as a "cold-blooded realist,"³⁰ Dost Mohammed proved to be an effective leader and adept statesman. Up until his death in 1863, Russia did not seriously threaten British interests in Afghanistan. Dost Mohammed used British subsidy to strengthen his patronage networks. He kept his word in not attempting to regain control over Peshawar, recognizing that not attacking Peshawar gave him leverage with the British to keep his subsidy flowing.³¹ Later, with British concurrence, he even expanded his control over southern Afghanistan, bringing both Kandahar and Herat back into his kingdom.³²

The concept of British defeat during the First Anglo-Afghan War also derives from a belief that the British could have achieved the same strategic ends without actually fighting the war.³³ Prior to the war, Dost Mohammad would have willingly signed the same deal with the British that they offered him after the war.³⁴ Why then did the British choose to deploy an Army into Afghanistan? Was it just "Auckland's Folly"³⁵ as the war is also known, or could there have been other reasons? The British viewed Dost Mohammed as too strong a leader to be trusted. Thus, they preferred Shah Shuja, a weaker, but more trustable ruler. The British may also have intended to send a message to Russia. Sending an army of over 30,000 into Afghanistan certainly sent a clear warning to Russia that Britain would fight for Afghanistan. Diplomacy and proxy war alone might not have sent such a strong message.

The Second Anglo-Afghan War

Less than four decades after the First Anglo-Afghan War, the British again marched military forces into Afghanistan, thereby initiating the Second Anglo-Afghan War. Great Power competition throughout Eurasia remained strong in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the mid-1850s, Great Britain built an alliance with France and the Ottoman Empire to defeat the Russians in the Crimean War, preventing Russia from achieving its interest of warm water access through the Dardanelles.³⁶ As a consequence, Russia again focused its national power eastward bringing all of the Central Asian emirs under its sphere of influence during the 1860s.³⁷ The two empires “came to an understanding in 1873 that the area south of the [Amu Darya] River would be considered Afghan territory.”³⁸ Russia also agreed that the British sphere of influence included Afghanistan.³⁹ Nevertheless, with Russia controlling everything north of the Amu Darya River, Great Britain feared that Russia still had aspirations to expand into India and was looking for a reason to get even for the Crimean War.

The most significant cause of the Second Anglo-Afghan War occurred back in England. In 1874, conservatives took power on a “Forward Policy” platform designed to contain the Russian Empire.⁴⁰ Like the previous war, the British reacted to a Russian diplomatic mission to Kabul in 1878 that “raised the stakes” of the Great Game. The Russian mission proposed “a defensive and offensive treaty [with Afghanistan], the placing of Russian troops on Afghan territory and permission to build roads and telegraph lines.”⁴¹ Sher Ali, the Afghan Emir, understood the game being played and made a futile attempt to prevent the Russians from entering his territory. In response, British India, which quickly learned the details of the Russian mission and its intent, launched its own diplomatic mission. The local Pashtun governor in the Khyber Pass

region threatened the use of force if the British delegation continued towards Kabul. The British mission returned to Peshawar. With honor again at stake and a new group of politicians elected on a containment platform in office, London decided to employ military force to achieve its interests.⁴²

In 1878, British India deployed three armies totaling 33,500 men into Afghanistan with objectives in Kabul and Kandahar.⁴³ Unlike the first war when it took several years for Afghan resentment to build, it took just weeks this time. In September 1879, Afghan tribal forces massacred a contingent of British leadership at the British Residency in Kabul. Quickly relocating more combat forces to Kabul, the British occupied defensive terrain and decisively defeated the Afghan tribesman in December 1879. Seven months later, an Afghan tribal army marched east from Herat and defeated the British at Maiwand, resulting in 1,000 additional British deaths. The British survivors, however, retreated to Kandahar. A force that quickly marched south from Kabul relieved them. This force later defeated the army from Herat.⁴⁴ But, London had again learned that occupying Afghanistan with military forces had a high cost in blood and treasure. As such, the British left Afghanistan for the second time in the summer of 1880.⁴⁵

British Strategic Accomplishments During the Second Anglo-Afghan War.

Despite their tactical struggles, the British again achieved significant and enduring strategic objectives. In 1879, while waging the war, Great Britain entered into the Treaty of Gandamak with the Afghan Emir who ceded both territory and control of Afghanistan's foreign policy to the British in exchange for a subsidy and assured defensive support against unprovoked aggression.⁴⁶ This treaty maintained British India's formal control over Peshawar, the Northwest Frontier, and Quetta, laying the

foundation for the future Durand Line and eventual international boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁴⁷

Additionally, as British India withdrew its forces back to India in the summer of 1880, it installed Abdur Rahman onto the Afghan throne. Like Dost Mohammed, Rahman was a strong leader whom the British believed could hold Afghanistan together. In exchange for British support, he recognized the Treaty of Gandamak. Rahman believed that British interests in Afghanistan promised a better future than Russian interests. Rahman stated that the British desired a strong Afghan government to serve as a “true ally and barrier,” whereas the Russians desired “to see Afghanistan divided into pieces and very weak.”⁴⁸ He solidified his patronage networks, and the British more than willingly helped him solve Afghanistan’s problems by providing him a subsidy.⁴⁹ Barnett Rubin explained that “the British sought to stabilize their northwest frontier and keep Russia at bay by supporting a ruler dependent on them for resources to subdue the peoples of Afghanistan and defeat rivals.”⁵⁰ Like the aftermath of the first war, the British achieved their strategic aims in the Great Game by maintaining Afghanistan as an enduring buffer against Russian advances into South Asia. Great Britain also kept the Pashtun nation divided, preventing Afghanistan from becoming so strong that it could seize Peshawar and pose its own threat to British India.

