



## **Concise History of the Afghanistan-Pakistan War**

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### **Executive Summary**

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\* Afghanistan has never been a viable political-military entity. It is still not. The territory of Afghanistan has always been an instrument of the grand strategic designs of regional powers. Passing through and using the landscape commonly known as Afghanistan have been imperative to making global and regional power-grabs possible.

\* The bulk of the territory called Afghanistan and Pakistan - and more accurately Pakhtunistan - is an amalgamation of Pushtun and Baluchi tribes. Their irreconcilable individuality is at the center of the grassroots population's refusal to accept any central authority from any foreign conqueror. The war of the armies of Alexander the Great some 2,300 years ago is identical to the war still being waged by the US/NATO/ISAF forces, as well as the countless wars waged by all foreign conquerors in between.

\* Presently, incapable of reconciling its own war aims with the two-and-a-half millennia of Pushtunwali-based tribal struggle against foreign invaders and centralized governance - the US must face reality. Only with a lot of knowledge and sophistication, the US and NATO can still reach out to the indigenous grassroots leadership, reconcile and work together on defusing the crisis and the establishment of a compromise acceptable to all. But such a daunting undertaking will take two generations to complete. Meanwhile, the exhausted US-NATO forces are vacating because their governments have given-up on winning skirmishes against Pakistan-sponsored Taliban.

### **About ISPSW**

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## Analysis

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*Turkestan, Afghanistan, Transcaucasia, Persia ...  
are the pieces on a chessboard upon  
which is being played out a game  
for the domination of the world.*

*-- Lord Curzon.<sup>1</sup>*

*Modern Afghanistan is indeed a purely accidental  
geographic unit, which has been carved out of  
the heart of Central Asia by the sword of conquerors  
or the genius of individual statesmen.*

*-- Lord Curzon*

In 329 BC, the armies of Alexander the Great crossed into Bactria which is today's north-western Afghanistan. The chroniclers among the camp followers provide the first Western impressions and history of the region. At first, they write, everything was extremely smooth. The main cities opened their gates to the Macedonian armies, and their rulers sought peace with Alexander.

However, it did not take long for rebellions to break out throughout the entire rural area for no apparent reason. These eruptions were led by local hyparchs - or "commanders" - who ruled their immediate locales and derived their authority from blood-related tribes surrounding them. The hyparchs did not claim to be kings or rulers of others. Nor did they respect the authority of superiors, kings or other regional entities. The hyparchs were motivated by the quest for preserving their localized influence. They fought ferociously against any encroachment of their domain by external power. They were not deterred by the painful punitive raids of the superior Macedonian and Greek troops. At the same time, the hyparchs also tended to make deals with the Macedonians when it suited them, and break them the moment circumstances changed. Overtime, Alexander and his generals found it impossible to deal with the shifting allegiances and the continued attrition from clashes with the hyparchs.

Except for the use of swords, arrows and spears - the description of the warfare faced by the armies of Alexander the Great some 2,300 years ago is identical to the description of the war still being experienced and waged by the US/NATO/ISAF forces, as well as the countless wars experienced and waged by all foreign conquerors in between.

Indeed, even the preoccupation with Afghanistan as a viable political-military entity is misleading. It is not. It has never been. The territory of Afghanistan has always been an instrument of the grand strategic designs of regional powers. Passing through and using the landscape commonly known as Afghanistan have been imperative to making global and regional power-grabs possible. Just as during the wars in Afghanistan in the 1980's, and, for that matter the Great Games starting the 17th Century, the peoples and territory of

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<sup>1</sup> George Curzon, 1st Marquess Curzon of Kedleston (1859-1925), was a British Conservative statesman. He served as the Viceroy of India and the Foreign Secretary of Great Britain. His area of expertise was Russia, Central and South Asia. He toured these regions extensively during the late-19th Century - at the height of the Great Game - before becoming the Viceroy of India (1899-1905). The several books and articles he authored about his experiences are still considered standard references about the Heart of Asia.



Afghanistan are presently merely pawns in, and means to, strategic maneuvers of dominant powers. Because of its strategic location and unique geography, Afghanistan has always been crucial to any regional dynamics and conflagration. However, the ultimate objectives that brought war into and out of Afghanistan have always lied elsewhere. Hence, any fighting in Kabul are but discrete though integral components of a wider and more profound historic evolution in the Heart of Asia and the entire world. Contemporary Afghanistan, though not a functioning state, continues to play a special and unique role in the surge in the Heart of Asia in quest for the zone Between and Betwixt Empires and its immense geo-strategic and geo-economic resources.

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The bulk of the territory called Afghanistan and Pakistan - and more accurately Pakhtunistan - is an amalgamation of Pushtun and Baluchi tribes. The irreconcilable individuality of tribal chieftains and the fierce loyalty of their tribes have remained at the center of the grassroots population's refusal to accept any central authority from any foreign conqueror. At the same time, for as long as they were left to their own devices, tribal chieftains did not challenge the central authority and even accepted some form of tribute/taxation if it kept foreign forces off their domains. Between the end of the 9th Century and the beginning of the 16th Century AD, the region now known as Afghanistan became the center of various important empires, including that of the Shahis, Samanids, Ghaznavids, Seljukids, Ghurids, Mongol Empire, Ilkhanate, and Timurids. All of these rulers had on-off rebellions on their hands, and ended up leaving the local tribes to their own devices.

