

# Defense & Foreign Affairs Daily

## Afghanistan in History: A Geopolitical Overview

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*"Turkestan, Afghanistan, Transcaucasia, Persia: to many these words breathes only a sense of utter remoteness, or a memory of strange vicissitudes and of moribund romance. To me, I confess, they are the pieces of a chessboard upon which is played out a game for the domination of the world"*

— George Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India.

If I were to search a single region of the world to illustrate the truth of the notion that "history is geography in motion" then we could find no more revealing example than the central Asia (once known simply as Turkestan) and its gate, Afghanistan.

As far back as history records, Afghanistan has been the heartbeat of the greatest continent on Earth; on its stability and wellbeing the lives of billions of people depend.

Afghanistan has been "highway of conquest" with strategic romantic gravity. It is a bridge between east and west, and also of dramatic meetings of cultures, and trade passage between China and the Central Asia: the Silk Road. The importance of Afghanistan has never been lost on world's great conquerors and founders of empires. They appreciated geo-strategic importance of Herat. Since Herat has been gate to Kandahar and Kandahar, through the Khyber Pass, to India (in the area which is now Pakistan).

Five centuries before Christ, Darius the Great conquered this area, consolidated his Persian Empire and from there proceeded to India.

In 4<sup>th</sup> Century before Christ, Alexander marched from Afghanistan and through the supremely strategic Khyber Pass to India and extended Hellenistic civilization to the region; unprecedented exchanges took place between East and West, both of goods and ideas.

In 1000 CE, Sultan Mahmood of Ghazna, one of the Islam's most important figures, launched his campaign to India through Khyber Pass, establishing Islam in the Subcontinent of India. He marched 17 times from Afghanistan to India.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, the Mongol leader Ghengiz Khan invaded Afghanistan, the *marche* to the north of India

In the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, the Mongol king's descendant, Timur (Tamerlane), spread universal destruction from his capital Samard through the Khyber Pass to India.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Zahir-ud-din Mohammad, known as Babur, went from Kabul through the Khyber Pass to India, to create the empire of Moghuls which extended from the border of Persia to Bengal.

In 1739, Nadir Shah of Iran invaded India through Afghanistan.

Napoleon Bonaparte in 1807 sent General Claude Gardanne with 70 officers to reorganize the Persian

army. His real goal was to attack India through Persia and Afghanistan, but later on he changed his strategy due to entangling involvements in Europe.

When Great Britain established its power in India, it tried to make Afghanistan a reliable buffer between Russia and India. By diplomatic pressure and armed intervention, Britain succeeded to bring Afghanistan temporarily under British suzerainty, but did not guarantee a peaceful frontier between Afghanistan and British India, since the Afghans, with stiff resistance, managed to preserve their independence between British India and Russia.

Also Russia, after consolidation of its power in Central Asia, advanced towards Afghanistan. Thus at the dawn of 19th Century this region became bargaining point in the Great Game. And finally Russian activities in Afghanistan and towards India were frustrated by Great Britain which had firmly established itself in India.

After the communist takeover of Russia, the Soviet Government several time tried to control Afghanistan and finally in 1979 invaded that country. The Soviet Union tried to consolidate its power in Afghanistan to advance to the Persian Gulf, but failed. To some extent this failure helped facilitate the disintegration of the Soviet Empire.

It was with the military, intelligence, diplomatic and financial help of the United States that the people of Afghanistan forced the Soviet invaders to retire from the country. But, after the Soviet withdrawal, the United States neglected Afghanistan and left the country to regional rivals, Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia and to local warlords. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, with their interference in Afghani Affairs, advanced their own interests without paying attention to political consequences for themselves and world peace.

Pakistan and its intelligence organization, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), succeeded in creating a *Taliban* Government and transforming, to some extent, Afghanistan into its satrapy. Iran tried to promote Shi'ite ideology in Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia promoted Wahhabi brand of Islam. The Saudis sent billions of dollars to promote Wahhabism and supported *Taliban* Administration. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan overlooked the terrorist activities of Osama Bin Laden and *Taliban* atrocities. The result was creation of monster which started a process of asymmetrical warfare against US and, indeed, against Western (and even moderate Muslim) civilization.

Afghanistan became the base or safe haven of international terrorism. Osama bin Laden and his *al-Qaida* organization chose Afghanistan as a springboard to advance international terrorism. *al-Qaida* indeed is trying to justify its heinous crime against the United States as war of Islam against the infidels. (Of course, international terrorism and war against "the Great Satan", the United States, was initiated by *Ayatollah* Ruhollah Khomeini.) While The US is fighting with *al-Qaida* and its supporter, the *Taliban*, it is trying to avoid a confrontation with whole Muslim world. But the US is indeed at war with terrorist fanatics who receive support from several governments in the Muslim world. Therefore, rôle of Afghanistan and the fundamentalist *Taliban* in this war has obviously been important.

Again in this modern history, as in the past, the rôle of Afghanistan in world politics is becoming very important. Central Asia and the Middle East are not only the heartland of Eurasia, but the geopolitical center as well as heartland of energy resources which the economy of industrial world depends upon. Moreover, Afghanistan is going to play an important rôle in US strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, perhaps as a surveillance post to monitor Central Asia and especially the People's Republic

of China which, as an emerging superpower, could challenge the United States.

As a result of the present crisis, a new anti-terrorist coalition consists between US, NATO, Japan, Russia, China, India and many other states has come to existence. How long this alliance will hold we do not know, but it is the most important development in campaign against international terrorism which poses a serious threat to world equilibrium.. It is imperative for the US and its new and old allies to win this war,

At the moment, the best thing the United States can do, after the fall of the *Taliban* and the destruction of *al-Qaida*, would be to help creation of a broad based neutralist Government in Afghanistan to establish order, stability and reconstruction. The best kind of Administration in Afghanistan, from my perspective, would be the formation a nationalist Administration composed of representatives of Pushtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazaras and other ethnic groups in a government to serve the interests of all Afghanis after a quarter-century of foreign domination.

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