The Third Anglo-Afghan War

In 1919, a third Anglo-Afghan war occurred, but was less about the power politics of great powers and more about Afghanistan’s own ambition to reunite the Pashtun nation. By the early twentieth century, the Russian Empire had weakened, and the Great Game cooled off. In 1905, Russia lost the Russo-Japanese war and began focusing internally to rebuild its military strength. In 1907, Great Britain and Russia

signed a convention that resolved their disputes in Afghanistan and Persia.⁵¹ In 1914, Great Britain allied with Russia and France at the outbreak of World War I. With little need to maintain significant military strength on the northwest frontier of British India, Great Britain thinned its military ranks on the frontier so that more manpower could go to the war effort in Europe. Simultaneously, anti-colonial movements in India further insinuated to Afghans that the British Empire had weakened.⁵²

Unlike the previous two wars, Afghanistan initiated this conflict, attacking east into British India in an effort to undo the Treaty of Gandamak and restore Afghan control of Pashtun areas in modern day Pakistan. Overestimating its own strength and misperceiving a weakening of British India after World War I, Afghanistan failed to achieve its objectives.⁵³ Instead of the weakness that the Afghans perceived, Great Britain's military technology had improved significantly since the first two wars. After initially losing some frontier outposts, Britain reorganized and pushed west into Afghanistan seizing border areas near Kandahar and the western entrance of the Khyber Pass. It even used air power to bomb Jalalabad and Kabul.⁵⁴ Great Britain saw no value in sending military forces further into Afghanistan, and Amanullah, the Afghan Emir, quickly realized that he could not gain control the Pashtun-inhabited lands of British India. Amanullah met with the Governor General of British India and agreed to a peace treaty.

British Strategic Accomplishments During the Third Anglo-Afghan War.

In the aftermath of the Third Anglo-Afghan War, Great Britain again pulled its forces out of the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan and maintained conditions that protected its interests in India. In the Treaty of Rawalpindi, the British agreed to give Afghanistan back control over its foreign affairs.⁵⁵ This was an easy

concession as the new Soviet Union came out of World War I weak and less threatening. The successful communist revolution had taken control of the former Russian Empire, further diminishing competition. During the subsequent years, Soviet Premier Vladimir Lenin focused more internally than externally, temporarily ending the great power competition centered on Afghanistan.⁵⁶ In exchange for Afghan self-determination, Great Britain cut Amanullah's subsidy and forced him to "accept the permanence of the Durand Line."⁵⁷ "Free and independent in its international and external affairs," Afghanistan slowly began leaning towards the Soviet Union in its foreign affairs.⁵⁸ Lenin became the first world leader to recognize Afghanistan as a nation in 1919, sent his first envoy to Afghanistan in 1920, and began providing subsidy to Afghanistan.⁵⁹

The Cold War

In the years following World War II, British influence in South and Central Asia declined as the world order changed. In 1947, British India partitioned into the two independent states of India and Pakistan. The creation of Pakistan, with its existential fear of envelopment by India, increased the number of external powers jockeying to influence Afghan domestic affairs. Globally, a bipolar world emerged with the United States and Soviet Union on opposite sides. In South Asia, the United States assumed the mantle of balancer against the Soviets. Like the British had a century earlier, the United States adopted a strategy of blocking the Soviet Union from direct access to the oil rich Gulf States and warm water ports of South Asia.

During this period, Afghanistan took advantage of its position as a geopolitical buffer state. It exploited the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union by extracting subsidy from both. The United States and Soviet Union took on very similar

roles as Great Britain and Russia had played in the previous century, with both competing to “maintain influence with Afghan rulers.”⁶⁰ Afghanistan used the resources gained to begin to modernize its military, irrigation systems, road networks, and education systems. By the 1970s, two-thirds of the government’s revenue came from foreign aid.⁶¹

The Soviet-Afghan War

In the late 1970s, it began to appear that the Soviets might win the game for Afghanistan. In 1978, the Khalqis, one of the two communist parties in Afghanistan, conducted a successful coup against Afghan President Mohammad Daud’s government. Khalqi leader Nur Mohammed Taraki abandoned the country’s policy of balancing one superpower off against the other. Instead, his new government entered into a direct alliance with the Soviet Union. This “Treaty of Friendship” took Afghanistan down the path towards the Soviet invasion of 1979 and the American and Pakistani response of arming the *mujahideen* throughout the 1980s.