In 1219, the region was overrun by the Mongols under Genghis Khan, who devastated the land but failed to subdue the Pushtun tribes. The Mongols' rule continued with the Ilkhanate, and was extended further after the armies of Timur Lang ("Tamerlane") invaded the region from Central Asia in 1385. The tribal forces found it difficult to withstand the ferocity and superior mobility of Timur Lang's forces. A live and let live arrangement existed until 1398, when the main armies of Timur Lang crossed the tribal lands on their way to invade India. Sporadic clashes continued until the death of Timur Lang in 1405 and the withdrawal of most of his armies.

In 1504, Babur, a descendant of both Timur Lang and Genghis Khan, established the Mughal Empire with its capital at Peshawar and later Kabul. At first, Babur and his son Homyun were incapable of consolidating their empire when the Pushtun tribes decided to contribute to a centralized army under the Pushtun Sher Shah Suri. Olaf Caroe, the great historian of the Pushtuns, succinctly described the achievement of Sher Shah. "A leader arises, great enough to gather men around him and make them forget the personal factiousness for one crowded hour of glory. He dies, and with him dies his inspiration. In the absence of the man who commanded trust, tribal jealousies are reasserted, everything that was gained falls away," elucidated Caroe. Indeed, the Pushtun army fell into disarray with the death of Sher Shah Suri as tribal chieftains decided to withdraw their fighters back to their locales. Consequently, Homyun returned with vengeance, conquered central India and consolidated the Mughal Empire in the mid-16th Century. However, as the Mughals concentrated on expanding their hold over the Indian subcontinent, their hold over the Pushtun tribes became tenuous at best. By the early-18th Century, the Pushtun-inhabited area was self-ruled by local tribes who nominally recognized the authority of the Mughals.

The rise of Pushtun "modern nationalism" (and this is really stretching the term) started in the first half of the 18th Century - when the chieftain of the Abdali tribe seized power from the Ghilzais' short-lived Hotaki dynasty. He went on to unify the Pushtun and Baluchi tribes - through deals and military strikes - into an empire centered in Qandahar. In 1747, the said chieftain changed the tribe's name into Durrani (the Pearl's) and crowned himself as Ahmad Shah Durrani. Durrani's empire started crumbling immediately after his death



in 1772 as tribal chieftains pulled their forces away from the imperial army and returned to their locales. However, with the brief and extremely bloody exceptions of the Panjsheri Habibullah Kalakani (1929) and the Communist pre-Najibullah rein (1979-85) - Afghanistan has been ruled by a Durrani (or relative thereof) till 1992. Significantly, Najibullah was a Durrani from an offshoot of the royal family, and Mullah Omar was a Durrani from a minor family.

An Afghan political entity was gradually consolidated during the 19th Century as Russian armed forces expanded their empire southwards into Central Asia and British forces expanded their empire into the north-west frontier area. In order to minimize the risk of a major British-Russian war over the fringes of their respective empires, London and St. Petersburg agreed on the creation of a buffer state between them - Afghanistan. The descendants of the Durrani emperors were made kings of the new Afghanistan. But this Afghan state was little more than a no-man's land effectively dominated by the various Pushtun and Baluchi chieftains. Indeed, in the three Anglo-Afghan Wars - the vastly superior units of the British-Indian armed forces were slaughtered by uncontrollable Pushtun tribes. The armies of the Afghan state were repeatedly defeated by the British who easily occupied all the cities they wanted to and were able to dictate favorable political outcomes to the wars. Moreover, the Pushtun tribes continued to ignore the Durand Line - the newly demarcated "border" between British India and Afghanistan (now the Afghanistan-Pakistan border) that was clearly marked on the rocks with painted white lines.

In 1897, young Winston Churchill served as a junior officer in Malakand, Swat (today in Pakistan's NWF) where he fought the rapidly escalating tribal insurgency. He wrote on his experiences in *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*. "The rising of 1897 is the most successful attempt to date to combine the frontier tribes," Churchill wrote. "It will not be the last. The simultaneous revolt of distant tribes is an evidence of secret workings. These features will be more pronounced in the future." The key to the sustenance of these revolts despite punishment by British forces was the adherence of the Pushtunwali code. Churchill defined the Pushtunwali as a "system of ethics, which regards treachery and violence as virtues rather than vices." He stressed that the dynamics of the war was an extension of this historic tribal code of collective guilt, honor, humiliation and revenge. The historic and uncompromising quintessence of the Pushtunwali made it impossible for Western-style agreements to endure. Churchill warned that "the longer the policy of half measures is adhered to, the more distant the end of the struggle will be." He anticipated an escalating cycle of violence despite alliances reached with local chieftains. "I do not see any sign of permanency in the settlements that have been made with the tribesmen," he wrote. "They have been punished, not subdued... Every year the tribesmen will have better weapons, and the difficulties of dealing with them will be increased." At the same time, Churchill was equally apprehensive about the practicality of an overall or permanent solution to the tribal insurrection. "People talk glibly of 'the total disarmament of the frontier tribes' as being the obvious policy," Churchill warned. "But to obtain it would be as painful and as tedious an undertaking as to extract the stings of a swarm of hornets, with naked fingers."

