CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS
The analysis reported in the preceding chapters provides ample evidence in support of our contention that Tibet and Afghanistan present a unique combination having similarities and differences in their historical trajectories that helps us understand ethnic conflict and its security dimension.

For Tibet and Afghanistan to be at the center of both dialogue and conflict between civilizations is nothing new. Afghanistan’s location at the crossroads between Iran, Central Asia, the Arabian Sea, and India has given its mountain passes a strategic significance for centuries. At certain times, Afghanistan has acted as a buffer between competing empires and ideologies; at others it has served as a corridor through which armies marched. Attempts to colonize the country for strategic reasons, by the British in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and most recently by the erstwhile Soviet Union initiated changes in Afghanistan, which in the long run led the Afghans to establish non-state organisations with state-like capabilities in making war.

Similarly, Tibet also has certain geo-strategic and historical similarities with Afghanistan. Tibet has been of crucial importance to the dominant powers in South and East Asia in their respective strategic calculations in the past, just as it is now. The domination of the region by
one power or other, directly or indirectly, has been an accurate indication of its strategic value. Tibet has always been a buffer between China and India. In the past, it had a similar significance between, first, the Mongols and India, and later between British India and Imperial Russia and China. But the hurried military intervention and takeover of Tibet in 1950 clearly demonstrated the Chinese desire to occupy an area of highest strategic importance and not allow it to be taken over by any hostile or

Therefore, both Tibet and Afghanistan have been of central importance to world politics because of competing security interests of the great powers from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Until the middle of the last century, Tibet formed the geo-strategic corridor of defense importance to the regional peace and security of the concerned powers. However, the British withdrawal from South Asia in the late 1940s along with the rise of communist powers in China and Soviet Union disturbed the existing balance of forces which altered the buffer status of Tibet and Afghanistan.

British withdrawal from South Asia was followed by momentous events in world politics. The division of Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan, the communist revolution in China in 1949 and the emergence of bipolar structure of world politics after 1945 disturbed the
existing balance of forces, and the security of Tibet and Afghanistan got linked with the larger global structures of strategy and security.

It should be noted here that in the changed international political climate, all strategic and counter-strategic intervention came to be articulated in terms of either global capital-labour dichotomy or in that of contradictions between communism and capitalism. At any rate, beyond the ideological rhetoric between USSR, and US strategic competition for global influence and domination has been the hot pursuit of Cold War politics. Therefore, military interventions in both Tibet and Afghanistan, even though, carried out to satisfy the respective strategic needs of People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) respectively, were wrapped up in the Marxist rhetoric of ‘liberation’ from ‘imperialism’.

The PRC, since its takeover of Tibet in 1950, has instituted its complex system of domination marked by tight, multi-layered Chinese security system, structural violence and denial of social space for any voice of dissent. This has created endemic strain between objectives and policies of Han dominated Maoist State on the one hand, and the subjugated Tibetan civil society on the other. As a result, PRC’s ‘notions of citizenship, patriotism and love for country’ that undergrid loyalty to modern state, face competing conceptions of identity, loyalty and
legitimacy in Tibet. Thus Tibetan ethnic revolts and its desire for ethnically based sovereignty is in order to escape what they see as the oppressive imposition of a centralized state in which they perceive themselves marginalized. Thus, the systematic domination of Han state on Tibetan culture and civil society has produced conditions of anarchy and violence, which are inherently linked to the larger strategic context of military intervention and not so ‘internal’, as the PRC claims them to be. Mainly because of the conflict in the border region of India. As we all know that the fundamental reason for 1962 Sino-Indian border conflicts was the disappearance of Tibet as a geo-strategic space between India and China. At any rate, in international relations, the external-internal divide, the distinction between interstate or systemic causes, and intrastate or unit-level causes in the understanding crisis and reasons of ethnic conflict, is increasingly being challenged as simply a perpetuation of ‘statistic myth’.

Like Tibet, Afghanistan also, particularly after the Second World War faced new changes that occurred in the international system. The British withdrawl led to the creation of Pakistan on the southern flank of Afghanistan’s boarder, while Soviets were across another border in the north. In the context of Soviet foreign policy, Afghanistan acquired the same geo-strategic significance as it had during the ‘Great Game’ of late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, played between Tsarist Russia and Great Britain. However in the new global situation, its significance as a buffer was threatened by the American hegemony over Pakistan in South Asia. Regionally, Afghanistan’s Islamic and ethno-linguistic links with the non-Russian Republics of Soviet Central Asia and Iran enhanced its security and strategic significance for the Russians. Moreover, they always viewed Afghanistan as their own backyard, in the same way, as the Chinese Maoists viewed Tibet. Soviet geo-strategic interests were supported by the ‘Sovietization’ of the Afghan State. Massive aid flows from the mid fifties until the Soviet intervention in 1979 produced a strong army and increased its capacity of administrative surveillance by creating a class of state managers and intellectuals in Afghanistan. Though, the domination of Pashtuns over Hazars, Tajiks, Turkmens etc. in state structures and army left the other ethnic groups dissatisfied.