Domestically, the *Khalq* government implemented reforms that created significant resistance from Afghanistan’s conservative rural population. It attempted to institute radical reforms to land ownership, education, and family law. Additionally, the government quickly moved to destroy its domestic opponents—the competing communist party, the traditional rural land-owners, the old military establishment, and the Islamic clergy.⁶² Rural Afghans, who rarely felt even the ripple effects of policies made in Kabul, viewed the reforms as a radical change and became disaffected. A rebellion fomented, giving rise to the *mujahideen* movement. In response, the Soviets sent military advisors and equipment to assist the *Khalq* government. In turn, Pakistan and the United States began providing *mujahideen* groups with cross-border covert

training.⁶³ The situation for the *Khalq* government deteriorated throughout 1979 with rebellions and attacks against it in Herat, Jalalabad, and elsewhere. Mass defections from the military occurred.⁶⁴ Then, another coup occurred within the *Khalq* regime on September 14, 1979, with Hafizullah Amin killing and taking power from Taraki.⁶⁵

Amin's ascendance triggered Soviet intervention. Both the Soviets and Amin distrusted each other. The Soviets feared that Amin would seek assistance from the west to quell the internal unrest that had risen in response to the Taraki government's radical reforms. From the Soviet perspective, "the onward march of communism was irreversible, and there was no way that a communist regime, once in power, could be allowed to fail."⁶⁶ The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on December 24, 1979.⁶⁷ On December 27th, *Soviet spetsnaz* troops attacked the Presidential Palace killing Amin. With Soviet assistance, Babrak Karmal entered Afghanistan from exile in the Soviet Union to assume power.⁶⁸ Karmal led Afghanistan's other communist party, the *Parcham* Party. Within a week, the Soviets pushed over eighty thousand troops into Afghanistan and controlled all major cities and the Afghan government. They quickly established themselves in the population centers and along the major road networks. To the *mujahideen* resistance who controlled Afghanistan's rural areas, the Soviet's replacement of its *Khalq* adversary with a *Parcham* adversary made no difference. A "national revolution against the Parchami puppet government and its Soviet supporters" ensued.⁶⁹

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan shocked the region and the West. It signaled a shift in Soviet behavior that confirmed what the West had always suspected—that the Soviets had "an inherent expansionist tendency."⁷⁰ To counter the Soviet threat, the

United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other regional opponents began providing substantial aid to the *mujahideen*. Each saw its national interests threatened. The United States and Saudi Arabia had an important national interest in preventing the Soviets from expanding into Afghanistan, which it could use as a jumping off point to threaten the oil-rich Gulf States.

Pakistan saw even more significant stakes. It viewed the Soviets on its western border as an existential threat. Pakistan's archrival, India, had close ties with the Soviet Union and "refus[ed] to condemn the Soviet invasion in public."⁷¹ This sent a clear message to Islamabad that if the Soviets achieved success in Afghanistan, Pakistan would find itself in a pincer between India and India's superpower ally.⁷² To Pakistan, it was a foregone conclusion that once the Soviets had conquered Afghanistan, it would only be a matter of time before the Soviets instigated Pashtun and Baluch separatist movements in Pakistan.⁷³

Second only to defeating the Soviet threat, Pakistan wanted to install a friendly future government in Afghanistan that would ensure long-term strategic depth against India. Pakistan's interests under President Zia-ul-Haq drove the manner with which it distributed foreign arms and equipment to *mujahideen* groups within its territory. Zia, who seized power in 1977, developed his own grassroots political support by "preach[ing] political religion fervently."⁷⁴ With U.S. and Saudi resources, Pakistan, through its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate, controlled the training and equipping of *mujahideen* groups. With an eye to the future, the ISI pushed funding to groups that it believed would best serve Pakistani interests as future leaders of a post-war Afghan government. The preponderance of support went to fundamentalist groups

like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's *Hezb-e Islami*, known for both its anti-Soviet and anti-western beliefs. Pakistan chose these fundamentalists because it believed they would keep Indian influence out of post-war Afghanistan and would also support the Pakistani cause in Kashmir.⁷⁵ So long as the *mujahideen* remained effective against the Soviets, the United States never exerted pressure on Pakistan to shift resources to more moderate groups. American, Saudi, and Pakistani efforts to balance against the Soviets worked. By the mid-1980s, Afghanistan had become the Soviet Union's "bleeding wound."⁷⁶

In 1985, when Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev took power, he recognized that Soviet strategy in Afghanistan needed to change. He believed that "time was running out on their Afghan adventure" and pursued a new Soviet strategy to modernize Afghanistan in a last-ditch effort to salvage his country's investment.⁷⁷ This strategy had three components: governmental reform, controlling population centers and major road networks, and building an Afghan security apparatus strong enough to eventually take over the war.⁷⁸

The Soviets had lost confidence in Karmal's leadership as President. Like the British, who had placed Pashtun strongmen into power as they disengaged, the Soviets did the same. Mohammed Najibullah, the chief of Afghanistan's equivalent of the KGB, ascended to the Presidency in 1986. A Pashtun whom the Soviets hoped might draw large numbers of the dominant ethnic group away from the *mujahideen*, Najibullah implemented broad reforms in 1986. These included implementing an Islamic legal system, a reconciliation program, and a multi-party system. He even changed the name

of the communist party to Hizb-I Watan, or “Homeland Party.”⁷⁹ None of Najibullah’s reforms, however, altered the grinding stalemate.