On August 19, 1919, following the third Anglo-Afghan war, Afghanistan regained full independence. The United Kingdom removed the last vestiges of supervision and control over Afghanistan's foreign affairs. King Amanullah Khan (1919-1929) moved to end Afghanistan's traditional isolation. Modern Afghanistan of Amanullah Khan and Zahir Shah (1933-1973) was strongly influenced by Kemal Attaturk and Reza Shah. Amanullah Khan and Zahir Shah committed to building a modern European-style capital in Kabul, to formulating a European-style constitution, to forcing the elite to wear western clothes - particularly the women - and to making elementary education compulsory for both boys and girls in co-educational schools. However,



the “modernization” and “westernization” was ultimately limited to a very small elite in Kabul that was isolated from the rest of society and the country. The authority of the Government of Afghanistan did not exceed beyond the outskirts of Kabul, and the tribal population continued to insist on their self-rule and adherence to the Pushtunwali code.

Nevertheless, the mere existence of a reform process, and the rise of a Durrani-Pushtun elite, were the root cause of the first major crisis and eruption of political violence in modern Afghanistan.

In the early 1920's, a Panjshiri called Habibullah Kalakani began preaching among his fellow Tajiks that the modernization and westernization reforms were sins against Islam. By the late 1920's he began calling himself Habibullah Khadem e Deen e Rasulullah (The Servant of the Religion of the Messenger of God) and expanded his preaching to the Nuristanis as well. The turning point was when he convinced various Pushtun tribes who opposed the modernization to join him in restoring traditional Islam. In January 1929, Habibullah led a predominantly Pushtun Islamist army on Kabul, began slaughtering civilians not in strict Muslim dress code, and forced the abdication of Amanullah Khan. He then declared himself the new ruler and established a council comprised mostly of Panjshiri Tajiks. They started imposing strict Islamic law that forbade some of the key tenets of Pushtunwali. When the Pushtuns of Kabul (as well as the Hazarah Shiites) resisted, Habibullah unleashed a horrific slaughter. By now, the Pushtuns were calling him by the derogatory name Bacha-ye Saqqow (son of the water-carrier) because his father was a water-carrier in the Afghan army. In fall 1929, the Pushtun chieftains abandoned Habibullah and convinced Prince Mohammed Nadir Khan, then in exile in India, to lead a Pushtun army on Kabul. Habibullah was summarily executed, and Nadir Shah was crowned. However, in 1933 he was assassinated by a Tajik student who avenged Habibullah's execution.

Because of the sheer magnitude and horrific cruelty of the killing spree in Kabul, the short reign of Habibullah Kalakani remains a lingering trauma among all Pushtuns. There is hardly any Pushtun and Hazarah family in the greater Kabul area that did not lose a significant number of its members to the Islamists. The predominance of Panjshiri Tajiks among Habibullah's henchmen has created profound hostility that is yet to be reconciled. For example, during the 1980's, the predominantly Pushtun leadership of the anti-Soviet resistance adamantly refused to cooperate with Ahmad Shah Massud - the Tajik leader of the Panjshir valley. The Pushtun resistance leaders refused pleas from Western intelligence services to reconsider their attitude toward Massud, and it was not long before Massud began working for the KGB against the resistance in northern Afghanistan. This change of loyalties only served to further deepen the animosity between Pushtuns and Panjshiri Tajiks.

Meanwhile, the 1930's saw the rise of anti-British independence movement, and particularly the Muslim-led Pakistan movement. In the mid-1940's, when the partition of British India into an India and a Pakistan became a reality, the Awami League that unified the Pushtun and Baluchi tribes demanded to be included in India rather than Muslim Pakistan. The tribal leadership was afraid that the urbanized Punjabis at the leadership of the Pakistan movement would try to establish a modern state and impose its rules on the tribal lands. On the other hand, the leaders believed, the tribes would have been at the far fringes of a huge India and consequently be able to retain the effective self-rule they enjoyed under the British. The call for Greater Pakhtunistan (essentially the region comprising of Pushtunistan and Baluchistan in today's Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran) became a rallying cry that has been getting stronger and stronger ever since. Indeed, in the late-1940's the Baluchi and some Pushtun tribes opted to join India and not Pakistan (where they ended anyway) because of their opposition to the Punjabi-origin Islamic ways that override the tribal heritage character. The aggregate impact of the carnage of the partition wars of the late-1940's and the economic plight



of the 1950's largely subdued the Pushtuns and Baluchis of Pakistan. Concurrently, the Pushtuns and Baluchis of Afghanistan exploited the gradual weakening of the Zahir Shah regime in order to further consolidate their effective self-rule. But the relative quiet was misleading for the tribes - both chieftains and population at large - have never given up on their quest for an independent ruler-less Greater Pakhtunistan.

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The earthquake that ushered in the still growing awakening of the relentless quest for the Greater Pakhtunistan took place in 1971. Originally, Pakistan was to be an amalgamation of mutually hostile nationalities whose sole common denominator and glue was Islam. Now, the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war resulted in the Indian occupation of Eastern Pakistan. When the Indian forces withdrew soon afterwards, the population elected to become the independent Bangladesh. And with this, the myth of the Islamic glue holding Pakistan together received a mortal blow.

Indeed, Baluchi and Pushtun tribes launched rebellions against Islamabad's rule almost immediately. In retaliation, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto purged the political elites of Baluchistan in 1972-3. Fighting spread and escalated to the point that Pakistan deployed over 80,000 troops in the Baluchi region under the command of an ambitious general called Zia ul-Haq. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union intensified clandestine military support for the revolt via both Afghanistan and Iraq (that used diplomatic mail to deliver specialized equipment). By 1975, the Pakistani army was falling apart, refusing to fight their brethren. It took a major Iranian expeditionary force to suppress the Baluchi revolt in 1976-7. The trauma of Baluchistan not only prompted Zia ul-Haq to overthrow and hang Zulfikar Ali Bhutto - but ultimately made him both cognizant of, and hostile to, the destructive power of tribal self-awareness and militancy in south Asia.

