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WAR FOR THE SAKE OF WAR

NATO, the United States and its vassal-states in Afghanistan

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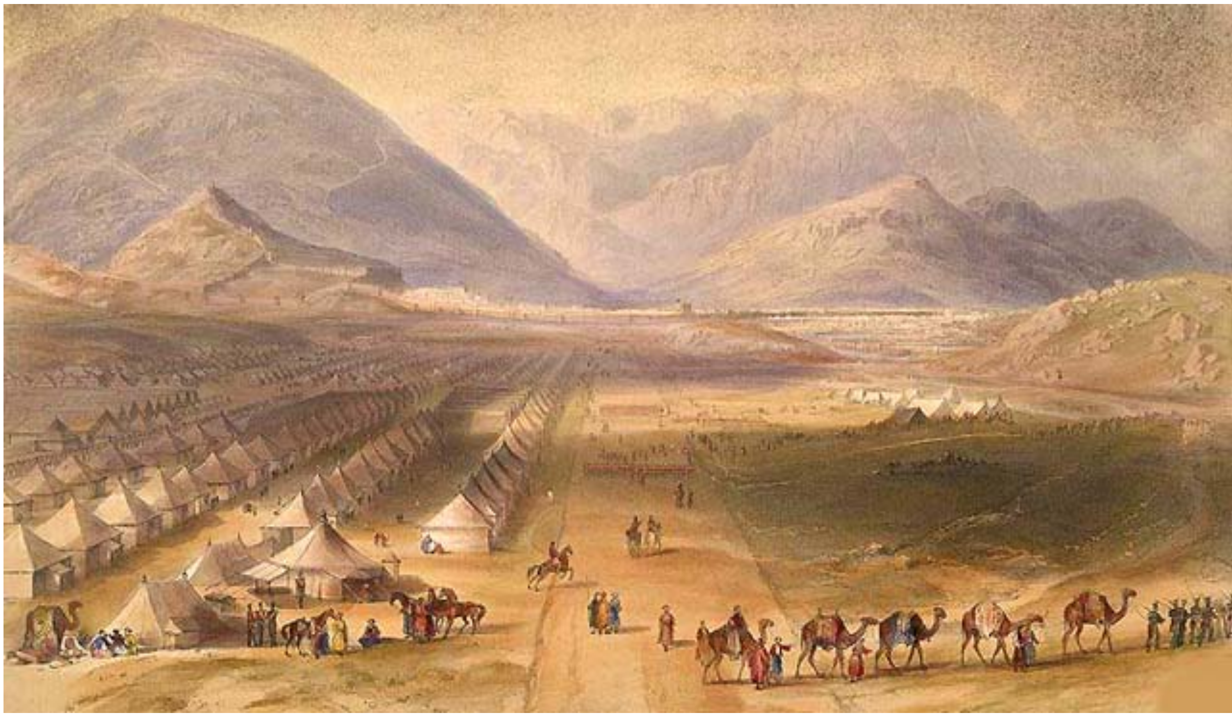
AS FAR BACK as it is possible to trace the history of what is now Afghanistan, it has alternately been invaded — by among others the Median, Persian, Mongol, British and U.S. empires — and served as the base of expanding regional powers. The history of modern Afghanistan begins in 1747, with the coronation of Ahmed Abdali of the Durrani clan.

British expansion in India soon presented Afghanistan with a new threat — which became a reality in 1839 with the first large-scale British invasion. Shortly thereafter came the Russian expansion into Central Asia, leading to the "Great Game" between the two empires for control of the region. Afghanistan was drawn into minor clashes and some major wars with both of them. The first war ended with the British being thrown out in 1842. The only survivors of the decisive battle at Kabul were a score of Indians and ***one*** of the 16,500 British soldiers and administrators.

The second British invasion came in 1878. After alternating victories and defeats in a series of battles during 1878-80, the British took control of a large territory. But the rest of Afghanistan remained autonomous under Amir Abdurrahman, who was compelled to accept British responsibility for foreign relations.