The expansion of the centralized state in the traditional structures of Afghan society along with the internal military and political hegemony of Pashtuns altered the balance of relationship between various Afghan communities and the state. The realignment of forces, to balance the state-society relationship by a remodelling of the Afghan State in Marxist-Leninist terms under the influence of Soviet Union, was expressed through new political structures and symbols. The leadership of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) decided to
change the national flag from traditional Islamic Green to red in the wake of Soviet backed Saur revolution of 1978. For a people attuned to the symbolic gesture, such a sign was an unmistakable symbol of alien domination. Islam became an over-arching symbol and language of protest against the cultural idioms of the Soviet backed Marxist regime in Afghanistan. This ideological polarization became critical to the failure of the Communists to gain popular legitimacy, and to the success of the Afghan Islamic resistance forces, the Mujaheddin, in securing domestic support and attracting international backing. Although the resistance rapidly split into various groups, the overall ideological schism between the Mujaheddin and the Communists facilitated a degree of inter-group cooperation and national consciousness within the resistance. Ideological polarization was instrumental and enabled the resistance to maintain sufficient operational cohesion, if not at the leadership level (marred by growing personal rivalries), then at least at the level of field commanders and their followers inside Afghanistan. However, two important factors changed the character of the resistance, from loosely national to fragmented along the lines of Afghanistan’s ethnic mosaic. One was the direct Soviet intervention with its armed forces in 1979, which resulted in the breakdown of a carefully crafted national framework maintained by the pre-communist Afghan governments—a framework that had helped to structure the longest period of relative peace and stability in
Afghanistan's modern history (1929-78). The Soviets and their surrogates restructured the country politically, socially and economically, altering the patterns of authority, power, and loyalty within each micro-society and the relations between them. Yet they could not build a substitute.

The second factor was the way in which international powers conducted their counter-interventionist strategy and support for resistance. The most important of these powers were Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and US. Although they all proclaimed a single goal, liberating Afghanistan, in practice they varied in their objectives, the nature and extent of assistance, and method of distribution of assistance.

While the current conflict in Afghanistan derives in part from Afghanistan's own ethnic fractures, it is aggravated by the fact that outside actors have found it increasingly convenient to focus their national and strategic interests on the faultlines of Afghanistan's disturbed politics. Here the current hegemony of the Taliban in Afghanistan, supported by Pakistan, deserves a special attention. The Pakistan sponsored Taliban and its application of orthodox Islamic practices to Afghanistan's national agenda directly contradicts the national ideology of India and Iran. Pakistan supported Taliban has heightened tensions and insecurity among the 'regional linkage states' by promoting
cross border ethnic clientelism based on Islam. It is a worrying development in the region of numerous potential and active international conflicts, most importantly the Indo-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir.

Finally, beside the commonalities, if we contrast the Tibetan and the Afghan situations then we find that Afghanistan invited external intervention due to internal ethnic, regional and cultural distinctions as well as elite competition, whereas differences among the four regions (Amdo, Kham, Ü, and Tsang) of Tibet are relatively superficial, yet it was colonised. However, sectarian differences with regard to Buddhist practices always existed among the Tibetans. But, the predominance of Gelugpa over Sakayapa, Kagupa and Nyingapa sects for the last three hundred years in Tibetan politics has put up a unified nationalist response against external interventions. The leadership and stature of the current Dalai Lama, who belongs to the Gelugpa sect has also helped to submerge the sectarian differences in the wake of China’s colonisation of Tibet.

Therefore, the Tibetan ethnic protests of 1959 and 1989 against the Maoist hegemony and Confucian China are an indication of absence of mechanical solidarity between Confucian and Buddhist social structures, notwithstanding the sectarian differences within Tibetan society. Therefore, the Tibetan case is a clear example of colonialism in the age
of democracy, freedom and human rights. In this sense the Afghans never faced the direct impact of Slavic nationalism. Its resistance despite the internal ethnic divisions had the unifying force of Islam along with the world-wide reaction against Soviet intervention. At the same time, the Tibetan ethnic nationalism has not succeeded in achieving independence from the Chinese yoke. There are mainly three factors behind it. The Chinese State power under the control of Hans has grown much stronger. Secondly, since nearly ninety percent of the so-called nation-state are in fact multinational states and therefore potential and actual cases of ethnic conflict, the international community has a vested interest in maintaining the territorial integrity of each if them other for security reasons. And finally, small-scale nationalism involving only minority communities fails to generate the required social power for political expression of their democratic will vis-à-vis the structural domination of modern state.