The Second part of the Soviet Union’s strategy focused on securing Afghanistan’s major population centers and “ring road.” The Soviet Union surged an additional 26,000 soldiers into Afghanistan bringing its troop strength to 108,000 in an effort to clamp down control over this key terrain.⁸⁰ By holding this key terrain and conducting occasional “search and destroy” missions into the Afghan countryside, the Soviet Union helped Najibullah’s government stay in power and also created enough security along lines of communication for its own withdrawal out of Afghanistan.⁸¹

Finally, the Soviet Union pursued an effort to indigenize the war. It expanded the Afghan military strength to 252,900. With this expansion came a dramatic increase in training and equipping efforts for the Afghan army, police, and intelligence service. Moreover, the Soviets employed 1,800 military advisors, partnered with Afghan military formations from battalion through division levels. These advisors initially enabled partnered operations with the Soviet 40th Army and eventually transitioned Afghan forces over to conducting independent operations.⁸²

The Geneva Accords, signed in April 1988 by the United States, the Soviet Union, Pakistan and Afghanistan, served as the diplomatic instrument for the Soviet withdrawal.⁸³ It set a timeline for the Soviet departure from Afghanistan, specifying the removal of “all Soviet forces by February 15, 1989.”⁸⁴ The agreement also affirmed the sovereignty of Afghanistan and its right to self- determination, its right to be free from foreign intervention or interference, and the right of its refugees to return home.⁸⁵ By 1989, the last Soviet combat troops departed Afghanistan.⁸⁶

Soviet Strategic Accomplishments During the Soviet-Afghan War.

For the Soviet Union, the war in Afghanistan was an abject failure. Unlike the three previous British withdrawals which occurred without compromising many strategic interests, it is impossible to argue that the Soviets did the same. The Iron Curtain fell in 1989, a byproduct of the Soviet Union's weakening from the war.⁸⁷ Moreover, the Soviet Union itself collapsed in 1991, and its war in Afghanistan played a large role in bringing about that downfall.

However, a more subtle argument can be made that the Soviet Union executed a respectable withdrawal that very well could have achieved its interests in Afghanistan. If not for the wildcard event of the USSR's collapse, the post-Soviet DRA appeared to be capable of holding off the Pakistan-backed *mujahideen*. This surprised many specialists, who believed that the Soviet-backed DRA would fall very quickly. Les Grau, a respected authority on the Afghan-Soviet War, wrote, "Ironically, in the case of the USSR's withdrawal, the fall of the DRA was conditioned more by political change in the supporting government (fall of USSR) than in Afghanistan itself."⁸⁸ When the last Soviet combat soldier departed in 1989, "it was far from clear if the Najibullah regime would last more than a few months."⁸⁹ The Pakistani ISI predicted to "Prime Minister Bhutto that Kabul would fall in a matter of days."⁹⁰ The CIA reported the same to President George H.W. Bush.⁹¹ Despite these predictions, the DRA government lasted almost three more years, and an argument can be made that it would have survived much longer had the flow of Soviet aid not stopped in 1991.

Four specific Soviet actions during and after its withdrawal resulted in the DRA's success from 1989 through 1992. First, the USSR put its strongman, Najibullah, into power. Adept at Afghan power politics, Najibullah maintained his government through

the same patronage networks that previous emirs had used. Second, during the years leading up to its withdrawal, the USSR indigenized the war effort, training and equipping the DRA's security apparatus. This security apparatus controlled the cities and major routes within the country. Third, the USSR left military advisors and trainers in Afghanistan after its combat troops departed. These advisory teams helped "coordinate logistics and air strikes" for the DRA security forces.⁹² The teams also helped maintain the confidence in the DRA government that they were not in the fight alone. As a result, the DRA's security sector continued to strengthen over the next two years. Finally, and most importantly, the USSR kept the desperately needed aid flowing to Najibullah's government. This steady, reliable flow of Soviet subsidy served as the lifeblood that kept the DRA government functioning. Thomas Barfield explained that Najibullah, "like the British-funded emirs before him, ... use[d] continuing aid from the Soviet Union to consolidate his power through networks of patronage."⁹³

Counter-intuitively, the Soviet withdrawal also improved Najibullah's combat force ratios. Without an 'occupying power' in Afghanistan, the *mujahideen's* ideological cause weakened. Victorious in driving the Soviet infidel occupiers out of their country, large numbers of *mujahideen* stopped fighting and went home. Les Grau explained that "they had joined the jihad to fight the Soviets and could care less who was in power in Kabul."⁹⁴ Using Soviet money and weapons, Najibullah also convinced about twenty percent of the *mujahideen* groups to switch sides and another forty percent to agree to ceasefires.⁹⁵ Only the most fundamentalist *mujahideen* groups, supported by Pakistan and Iran, continued fighting Najibullah's government.