In 1919, the new Amir (later King) Amanullah Khan demanded full independence for Afghanistan and, in the third British-Afghan war during May-August of 1919, he confronted forces ten times the size of his own. Nevertheless, the Afghans won their independence and regained some of the territory taken over by the British since 1880. The British managed to retain some Pashtun areas east of the so-called Durand Line in what is now northeastern Pakistan. The resounding defeat of the British — which they portrayed as a victory — was the beginning of the end for the British Empire in Asia. Seeing that the British could be defeated, other colonized peoples began to struggle, violently or otherwise, for their own liberation.

After some initial territorial disputes, the Soviet Union became a major trading partner of and aid-provider to Afghanistan, resulting in a period of peaceful coexistence and co-operation between the two very different societies. That changed in 1973 when King Zahir was deposed by a relative named Daoud, who in turn was ousted in 1978 by a communist coup led by Nur Muhammad Taraki.



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Invading British army encamped in 1840 near Kabul
which can be discerned at the foot of the mountains in the background.

Taraki's attempts to establish a strong central government, combined with his impatience with the pace of social reforms, led to widespread resistance from Afghan traditionalists. The resulting dilemma for the Soviet Union (USSR) was whether to support Taraki militarily or allow the country to be taken over by interests that were receiving money and arms from the United States; those interests included the *mujahedeen* "freedom fighters, Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. When Taraki requested military intervention in March 1979, Soviet leaders Kosygin and Brezhnev initially tried to dissuade him, stressing the negative repercussions that would likely follow for Afghanistan, the Soviet Union and the world at large.

But the USSR eventually entered Afghanistan in December of 1979, when the predicament of the Taraki regime had worsened. The consequences for the West included a new, more dangerous phase of the Cold War. In the USSR, the rising number of killed and wounded soon led to growing popular resistance to the war. Largely due to that opposition, the Soviet Union could not send many more than 100,000 troops — enough to devastate the country and kill about one million people, but not enough to quell the resistance.

The USSR was learning the same lessons as did France in Algeria and the United States in Vietnam: First, an overwhelming superiority in numbers is required in order to have any chance of winning a war against an indigenous guerrilla movement (the rule of thumb is 10-20 to one); second, it cannot be done with a conscript army whose members are poorly motivated and have disapproving relatives at home.

Mikhail Gorbachev eventually drew the consequences of the military fiasco, including loss of international prestige, and withdrew all Soviet troops in 1989. Left behind in Afghanistan were competing interests in a power struggle that continued throughout the following decade. After the Afghan communists were eliminated in 1992, the main

Mikhail Evstafiev / Wikimedia

Soviet troops withdrawing from Afghanistan

combatants were regional warlords in shifting coalitions. Joining the fray in 1994 were the Taliban (literally, "Koran students") based in the Pashtun region of southern Afghanistan and western Pakistan, who were dedicated to a strict interpretation of Islam that is closely related to Saudi Wahhabism.

Cure for a disastrous decade

The 1970s was a disastrous decade for the United States in southern and southeastern Asia. Its main ally, Pakistan, had disintegrated and an independent Bangladesh was born in 1971, with India serving as midwife to the dissolution with a brief but large-scale military intervention. Saudi Arabia demonstrated some independence in the oil crisis of 1973. Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were definitively "lost" in 1975.

China, at this point a U.S. ally of convenience, was repulsed after attacking Vietnam in 1978 in order "to teach it a lesson" for the invasion of Cambodia which toppled the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge (who, despite widespread knowledge of their atrocities, continued to be supported by the U.S., China and England for many years thereafter). Also in 1978, Afghanistan got its first communist regime. The shah whom the U.S. had imposed on Iran fell in 1979, and was succeeded by a theocratic regime which regarded the U.S. as the Great Satan (and the Soviet Union as the Small Satan, as a consequence of which the Iranian left was soon eliminated).