Meanwhile, the USSR was also alarmed by the spreading flames of Pushtun tribal instability. While the USSR helped fan the flames of the Baluchi revolt in order to destabilize US allies - the backlash was unnerving. Hence, the USSR orchestrated the Mohammad Daoud coup of April 1973. Daud was a pro-Soviet prince who empowered the PDPA - Afghanistan's Communist Party - under the banner of Pushtun legitimacy. The Afghan communists immediately committed to building a modern state and launching genuine agrarian and social reforms in an effort to force Afghanistan's society into the late 20th Century. These reforms were met by across the board armed resistance from the Pushtun tribal population that dreaded and refused to accept central governance and changes to the localized power structure. In a sign of things to come, the tribal armed resistance to both change and modernity was aided and encouraged by conservative mullahs and imams from Pakistan. Eager to avenge the deteriorating situation in Baluchistan, Pakistani intelligence organized, armed and dispatched gangs of Pushtun Islamist mujahedin into Afghanistan to incite their brethren and help their revolt.

Starting the mid 1970's, both Pakistani and Soviet-Afghan intelligence were intensifying assistance to, and sponsorship of, irredentist Baluchi and Pushtun movements in order to destabilize the other side. Both Islamabad and Kabul-Moscow were convinced that the immediate damage done to their respective nemeses outweighed the long-term risk of tribal radicalization blowbacks. Two dominant trends emerged during the late-1970's. (1) Soviet-Afghan intelligence reached out to, and gained a lot of support from, the Awami League - the traditional nationalist trend in both Pushtunistan and Baluchistan. Awami leaders were still remembering the support of Kabul in the 1940's and 1950's to their political and armed struggle against incorporation into Pakistan. (2) The Pakistani ISI reached out to Ikhwani and other religious "orders" or "schools" (Deobandi, Haqqani, Mojadedi, etc.) for cooperation in the Pushtun wars in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Islamabad was



apprehensive that purely Pushtunwali-based tribal leadership would refuse cooperation with any centralized authority and sought alliance with Islamist elements whose influence also crossed tribal allegiances and whose system of authority was not based on tribal affiliation. These sets of alliances and sponsorships would serve as the foundation for the anti-Soviet Jihad of the 1980's.

The Soviet invasion of December 1979 shocked everybody. The Soviets invaded in order to accomplish two strategic tasks: (1) Acquire a bridgehead for quick surge toward the Persian Gulf - primarily the Straits of Hormuz - from Afghanistan's barely populated southwestern corner; and (2) Contain the rise of radical Islamism that they feared would cross into the USSR's own soft underbelly. The Soviets were cognizant of the destructive power of radical Islam having witnessed and assisted Khomeini's Islamic Revolution in 1978-9. Indeed, then Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev stressed the issue in his speech at the 26th Congress of the CPSU on 23 February 1981.

The latter task - containment of Islamism - was to be accomplished by enforcing modernity and development on the basis of the Soviets' own experience in Central Asia in the 1920's and 1930's. Indeed, after a short and most violent interlude, the Soviets succeeded to pacify the northern parts of Afghanistan where the population is non-tribal and belongs to the same nationalities as southern Soviet Central Asia. Even the local great "mujahedin commanders" such as Ahmad Shah Massud of the Panjshir Valley were actually working for the KGB. However, grassroots revolts in the tribal south continued to escalate. The mere presence of Soviet invaders on their lands just exacerbated the tribal rejection of any effort to change their Pushtunwali-based way of life and system of loyalties. Moreover, across the Durand Line, "Pakistani" Pushtun tribes were rising up as well and committing to joining their brethren in the anti-Soviet Jihad. These "Pakistani" tribesmen did not hesitate to also fight and crush local Pakistani garrisons that tried to stand in their way to the Jihad in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, given the growing US presence in Pakistan in support for mujahedin operations in Afghanistan, the Kremlin concluded that any surge into Iran toward the Persian Gulf would risk "Pakistani" strikes on the flank and rear of the small Soviet forces racing into southwestern Iran.

Having studied the tribal revolts in detail, the Soviets reached out back to the late 19th Century Tsarist wars against the nomadic tribes of northern and eastern Central Asia as the source of knowledge how to deal with and ultimately pacify Afghanistan's unruly tribes. Essentially, the Soviets recognized the preeminence of the Pushtunwali factor, and decided to dismember Afghanistan and Pakistan along ethnic, nationalistic and tribal lines in order to give the indigenous population what they wanted in return for tolerating the Soviet pursuit of their grand strategic objectives on and through their lands. Implementation on the ground evolved gradually between 1983 and 1985 - virtually stifling and defeating the mujahedin revolt.

At first, Moscow sought to deliver a coup de-grace through a joint campaign with India to occupy Pakistan and dismember both Afghanistan and Pakistan between a new Pakhtunistan and India. Moscow concluded that there was no alternative to occupying Pakistan as well, and in March 1982, Indira Gandhi and Dimitry Ustinov agreed in principle to prepare joint contingency plans for the occupation of Pakistan. In spring 1983, select members of the DRA High Command were briefed by their Soviet counterparts on contingency plans to occupy Pakistan and divide it between the DRA and India. A major Soviet-DRA build-up in eastern Afghanistan started in April 1984 and intensified markedly during the summer - after the spring offensive against the mujahedin had been concluded.