As the DRA army became stronger, *mujahideen* ineptitude grew. Pakistani-supported *mujahideen* groups struggled to transform from irregular tactics to conventional tactics and never agreed to the composition of the future Afghan government. Najibullah's forces subdued a coup attempt in early 1990 and defeated the *mujahideen*'s initial conventional attack against Jalalabad in the spring of 1990.⁹⁶ Although, the *mujahideen* did score some successes, Najibullah's forces maintained control over Afghanistan's major cities and road networks for two and a half years after the last Soviet combat troops departed. No one would have predicted that the Najibullah regime would outlive the Soviet Union, but that was exactly what it did.

The fall of the Soviet Union in December 1991 spelled doom for the DRA. Once Najibullah could not fund his patronage network, his security apparatus fell apart. His security forces' morale plummeted, and as often happens in Afghanistan, factions began switching sides in hopes of being on the winning side when the dust cleared. General Rashid Dostom, a key Uzbek commander from the north, joined Massoud's forces and laid siege to Kabul. One by one, the rest of Najibullah's patronage network jumped ship.⁹⁷ On April 27, 1992, *mujahideen* forces entered Kabul and Najibullah's DRA finally fell.⁹⁸ In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Anthony H. Cordesman stated that "Najibullah did not fall because the Afghan forces supporting him lacked training, equipment, and sustainability ... He fell because he could no longer pay for the military and payoff tribal militias."⁹⁹

Application of Lessons

Post-2014 Geopolitical Situation

Policy makers and strategists looking beyond 2014 should consider the lessons from the aforementioned great power withdrawals, but they should also consider the

current geopolitical situation. The situation in Afghanistan will not exactly resemble the situations following any of the withdrawals described in this paper. It would be a mistake to blindly apply these lessons from history without considering the current geopolitical situation. The past will not provide all the answers, but as Williamson Murray and Richard Sinnreich wrote, it can “suggest possible paths to the future.”¹⁰⁰ Undoubtedly, British and Soviet histories have provided the U.S.-led coalition some options to be considered if applied in the context of today’s situation.

Today’s situation in Afghanistan has both similarities and differences to the previous periods described in this paper. Like other periods, it appears that competition between external actors will heavily influence the post-2014 Afghanistan. During the Great Game and Cold War, two great powers with diametrically opposed interests competed to prevent Afghanistan from threatening their interests. To varying degrees since 1979, regional powers like Pakistan, Iran, India and Saudi Arabia also pursued their national interests in Afghanistan. However, following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the world’s superpowers either declined or lost interest in Afghanistan. Only Pakistan saw the benefit of a continuation of the war. It still wanted to ensure a friendly and pliant neighbor to the west. Pakistan had lost three wars to India and pursued its international affairs based on defensive realism. To survive long term, Pakistan still saw a vital interest in achieving strategic depth against India.¹⁰¹ Even during the current war, Pakistan has played a double game by publicly joining the western world in the war on terror while also supporting and providing sanctuary to Taliban and Haqqani leaders and insurgents within its territory.¹⁰²

A new Great Game in Afghanistan is emerging with many more players than past examples. It appears certain that world and regional powers will not sit idly by as happened in the 1990s. The geopolitical dynamics of the region have changed. Russia is reasserting its power regionally. China has emerged as a potential revisionist power. India is rising and seeks to balance against China by achieving broader influence across Asia. Pakistan remains driven by its security dilemma with India. Iran has a long history of pursuing its interests in the western and central regions of Afghanistan. And, America learned the ramifications of ignoring Afghanistan on 9/11.¹⁰³ The players in this new Great Game all desire a stable Afghanistan, but they desire stability on their own terms. Each player's terms do not necessarily converge with the terms acceptable to the other players. Moreover, each player's interests in Afghanistan lie at a different point on the continuum between vital and peripheral. None of the players would desire a stable Afghanistan if stability included a hostile government in Kabul. None would want stability if it meant that their adversary achieved better access to resources than they did. None would accept stability if it meant a security dilemma for their own country. None, except Pakistan and possibly China, would desire stability that included a return of the Taliban.

Furthermore, Afghanistan itself has changed. Thomas Barfield explained two key changes within Afghanistan due to the war with the Soviets. He wrote, "The successful resistance strategy of making the country ungovernable for the Soviet occupier also ended up making Afghanistan ungovernable for the Afghans themselves."¹⁰⁴ None of the Afghan resistance groups could consolidate enough power and legitimacy "to restore political order without resort to continual armed conflict."¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, he wrote, "Afghanistan found itself without world-power patrons for the first time in 150 years and

hence had no significant sources of outside revenue with which to fund a central government. [Afghanistan] could no longer right itself as it had done so many times in the past.”¹⁰⁶ This situation gave rise to the Taliban in the 1994, which despite its harsh form of governance restored some semblance of political order with its tyrannical rule and Islamic justice system.