Due to these developments, Afghanistan acquired greater prominence in U.S. geostrategic thinking. One consequence was co-operation between CIA and its counterparts in Pakistan (SIS, etc.) to finance and arm the Afghan resistance against Taraki's internally divided regime. The level of support increased when the Soviet military intervention began. According to well-informed sources, including President Jimmy Carter's chief foreign policy advisor, a primary objective of the United States was to create conditions that would compel the intervention in order to defend the Taraki regime, and thereby weaken the Soviet Union.

The U.S. support, channelled mainly via Pakistan, went to Al Qaeda and other groups that had set aside their differences and joined forces to topple the communist regime. Once that goal was achieved after the complete Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the competing interests began fighting amongst themselves. With bases in and support from

Pakistan, the Taliban became a major factor, and by 1997 had gained the upper hand. When the U.S. launched its war of aggression in 2001, the Taliban effectively ruled most of the country, with the exception of some areas controlled by warlords in the north.

Initially, the U.S. attempted to co-opt the Taliban in order to achieve its policy objectives. One of them was to combat opium production and trade. The Taliban obliged and achieved considerable success until the U.S. attack in 2001, at which point the Taliban started competing in the opium trade with the Karzai family and the warlords supported by the U.S. (Scott, 2010). Another objective was to secure a pipeline route between Turkmenistan and Pakistan. To this the Taliban regime consented, or so the U.S. at first believed; but it eventually concluded that the Taliban could not or would not deliver.

Dramatically altered situation

The situation was dramatically altered by the terror attacks with hijacked airplanes in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001. Exactly what happened on that day is still clouded in considerable mystery, although it was soon established that most of the hijackers (apparently) were Saudi Arabians and that the operation had been planned in Germany. But neither of those countries could be bombed and, as in the case of Pearl Harbor in 1941, the U.S. president was under intense pressure to take swift action.

On the basis of little or no evidence, the government of George Bush II asserted that Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda were responsible for the attacks. It also accused Afghanistan of providing bases for the alleged attackers, and demanded that bin Laden be extradited to the U.S. for trial.

In addition, the U.S. engineered passage of Resolution 1373 by the U.N. Security Council on 28 September 2001. The resolution does not explicitly authorize military action, and international lawyers are divided (along largely predictable lines) as to whether another resolution was needed to justify the assault on Afghanistan.

The U.S. assault on Afghanistan was launched on 4 October 2001, supposedly in response to the terror attacks on 11 September. But there are strong indications that the war was planned months in advance of those dates.

The response from Kabul was conciliatory: If bin Laden was, in fact, in Afghanistan and if the U.S. presented at least some *prima facie* evidence that he was guilty, Afghanistan would agree to extradite him to some third country such as Pakistan where he could be tried before a *sharia* court. But the United States refused to present any evidence or discuss the Afghan proposal. (Three years later, in 2004, bin Laden acknowledged responsibility for the attacks; but it is not known whether he was telling the truth or, possibly for some tactical purpose, making a false admission.)

The U.S. assault on Afghanistan was launched on 4 October 2001. It appears, however, that it had been planned well in advance of 11 September. Niaz Naik, former Foreign Minister of Pakistani, told BBC that he had been informed by senior U.S. officials in mid-July of 2001 that an attack would be launched before mid-October (Arney, 2001).

Unilateral aggression

Following the terror attacks on 11 September, the U.S. had received messages from governments and individuals from all over the world, sharply condemning the attacks, expressing sympathy, and offering various kinds of assistance. Some NATO countries stated that Article 5 applied ("an attack on one is an attack on all") and offered immediate assistance.

Yet when the United States attacked Afghanistan, it did so on its own — without any NATO involvement, and without a resolution from the Security Council authorizing military action.

The unilateral aggression of the United States may reflect its experience from the war against Yugoslavia in 1999. Then, as in 2003 with the war against Iraq, the U.S. simply ignored the U.N. when it became apparent that it could not get a resolution authorizing war. In Yugoslavia, it also learnt that conducting a war through NATO is too cumbersome in several respects — too many annoying questions about the legality of various kinds of bombing, too many member-state governments that were vulnerable to anti-war opinion at home and/or were unwilling to provide soldiers, aircraft, military bases, etc.