Fall 1984 saw an unprecedented Soviet military build-up and mobilization world-wide, as well as modification of the High Command, in what seemed to be an anticipation to a crisis on a global scale. The USSR was planning



for a possible war in October 1984 - thus exploiting the contentious presidential elections in the US and especially the intense campaign against the Reagan Administration's commitment to winning the Cold War. Soviet forces would race to the Persian Gulf while Soviet-Afghan forces would occupy Pakistan jointly with Indian forces - converging from east and west. The assassination of Indira Gandhi in October 1984 brought down the entire grand design. (Little wonder that numerous former senior intelligence and military officials in both Russia and India are still convinced that the CIA assassinated Mrs. Gandhi as a desperate, though well timed, knockout of the Soviet-Indian plans. For example, the late Leonid Shebarshin, the KGB's best South Asia hand, the head of the First Chief Directorate and briefly Chief of the KGB, claimed to having iron-clad proof of the CIA's culpability.)

The Soviet grand design was not taken completely off the table till 1986. As the USSR was preparing to hand-over greater responsibility to the DRA - the Indian Armed Forces were given ever greater role in a future war. Between November 1986 and March 1987, India tested its own ability to launch surprise attack on Pakistan in the Brass Tacks "full scale war" exercise on the Pakistani border. The exercise started with some 70,000 Indian troops rushing toward the Pakistani border on one of the main invasion routes - catching Pakistan in complete surprise. Stunned, Zia ul-Haq mobilized the entire V Corps and sent it to the front lines, while the Southern Air Command was put on high-alert. By the time the exercise was over, India had over 400,000 troops - or about half the Indian Army - deployed directly across Sindh Province within 100 miles of the border. Zia-ul-Haq was shocked by the fact that Brass Tacks caught Islamabad completely by surprise. He told the Chiefs that Brass Tacks should be considered "as a direct threat and challenge to Pakistan's existence."

The Pakistani Army's study of the exercise and their own reaction convinced the Army Chiefs that had it been a real war - the Pakistani Army would have had to withdraw into the heart of Afghanistan and regroup near Lashkar-Gah before they could launch a counter-offensive against the Indian forces on the Indus River. Operating within the territory of Pakistan would have meant the annihilation of the Pakistani Army in the hands of the Indians within 48-72 hours. It is because of the Brass Tacks shock that Islamabad resolved to never ever permit anybody - be it Kabul or Washington - to control the Pushtun areas of Afghanistan south of the Hindu-Kush under any circumstances. This is Pakistan's vital strategic depth. Pakistan must dominate these areas so that the Pakistani Army can deploy at will to Helmand and the Air Force can deploy to the ex-Soviet air bases in western Afghanistan. The growing nuclear arsenals of both India and Pakistan have only reinforced Islamabad's resolve to hold onto Pushtun Afghanistan at all cost as the sole alternative to the specter of a war with India escalating to a major nuclear exchange.

Meanwhile, by the mid-1980's the Kremlin comprehended that no matter how decisive the success of their military was, the grassroots insurgency would continue for as long as people were convinced their Pushtunwali-based way of life was being threatened. Colonel Oleg Kulakov, who served for five years in Afghanistan and now teaches at the Russian Military Academy, emphasized that "there was no task the Soviet Armed Forces were assigned and failed to carry out. However, the achievements at the battalion and brigade level could not be turned into political success." The Soviets grasped that it was impossible to transform tribal society through massive force or lavish incentives. "It is naive to suppose that ... everyone in the village will become our friends and will change ideas that have taken shape over the centuries," a Soviet military intelligence officer observed in fall 1987. It was, however, possible to use both forces and incentives to convince the tribal population to compromise on coexistence under imperfect conditions acceptable to both sides. The Soviets also capitalized on the inability of the local population to cope with the strict obedience of Islam as demanded and imposed by force by the Islamist mujahedin.





By now, the USSR committed to a slow gradual implementation of the Greater Pakhtunistan initiative. Toward this end, Moscow empowered Najibullah - the loyal head of Afghan intelligence but also a Pushtun and a distant relative of the former king - as the new leader of Afghanistan. Najibullah, with exceptionally sophisticated and lavish Soviet guidance, revitalized the quest for a Greater Pakhtunistan, arguing that given the climate of the Cold War only alliance with the Soviet Union would deliver results to the Pushtun and Baluchi tribes. Demonstrating great sophistication, intimate knowledge and prudence, Najibullah and Soviet intelligence were able to revive the system of tribal allegiances all the way to the shores of the Arabian Sea and the Indus River. Indeed, by 1987-8, complete segments of the tribal population on both sides of the Durand Line abandoned the mujahedin and joined the new Soviet-sponsored Jihad for a Greater Pakhtunistan and, by default, the dismemberment and self-destruct of America's ally Pakistan.

Meanwhile, still petrified by the lessons of the Baluchistan revolt a decade before, Zia ul-Haq would not try to harness the tribes' upsurge. Instead, the ISI embarked on two major undertakings: (1) break-up and mix tribal population blocs by moving and resettling both Afghan refugees and Pakistani internally displaced - thus breaking up concentrations of tribes; and (2) subvert the traditionalist-conservative Afghan resistance and empower Islamist Jihadist and Neo-Salafi forces. The US went along because Washington was adamant on subcontracting the anti-Soviet Jihad to Islamabad, and the Saudis were eager to spread their brand of Islamism and were thus ready to outspend the US for this purpose.