After September 11, 2001, the US-led coalition drove the Taliban and its Al Qaeda guests from Afghanistan. But, the coalition never completely succeeded in helping the new Afghan government restore political order. The Taliban regrouped in Pakistan and by mid-decade had established an insurgency throughout the Pashtun belt of southern and eastern Afghanistan. Given the current Afghan government’s security apparatus and international backing, it is unlikely that the Taliban will repeat its consolidation of power across Afghanistan like it did in the late 1990s. As opposed to 1994 when the Afghan people rallied around the Taliban without fully understanding the nature of the harsh, conservative government it would impose, they now view the Taliban with eyes wide open. More than half of Afghans view the Taliban as the “biggest threat” to Afghanistan and over 86 percent oppose the presence of the Taliban and “jihadi fighters from other countries.”¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, the Taliban still have the capacity to control large swaths of Afghanistan’s rural areas, especially in the south and east. In 2013, both General Dempsey and General Dunford stated that the Taliban will present a persistent threat to Afghanistan, but that the threat will not be “existential.”¹⁰⁸

At the same time, an argument can be made that the NATO coalition has brought some significant improvements to Afghan society. A US Department of Defense report to Congress in November 2013 asserted that over the last decade “Afghanistan has

made the largest percentage gain of any county in the world in basic health and development indicators.”¹⁰⁹ The report specified that school attendance has increased by over 800 percent, male life expectancy increased from 37 to 56 years, cell phone usage increased from five to 60 percent of the population, and internet access went from all-but-nonexistent to 65 percent of the population.¹¹⁰ It remains unclear whether the Afghan government and its international backers can sustain this momentum going forward.

Strategy Recommendation for the 2014 Withdrawal

History will likely judge the United States’ withdrawal from Afghanistan as something short of victory. But, like the Soviets and British before them, the United States can still achieve its strategic interests in Afghanistan and throughout the region. In 2009, President Obama specified two core goals for the war in Afghanistan: “to defeat al-Qaeda and to prevent future safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”¹¹¹ Arguably, the United States has achieved these two goals, but this achievement may not be permanent. Furthermore, in a 2014 Congressional Research Service report, Catherine Dale listed the following U.S. interests at stake across the region:

... countering Al Qaeda and other violent extremists; preventing nuclear proliferation; preventing nuclear confrontation between nuclear-armed states; standing up for American values, including basic human rights and the protection of women; and preserving the United States’ ability to exercise leadership on the world stage.¹¹²

These goals and interests are broad, pertaining just as much to Pakistan, India, and Iran as they do to Afghanistan. But, they also highlight that Afghanistan does not need to become a model democracy for the United States to achieve strategic success. A somewhat stable Afghanistan that does not revert to a safe haven for terrorism would likely suit America’s interests just fine.

As U.S. strategists develop the 'ways' and 'means' to achieve these 'ends,' they should consider both lessons from previous withdrawals and the new geopolitical situation. Past lessons like subsidizing and advising the Afghan government and security forces remain relevant in 2014, whereas, lessons such as placing a Pashtun strongman into power is probably no longer applicable. It would be near impossible for the coalition to square such a strategy with its commitment to Afghan democracy. As such, the United States should pursue a strategy that both supports the continued development of the Afghan government and induces international cooperation in an attempt to prevent the disruptive new Great Game that seems so likely.

To support the continued development of Afghan government, the international community must first fund it, then if possible continue to advise it. On its own, the Afghan government will not have the capacity to fund itself and its security apparatus. Over 95 percent of Afghanistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) presently comes from donor aid, as well as, over two-thirds of its government expenditures.¹¹³ Despite average growth near ten percent, growth alone will not close this gap anytime in the next decade.¹¹⁴ Hence, just like the Soviet and British withdrawals, the predictable flow of aid to the current Afghan government will be the key determinant of its ability to stay in power. In 2012, the World Bank warned "that an abrupt aid cutoff could lead to fiscal implosion, loss of control over the security sector, the collapse of political authority, and possible civil war."¹¹⁵ Moreover, it estimated that Afghanistan would need "\$3.9 billion per year through 2024 to boost development" plus another "\$4.1 billion per year" to fund the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).¹¹⁶ In his testimony before the House Armed Services Committee in February 2013, Cordesman drew the same conclusion

about funding the ANSF. He attributed the collapse of Najibullah's military forces to "erratic funding."¹¹⁷ He further testified, "If the US wants the ANSF to be successful, it must be prepared to pay what it takes on a contingency basis for as long as it takes."¹¹⁸ Furthermore, he stated that "funding the ANSF will be pointless if the US does not also ensure that enough civil aid will be available to keep the civil economy from gravely weakening or imploding."¹¹⁹