The war against Afghanistan was therefore conducted entirely under U.S. command, with supplementary troops from "the coalition of the willing" (i.e. states that accepted U.S. command), plus the forces of northern warlords who were dubbed "security providers". The operation was first entitled "Infinite Justice". But when friendly Moslem states objected that such justice can only be provided by Allah, it became "Operation Enduring Freedom" (OEF).

U.S. Army

U.S. Special Forces in Zabul province, January 2010. The capital city of Kabul was quickly taken with the initial assault in 2001. But nine years later, most ofAfghanistan remains beyond the grasp of the U.S. and its collaborating vassal-states.

In one sense, the war was soon over: Kabul was quickly taken and the regular Taliban troops dispersed. But gaining control of the entire country and eliminating all resistance were entirely different matters and, nine years later, the likelihood of achieving those objectives is increasingly remote.

As in the cases of Yugoslavia and Iraq, it soon became necessary to bring in the United Nations, after all, in order to provide some sort of legitimacy. Security Council Resolution 1386 of 20 December 2001 authorized the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) under NATO command, which was to be kept completely separate from the USA's "Operation Enduring Freedom". It has been suggested that some members of the Security Council were not unhappy at the prospect of the United States facing the same fate in Afghanistan as they had suffered on previous occasions.

Eventually, about one fourth of the countries in the world supplied troops to ISAF. They included NATO members, Partnership for Peace countries (such as Macedonia and Georgia) whose governments were seeking NATO membership, and other U.S. allies such as Australia.

Blurred distinctions

There may be some lawyers and others who are still able to distinguish between OEF and ISAF, but it is exceedingly unlikely that the people of Afghanistan do.

The original premises upon which ISAF was based have been gradually abandoned. In 2003, the area of ISAF operations was enlarged from the city of Kabul to the entire country, and the command function that previously rotated among participating countries was placed under NATO, but still with non-U.S. commanders. Since 2007, however, U.S. generals have commanded the ISAF forces. Until recently, it was Stanley A. McChrystal, who had previously organised death squads in Iraq, and has altered ISAF's rules of engagement to include "preventive attacks" against suspected threats.

There may be some lawyers and other persons who are still able to distinguish between OEF and ISAF, but it is exceedingly unlikely that the people of Afghanistan do. There has also been a blurring of the distinction between the military and civilian components of ISAF.

Thus far, the ongoing war in Afghanistan seems to follow the historical pattern: A great power intervenes in an internal power struggle in order to support one of the parties which is believed to be sympathetic and potentially obedient. The increasing numbers of invading troops provoke a nationwide resistance that eventually forces the great power to withdraw, after doing great damage to Afghanistan and to itself.

The current repetition of that pattern has been confirmed by former U.S. Marine captain Matthew Hoh, who in 2009 resigned from his diplomatic post in Zabul province, having concluded that it was not clear why the United States should be in Afghanistan in the first place, and that much of the insurgency had started *after* the arrival of U.S. troops (BBC News, 27 October 2009).

Pitted against OEF/ISAF is an array of resistance groups that enjoy significant advantages. For one thing, they are able to portray themselves as "more Afghan" than President Karzai with his Californian background and U.S. backing — all the more so as the number of foreign troops increases. A related factor is that the Afghan National Army—

Left: Rachael Washington, purveyor of something called Christian rhythm & blues, entertains the troops on the U.S. military's "Hope and Freedom Tour 2005" in Afghanistan.
Right: Three children wounded in repeated bombing raids on their village by U.S. warplanes. Their parents and numerous other civilians did not survive. (Source: Wikimedia)

set up and maintained by the occupying forces — is dominated by the Tadzhik ethnic group, whereas the Taliban are dominated by Pashtuns who comprise by far the largest ethnic group in the country.

It may be assumed that the many cases of civilian deaths due to "collateral damage" have strengthened the Taliban and other resistance movements in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The resistance forces also have time on their side: The longer they can avoid total defeat, the more difficult it becomes for the U.S. and its allies to continue a war that is creating growing opposition at home.