Consequently, by 1987, the indigenous resistance was virtually non-existent. The fighting against the Soviets were carried out by predominantly Pakistan-sponsored and US-funded Islamist-Jihadist mujahedin small units raiding and killing indigenous Afghan forces - both tribal militias and pro-Soviet garrisons. These ISI-controlled forces were operating largely under the banner of Gulbaddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami - a predominantly Pushtun Neo-Salafi Jihadist movement ready to sacrifice tribal interests in the pursuit of Islamist tenets identical to the Muslim Brothers'. Little wonder the "mujahedin" were rejected by the grassroots population.

Except for the occasional shooting down of Soviet and Afghan helicopters, the resistance was counter-productive for it was pushing ever wider segments of Pushtun and Baluchi tribal population (in both Afghanistan and Pakistan) into the arms of the Soviets - now accepted as the real sponsors of Greater Pakhtunistan, albeit also invaders. By the time the Soviets completed their withdrawal in early 1989 - they had in place a functioning Afghan state based on live and let live arrangements with the myriad of tribes. The predominantly tribal Afghan forces repulsed the US- and Pakistani-sponsored Islamist invasion of March 1989. Najibullah remained in power until 1992 - well after the collapse of the Soviet Union - and had to abandon the fight solely because financial aid and military supplies were no longer available.

Starting the early-1990's, Pakistani-sponsored Jihadist forces were fighting for power in Kabul as the rest of Afghanistan and Pakistan's own tribal areas were rapidly descending into chaos. Throughout, the ISI continued sponsoring local chieftains who guaranteed no other power could prevent Pakistani forces from deploying into the strategic depth area should the need suddenly arose. Only when the US gained access to oil and gas in Central Asia, interest in Afghanistan was renewed simply because it is impossible to get the oil and gas to the West but via pipelines crossing Afghan and Pakistani territory. Indeed, the Taliban were originally established by the ISI, and Mullah Omar was empowered, at the behest of the US in order to clear and control Afghanistan's southern ring road where the pipelines should have passed. Former Pakistani interior minister, Naseerullah Babar, acknowledged in fall 1998 that the Taliban were organized under his guidance in 1994. "Taliban were also given military training when I was interior minister in 1994," he said. Significantly, Benazir



Bhutto was more ruthless than Zia ul-Haq and less apprehensive about tribal backlash. Therefore, she had the ISI reach out not only to the religious “orders” or “schools” used in the 1980's - but also to tribal leaders and drug lords.

By the late-1990's, Greater Pakhtunistan was effectively existing by default. This was the outcome of complete neglect by Benazir Bhutto and her successor Nawaz Sharif of the long-term ramifications of their on-going policies of immediate expediency. In Afghanistan, Pakistan's vital interests were being served by about 5,000 Taliban (both Afghan and Pakistani) and about 1,000 predominantly-Arab foreign volunteers. The Taliban fought mainly in the predominantly Tajik north-eastern corner of Afghanistan in order to suppress the Panjshiris' quest for power. Two Pakistani Ranger regiments bolstered the Taliban forces because Islamabad feared setbacks for the Taliban. The Taliban were also holding onto the narrow supply corridors from Pakistan to Kabul and Qandahar. The predominantly Arab and Punjabi (Pakistani) Jihadists kept a dozen or so ISI-sponsored training camps which were also used for training mujahedin to strike at India's Kashmir. The rest of “Afghanistan” was effectively no-man's land run by the local tribal chieftains and elders in accordance with the Pushtunwali. Moreover, to keep the quiet, Bhutto and Sharief pulled most of the Pakistani military and security forces out of Pakistan's Pushtun- and Baluchi- populated rural areas - leaving the local chieftains and elders to their own devices.

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This was the situation in Afghanistan when the US invaded in October 2001. On the one hand, the CIA made a deal with the Panjshiris to use their valley as the springboard for the march on Kabul. On the other hand, the US declared Pakistan the primary ally in the fight against the Jihadists and Taliban of Afghanistan. It did not take long for the profound contradictions in the US strategy to surface. In November, Washington reached a tacit deal with Islamabad to evacuate Pakistani and Taliban forces in Afghanistan's northeastern corner. The ISI used the agreement to save Osama bin Laden and key Jihadists as well. Meanwhile, the US brought the Panjshiris back to Kabul - petrifying and alienating the entire Pushtun population of both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The legacy of the carnage inflicted by Bacha-ye Saqqow and his followers, as well as of the cooperation between the Panjshiris and the KGB, could not be erased by American assurances.

By March-April 2002, US and allied (mainly British and Australian) special forces destroyed the training camps along the Durand Line - killing about 20% of the mujahedin and sending the rest across the Durand Line into the open arms of their Pakistani brethren. At this point, the Pushtun population was wavering between tacit support and indifference. The Pushtuns didn't like the American-led invasion - but they were also hostile to the efforts by the Taliban and their Arab allies to spread Neo-Salafism in their midst. The return of the Panjshiris to Kabul was initially considered a transient phenomenon for the Pushtun and Baluchi tribal leaders were convinced that the US will withdraw once the hunt for al-Qaeda was completed. Indeed, by spring 2002 there were virtually no al-Qaeda and no Taliban in Afghanistan. Everybody was expecting the US to leave as American generals had promised the local tribal chieftains when they asked for their help in locating and destroying the Jihadist training camps.