In 2012, international donors pledged to provide much of this aid at the Tokyo Donors Conference and NATO's Chicago Summit. However, pledging aid and delivering aid are two different things, especially the farther in time one moves beyond 2014. Congress and its international counterparts must appropriate the funds. Stephen Biddle argues that the more time that goes by the more difficult it will be to convince the U.S. Congress to appropriate funding to Afghanistan. He posits that the war will become "a contest in stamina between Congress and the Taliban."¹²⁰ It will only take one front page insult to the United States before Congress and the American people's patience runs out.¹²¹ President Karzai's public criticism of the United States and refusal to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) have already made Americans question the cost-benefit analysis of supporting Afghanistan, especially in this time of increasing fiscal austerity. It will take serious domestic leadership to continually re-convince the American people and Congress that the several billion dollars required each year to support the Afghan government and ANSF is "a pittance" compared to the hundred plus billion spent annually to fight the war with American soldiers.¹²²

U.S. strategy should also consider another lesson from previous withdrawals: advisory support to Afghanistan's government and security apparatus. The Soviet Union

spent its last few years of the war building an indigenous Afghan security apparatus. Following the Soviet Union's withdrawal of combat forces, it left both military and civilian advisors who helped fill critical capability gaps and further professionalize the DRA's forces. This commitment maintained the confidence of the DRA and provided critical capabilities. It also undoubtedly helped Najibullah's regime defeat *mujahedeen* offensives.

For the American-led coalition, building the ANSF has been an ongoing task since 2002. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) implemented an indigenous strategy in earnest to 'Afghanize' the war in 2009. As Les Grau explained, Najibullah's security forces actually got better between 1989 and 1991 with Soviet advisors in an advisory role.¹²³ One should expect that the same can happen beyond 2014, and U.S. and NATO advisors will be critical to this end. This strategy started with a two-year surge of military and civilian capabilities intended to build momentum against the insurgency while simultaneously expanding the ANSF. Then, the coalition began transferring responsibilities to the ANSF. In June 2013, the ANSF reached a key milestone, assuming "lead responsibility for security all across Afghanistan."¹²⁴ The ANSF's strength already approaches its expected peak of 352,000 soldiers and police before it is expected to drop back to 228,500 after the coalition withdrawal.¹²⁵ However, the growth of the force does necessarily not equate to the growth of all the systems and capabilities required within the force. The ANSF still has challenges with logistics and critical capabilities like aviation, medical evacuation, and air and ground based fires. Furthermore, it has not fully established its air force.

The United States intends to leave an advisory force in Afghanistan beyond 2014, but will do so only if the Afghan President signs a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). If Afghan President Hamid Karzai's perceived truculence and refusal to sign the BSA results in the United States adopting what has become known as the "zero option," the future capability and capacity of the ANSF could be in jeopardy. A zero option would mean the withdrawal of all U.S. forces including advisors and critical enablers from Afghanistan.¹²⁶ Certainly, NATO countries would follow the United States' lead in this regard. General Dunford described mere talk of a zero option as "damaging," and Ambassador Dobbins stated that he believed a zero option would result in "widespread violence."¹²⁷ In a February 2014 phone conversation with President Karzai, President Obama told him, "The longer we go without a BSA, the more likely it will be that any post-2014 U.S. mission will be smaller in scale and ambition."¹²⁸ Resolution of this issue remains in Afghan hands; the longer it takes, the higher the potential for a smaller-than-optimal advisory force or even no force at all.

Aid and advice alone guarantee little if Pakistan, Iran, India, China, and Russia, among others, pursue divergent interests within Afghanistan. Thus, the second part of this strategy recommendation may be just as crucial as providing subsidy. The United States, using all its elements of national power, should work to persuade, incentivize, or even coerce the other players to cooperate towards a goal of stabilizing Afghanistan. However, American interest in Afghanistan will diminish once combat forces depart making this strategy difficult to keep on course. Xenia Dormandy and Michael Keating explain that U.S. interests in Afghanistan will wane regardless of whether a BSA is signed. They believe that, unless "Afghanistan once again becomes an incubator for

transnational terrorism,” the United States will shift focus to other parts of the world where more vital interests are at stake.¹²⁹ Conversely, they believe that Afghanistan’s neighbors—Pakistan, India, and Iran—“have an immediate stake in a secure, stable Afghanistan” and will become more important players.¹³⁰ The problem with these players is that, left to their own volitions, they will undoubtedly compete with each other through proxies. It will take the United States’ leadership and commitment of money to keep the Afghan government upright and prevent these other players’ competition from destabilizing the country.

The United States should attempt to apply “smart power”¹³¹ to convince competitors to cooperate in Afghanistan. Each of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council has somewhat convergent interests regarding Afghanistan in that they share interests in defeating Al Qaeda and preventing terrorist safe havens. Additionally, India and Iran also share these interests. Pakistan may as well, but its overwhelming security dilemma with India could drive it in a divergent direction from the rest of the players in the game. Can the United States and others exert enough influence to assuage Pakistani fears of envelopment by India?