War for the sake of war

Due to these and other factors, the prospects for a clear-cut U.S. victory in Afghanistan are increasingly slender, as the administration of President Obama has more or less openly conceded. This raises the question of why the war was started in the first place, and why it has been pursued at such great cost for so long.

Several explanations have been suggested, including the motive of revenge, the geopolitical significance and natural resources of Afghanistan, issues of development and human rights, etc. The most plausible explanation may be that war, in itself, has become essential to preservation of the United States' status as superpower.

Following World War II, the U.S. dominated the world military, economically and, in the eyes of many, even morally. But the reputation of the United States as a champion of democracy, human rights and other good things has been severely damaged by the Vietnam War and numerous other factors; and its economic standing is in a state of what may be irreversible decline due to internal weaknesses, the growing strength of challengers such as China and India, and the over-extension of its empire.

That leaves the military sphere as the sole basis of dominance. Against that background, "war for the sake of war" becomes a likely explanation for the aggressive behaviour of the United States. War serves a variety of purposes, one of them being to inflate the importance of the military dimension in international affairs: "There, you see — it is military power that really counts". Another is to motivate and discipline allies, the classic formula being: "This is a test of the credibility and resolve of the world community [sic]." Yet another function of aggressive war is to intimidate other nations by demonstrating that the United States, like other great powers before it, tends not to regard itself as constrained by international law.

Fighting a war is thus a means to preserve superpower status; winning, or at least appearing to win, is a welcome bonus. Tending to support this hypothesis is the fact that the U.S. wars against Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq were all decided upon well in advance: in the case of Yugoslavia, several months ***before*** the sham peace negotiations at Rambouillet; in the case of Afghanistan, several weeks before the 9/11 attacks; and almost a year before the Security Council debate on Iraq in February of 2003.

Increasing usefulness of NATO

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has come to play an increasingly important role in the development and maintenance of U.S. military dominance, even though the stated reason for its existence was eliminated with the collapse of the Soviet Union. NATO is clearly indispensable to the United States, because its essentially military character provides a means of dominance that the U.S. can no longer assert in other key institutions. For example, the U.S. veto power in the International Monetary Fund was weakened when Asian states established a fund of their own after their disastrous experiences of IMF mismanagement during the 1997 economic crisis.

NATO's usefulness as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy was limited by the original treaty of 1949, which specifically prohibited aggressive war and other military initiatives beyond the boundaries of the alliance. Nevertheless, NATO violated its founding treaty by launching an unprovoked attack on Yugoslavia in 1999. That violation was papered over a few weeks later, on the 50th anniversary of the alliance, with the adoption of a new "strategic concept" which eliminated the original restraints.

Wikimedia

British bombing raid on suspected tunnel complex in Paktika Province, eastern Afghanistan.

That paved the way for the occupation of Afghanistan under the banner of ISAF by NATO and compliant states in its "Partnership for Peace".

From an Afghan point of view, the current war fits into a very old pattern — with the difference that the British, Russian and Soviet empires invaded without dragging in their satellites. By contrast, the U.S. empire has managed to enlist a large number of vassal-states.

How much longer the slaughter and destruction will continue depends on a variety of factors, including the patience of U.S. taxpayers and international creditors, and the willingness of U.S. vassal-states to supply troops and other forms of support.

Recent promises by the Obama administration that the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq will end in 2011 appear to be based on a combination of a realistic assessment of such factors and a great deal of wishful thinking.

U.S. Army

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Note: This is a revised extract of an article entitled "The Afghanistan War in a Comparative Perspective", published in the Macedonian journal *Bezbednosni Dijalozi*, Vol. 1/No. 1, 2010. Håkan Wiberg is a Swedish mathematician and philosopher whose concerns over nuclear weapons and related issues led him to become professor of sociology and director of Peace Research Institute at Lund University. He has also served as director of the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute and as first president of the European Peace Research Association.

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