Instead of leaving, President Bush decided to establish “democracy” in Kabul. Moreover, Washington empowered the Panjshiris in Kabul as the core of the security segment of the regime, and nominated the puppet Hamid Karzai as “President”. (During the 1990's Karzai was the US “gopher” in the contacts with the Taliban over the pipelines and thus was totally discredited.) The US also announced the establishment of centralized rule, and started implementation by training security forces that would be able to reach the remote



tribal areas by roads built by the US military. Little wonder that the Pushtun tribes took up arms. This time, it was not ISI-sponsored "resistance" - but the indigenous tribal forces the CIA and ISI could not raise in the 1980's. On the contrary, petrified about American dominance over Pakistan's strategic depth in Afghanistan, Islamabad ordered the ISI to ferment widespread insurgency throughout Pushtun Afghanistan that would prevent the emergence of a viable Kabul capable of controlling Afghan territory. And so it was and still is. Preventing the US from consolidating a viable government in Kabul is so crucial for Islamabad that the ISI keeps sponsoring the Pushtun and Baluchi insurrection even as it spreads across the Durand Line back into Pakistan. That official Washington keeps calling this ISI-sponsored indigenous force "Taliban" in order to placate the American public and pretend continuity does not alter reality.

Simply put, starting mid-2002, the US and NATO, and their proteges in "Afghanistan" and "Pakistan", have been facing an overwhelming grassroots indigenous revolt by the Pushtun and Baluchi tribes against yet another attempt by foreigners to impose central government at the expense of their Pushtunwali-based way of life and system of loyalties. Instead of the total of less-than-10,000 Taliban-al-Qaeda-Jihadist mujahedin of all coloration the US and NATO faced in Fall 2001 - the US and NATO are now facing about 42-45 million Pushtuns (in estimated 60 major tribes and more than 400 sub-clans) and about 20 million Baluchis (in two distinct sub-nations and a convoluted system of tribes and sub-tribes). In summer 2009, Hassan Abbas, research fellow at Harvard University's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, articulated the centrality of the Pushtun factor. "Pushtuns are at the heart of insurgency in both Pakistan and Afghanistan because they have been used and abused in the last three decades by regional as well as international players. Their social fabric has been torn to smithereens and their tribal ethos has been under severe stress and strain due to the rise of fanatical religious elements. Pushtuns today are a victim of circumstances."

There is a sense of mounting frustration and despair at the grassroots of the Greater Pakhtunistan. In Fall 2006, Wali Khan, the leader of the predominantly Pushtun Awami League or National Party warned of the explosive situation. He claimed that tribal politicians of all coloration were pushing for reconciliation with both Kabul and Islamabad while the US and NATO were not only escalating their military operations, but were coercing both Kabul and Islamabad to escalate their military operations as well. "Right now, two forces are operating in the region. One is promoting war, hatred and isolation, while the other is trying for peace and harmony. We are in the latter camp," Wali Khan said. He hoped that Kabul and Islamabad would be able to disengage from the incessant pressure by Washington to keep escalating the war against the "Taliban" - thus alienating their own people to the point of explosion.

Indeed, in summer 2009, neither the Pakistani nor the Afghan military and security forces were showing any inclination to join the fight in a meaningful way despite incessant US pressure that they do so. Even in those cases where both governments were coerced by the US into launching "offensives" against the "Taliban" - they were half-hearted and inefficient. Simply put, neither Islamabad nor Kabul was ready to confront and alienate the grassroots tribal insurgency in the name of the US and NATO fight against the "Taliban". "It's an insane dream to expect anything different from the Pakistani government," said Ali Wazir, a senior politician with the Awami National Party. "The Taliban are the brainchildren of the Pakistan Army for the last 30 years. They are their own people. Could you kill your own brother?" Similarly, the US and NATO forces continued to fight with little aid from the Afghans.

This is not surprising given the real nature of the war and the predominance of the Pushtunistan issue. Moabullah, a former mujahedin commander in the anti-Soviet Jihad who first joined the US in fighting al-Qaeda



in eastern Afghanistan quickly became a leading “Taliban” commander fighting the US and NATO forces in the same area. He represents the quintessence of the challenge in Afghanistan-Pakistan. “Pushtuns on both sides of the border are feeling that all the world is against them,” Moabullah explained in late-July 2009. The insurgency has sprung up because “the people were suffering. Pushtuns were feeling their life was tough.” The perceived threat to the Pushtunwali-based way of life is so unacceptable and intolerable that the Pushtun tribal population is willing to realign itself with the Jihadists because of their uncompromising anti-US position. “Slowly, slowly Mullah Omar began organizing and we all went back,” Moabullah explained. “We are one tribe in Pakistan and Afghanistan. There is no difference. We are the same culture, the same turban, the same language. Our people are coming and going. Pushtuns on both sides of the border have to help Taliban.”

Throughout, Washington adamantly refused to comprehend the situation and face the reality US forces were experiencing on the ground. In 2009, Special Forces Major Jim Gant urged the US to defuse the escalating war by dealing with “one tribe at a time” at the local level. There was no alternative to such a profound change in US strategy, he warned, because “Afghan tribes always have and always will resist any type of foreign intervention in their affairs.” Gant called for the deployment of US Special Forces teams to support the numerous Arbakai local tribal militias even though they were mistrustful of the Kabul government. Such cooperation would remove them from under the Taliban’s influence which was the higher US interest. However, US forces could build trust only “thorough and deep understanding and respect for Pashtunwali,” and in so doing impact the overall US posture in Afghanistan. Gant was cognizant of the extent of the change he was advocating. “A strategy of tribal engagement will require a complete paradigm shift at the highest levels of our military organization,” he wrote.