I believe the answer is uncertain, but still worth pursuing. It appears that the United States is clearly favoring India over Pakistan in its international relations which will likely push Pakistan further towards a divergent strategy. For example, the United States entered into a nuclear energy agreement with India in October 2008 that made India the only country in the world not to have signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to be permitted to purchase nuclear materials from the rest of the world.¹³² The United States has not offered the same sort of deal to Pakistan. Additionally, in an effort

to balance against China's rise, the United States has developed increasingly closer ties to New Delhi. In September 2013, the United States and India issued a joint declaration on defense cooperation, another measure the United States has not offered to Pakistan.¹³³

Pakistan sees itself as a dependable ally to the United States in times of need, but has not received the same commitment from the United States in return. Pakistan stood as allies with the United States during the Cold War, the Soviet-Afghan War, and the current war in Afghanistan. U.S. 'abandonment' in time of need is now deeply embedded in the Pakistani psyche, causing a 'trust deficit.' Pakistan perceived that the United States failed to assist it during its war with India in 1971. As a result, Pakistan lost more than half its population when East Pakistan (Bangladesh) seceded. Pakistan also believed the United States betrayed it just after it helped the United States defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan. In 1990, the United States sanctioned Pakistan due to its nuclear program. These sanctions cancelled delivery of advanced weapons that Pakistan believed it needed to defend against India, including F-16 fighter aircraft that Islamabad had already paid for.¹³⁴ Pakistan likely expects American abandonment again after its 2014 withdrawal from Afghanistan. As a result, Pakistan will likely pursue hedging strategies to protect its own interests. A logical hedging strategy would be the same one Pakistan pursued in the 1990s when it supported the *jihadis* and then the Taliban to bring about a government in Kabul unfriendly to India.

Ultimately, the United States should adopt 'ways' in its strategy that do not again alienate Pakistan. To do this, it must carefully balance relationships with both Pakistan and India. The United States is unique in that it is probably the only country in the world

that can have a stabilizing influence on these bitter enemies—similar to the influence the United States has, at times, had on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Recognizing that Pakistan will often act in ways contrary to international norms, America must find a way to “disagree with Pakistan without being disagreeable.”¹³⁵ Too much is at stake in the region for the United States to overreact to Pakistani misbehavior like it has in the past. William Dalrymple wrote that Afghanistan’s stability depends on “India and Pakistan see[ing] the instability in Afghanistan as a common challenge to be jointly managed rather than a battlefield on which to escalate their long, bitter feud.”¹³⁶ Bruce Riedel recommends that the United States should continue to provide targeted aid to Pakistan and also to take a leadership role in resolving regional security issues. Specifically, he advocates for a combination of civil and military aid aimed at improving both civil education and military counterinsurgency and counterterrorism capabilities. This will demonstrate a continued commitment to Pakistan without threatening India. But, most of all, he believes that U.S. leadership in solving the Kashmir issue is the key for regional stability and will make both Pakistan and Afghanistan more normal states.¹³⁷

Conclusion

An understanding of the four previous great power withdrawals should inform policy and strategy for the 2014 withdrawal. Outgoing great powers have demonstrated that it is possible to achieve strategic aims even after pulling combat forces out of Afghanistan. Both the British and the Soviets reverted to “light footprint”¹³⁸ approaches that hinged on the provision of subsidy to keep the Afghan government both strong enough to maintain internal stability and reliant upon the departing power. This reliance created enough passive loyalty to the departing great power to allow the achievement of that power’s strategic goals. The British succeeded in this strategy for the better part of

80 years. The Soviet Union also succeeded in applying this strategy, albeit for a much shorter period of time. Additionally, the Soviet Union's efforts to indigenize the fight as it departed produced unexpectedly positive results from 1989 through 1991. Each of the previous withdrawals, however, relied on a strong Afghan leader, a condition in which the United States has little control over in 2014. Afghans themselves will have to decide which leader will best serve their interests beyond 2014.

The evolving international environment and geopolitical situation surrounding Afghanistan may make some of the lessons from the past either more or less applicable to today's situation. During the Great Game and the Cold War, two dominant powers competed against each other to achieve their interests, with Afghanistan as their playing field. The post-2014 environment appears to pit many more powers against each other—superpower(s), regional powers, neighboring states, and even non-state actors. As Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid wrote, "The game has become too deadly and has attracted too many players; it now resembles less a chess match than the Afghan game of *buzkashi*, with Afghanistan playing the role of the goat carcass fought over by innumerable teams."¹³⁹

The power politics of realism drove the Great Game and the Cold War; the future stability of Afghanistan may require a different approach. Cooperation among the players in this new game may be the only way to prevent the ominous game of *buzkashi* described above. Thus, in addition to the provision of subsidy and advisors, the United States should apply both hard and soft power to persuade or coerce other potential players in the game to cooperate. U.S. interests in Afghanistan will likely diminish beyond 2014 making the application of power more difficult. However, a complete

disengagement brings with it the risk of either losing the follow-on Great Game or the requirement to send forces back in. A better approach would be to remain engaged leading the international community towards a cooperative solution, while still hedging with less visible, light footprint approaches in a manner that resembles British and Soviets actions of the past.

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