Official Washington reacted with fury. Capitalizing on Gant’s personal transgressions (living on site with a biographer he would later marry, consuming alcohol on site, etc.) - the Pentagon and the White House had the excuse to reject and refuse to address the professional criticism and proposals based on the unique success of Gant’s force in the field.

Senior US commanders in Afghanistan were also alarmed by the US failures. The internal doubts burst into the open in January 2010 when three senior intelligence officials - Major General Michael Flynn (who would become DIA Director and later Trump’s first National Security Adviser), USMC Captain Matt Pottinger (who still holds a senior position at the NSC), and Paul Batchelor (who is still a very senior civilian executive at DIA) - published a monograph titled *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*. Their verdict was precise and damning:

Eight years into the war in Afghanistan, the US intelligence community is only marginally relevant to the overall strategy. Having focused the overwhelming majority of its collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, the vast intelligence apparatus is unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which US and allied forces operate and the people they seek to persuade. Ignorant of local economics and landowners, hazy about who the powerbrokers are and how they might be influenced, incurious about the correlations between various development projects and the levels of cooperation among villagers, and disengaged from people in the best position to find answers - whether aid workers or Afghan soldiers - US intelligence officers and analysts can do little but shrug in response to high level decision-makers seeking the knowledge, analysis, and information they need to wage a successful counterinsurgency.



The authors-officials attributed the enduring US failure in Afghanistan to a profound lack of knowledge and understanding of the theater. They urged that the American effort would shift “from a focus on the enemy to a focus on the people of Afghanistan.” Since the US war effort was oblivious to “the environment in which we operate and the people we are trying to protect and persuade,” there was no way the US would succeed in Afghanistan. This urging was also ignored by a resentful Obama White House that ultimately got Flynn fired from the Army in April 2014 for intransigence regarding the situation in, and US counterterrorism policy toward, Afghanistan, Iran and Syria.

If anything, the overall situation has only deteriorated in recent years. At the peak of the US presence, local civic initiatives were used as instruments to bring in Kabul - thus alienating tribes and villages who would have otherwise cooperated with the US. As US forces withdrew and Afghan mercenaries (aka security forces) and corrupt officials got in - they only aggravated the situation and the indigenous insurrection escalated. Throughout, Pakistan tightly controlled and cleverly used Jihadist “Taliban” forces for major anti-Kabul operations such as spectacular bombings. As well, Pakistan ensured that the myriad of ISI-sponsored grassroots tribal forces kept resisting and fighting any attempt to establish a viable centralized government in Kabul. Significantly, the tribal grassroots forces needed, and still need, no outside encouragement to resolutely fight any attempt to enforce central authority - but the Pakistani support in funds, weapons, expertise and fighters has made the grassroots insurrection far more lethal. Ultimately, all these Pakistani undertakings have undermined the US efforts to legitimize and bolster the central authority in Kabul.

Meanwhile, the US focuses on the legitimacy and image of the Kabul regime even while the vast majority of the tribal grassroots profoundly rejects the very notion of a viable centralized government over-lording the tribes - be it from Kabul, Washington, or anywhere else. Moreover, with the passage of time, the legacy of the US help for both the anti-Soviet Afghan Jihad and the eviction of the Arab Neo-Salafis has all but evaporated, while the influence of the various Islamist-Jihadist “Taliban” entities rises because of their leading and exemplary role in the anti-Kabul fight and the generous ISI-origin assistance channeled through them. The increasingly popular influence of the Islamists-Jihadists adds Islamic motivation to the grassroots Pushtunwali-based rejection of the American-led effort at nation building. Thus, no matter what the US, or anybody else, does - there can be no solution to this irreconcilable dichotomy.

The extent of the despair of the Pushtun and Baluchi tribal grassroots is clear. In slightly over a generation, the uncompromising defiant struggle for preserving their Pushtunwali-based self-identities have taken the Pushtun and Baluchi tribes from one extreme to the other. Back in the 1980's, the tribes felt compelled to make deals with the Soviets against the Islamist threat from Pakistan fearing the imposition of Neo-Salafism. Since the early 2000's, the tribal grassroots are so petrified by the possible rise of a US-dominated Kabul, they reach out to the Pakistanis and their Jihadist proxies. In both extreme cases, the tribes are seeking deals against what they perceive to be profound insensitivities toward, interpreted as intentional threats to, their Pushtunwali-based way of life and value system. The only common denominator of these shifting of allegiances is that throughout the US was the preeminent supporter of the tribes' nemeses while claiming to be their savior. The tribal grassroots are reaching out to anybody who would closely cooperate with them against the American mortal threat. None of this should have happened had the US bothered to pay attention to the tribal grassroots - something the US has never done since getting involved in Afghanistan fighting in the mid-1970's.

And so, incapable of reconciling its own war aims with the two-and-a-half millennia of Pushtunwali-based tribal struggle against foreign invaders and centralized governance - the United States must face reality. In principle



and with a lot of knowledge and sophistication, the US and NATO can still reach out to the indigenous grassroots leadership, reconcile and work together on defusing the crisis and the establishment of a compromise acceptable to all. But such a daunting undertaking will take two generations to complete. Meanwhile, the exhausted US-NATO forces are vacating because their governments have long given-up on winning skirmishes against Pakistan-sponsored Taliban.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

### About the Author of this Issue

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Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

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