CHAPTER III

SOVIET INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN (1979): INTRA-ETHNIC CONFLICT, INTERNAL CRISIS AND INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC RESPONSE
The Afghan Conflict in the late 1970s predominantly reflected a clash of two ideologies: Marxism-Leninism, as expounded by the pro-Soviet coup makers of Saur revolution of 1978 which was subsequently reinforced by the Soviet invasion of 1979; and Islam, the religion of Afghans. This ideological polarization was critical to the communists’ failure 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 enabling 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 resistance’s character, 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 boundaries of patterns of authority, power, and loyalty within and between each micro-society. Yet they could not build a substitute. A 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 the United States. Although they all proclaimed a single goal of liberating Afghanistan---in practice they varied in their objectives, the nature and extent of assistance, and method of its distribution.

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 fault lines of Afghanistan’s disturbed politics. The outside involvement has not only further polarized the Afghans along ethnic lines, but it has also heightened tensions among the ‘regional linkage states’—a worrying development in the region of numerous potential or active international conflicts, the most important being the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir.

Cross-border ethnic clientelism has thus emerged as a formidable obstacle in the achievement collective peace and security in Southwest Asia - a region comprising Afghanistan at its epicentre bordering Iran, Pakistan and the non-Russian Central Asian republics.
Trans-border ethnic alignment, conflict and big power involvement in these conflicts now dominates the region's geo-politics.

In this context, the objective of this chapter is to map out the linkage between the fundamental strategic interests and objectives of Soviet intervention, its continued commitment to Marxist-regimes and unfolding of social dynamics of resistance in Afghanistan with international and regional dimensions.

Soviet Strategic Interests, Military Intervention and Instability in Afghanistan

In a number of ways, the rivalry between the United States and the former Soviet Union over Afghanistan is similar to the intense Anglo-Russian security competition throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth until early twentieth century in this region. On several occasions, these rivalries resulted in external interventions, which erupted into major wars. Therefore, to understand the current security crisis and instability in Afghanistan, it is important to examine the Soviet and interests and objectives in the overall strategic calculus, in the region, which prompted military intervention in 1979.

Southwest Asia is a region defined by British as “east of Suez”.1 It is a sprawling, heterogeneous region stretching from the Red Sea to the Indian subcontinent on the rim of continental Asia. It is Asia west

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of China and south of the former Soviet Union. Historically, it has been a collision zone of the Great empires and Civilizations.

Afghanistan, in this region, took shape within its current borders in this region as the British and Russian imperial powers tried to regulate their competition and prevent conflict in the contest for influence and advantage in the ‘Great Game’. The frontiers thus defined were purely strategic and did not correspond to any ethnic or historical boundary. As an English analyst noted:

What was meant by the term scientific frontier in this connection? ... it would have been impossible to demarcate on the north-west of our Indian Empire a frontier which would satisfy ethnological, political and military requirements......what was meant by scientific frontier was the best strategical boundary which could be used as a line of defense against invasion from the direction of Central Asia.  

Thus, the identity of Afghanistan reflected the relations of force and strategic needs of the imperial/hegemonic powers, rather than the political or social structure within its boarders. This externally prompted transformation inevitably entailed interactions between international and domestic politics. Typically, Soviet intervention\(^3\) in


\(^3\) "Intervention must be distinguished from involvement. Intervention is used to denote the direct and intrusive projection of military power on behalf of a third world client in order to bring about a preferred political outcome. Specifically, in contradistinction to arms transfer, intervention entails the commitment of combat or combat-supported personnel to
Afghanistan illustrates clear linkage between its location as a strategic border state having co-ethnics beyond its borders in the neighbouring former Soviet non-Russian Central Asian republics, Iran and Pakistan. The spilling of co-ethnics across its borders formed dyads (The concept of dyads has been explained in the first chapter of this work in details), an ideal situation for the spread of ethnic conflict, and Soviet security and strategic interests.

In this context, historically, USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republic) had all it could want in its relationship with Afghanistan decades prior to invasion. The Soviet Union was the first country to recognize Afghanistan’s independence and sovereignty in the early decades of 20th century. Congratulating the achievement of independence from Britain, Lenin in a letter to Amanullah (Amir of Afghanistan) proposed good neighbourly relations and a joint struggle against Great Britain. Taking off from here the two countries exchanged diplomats at the ambassador level and concluded cultural, educational, and technical treaties on 28 February 1921.4

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Welcoming the Conclusion of 1921 Treaty, Lenin sent the following message to Kabul: “The old Imperialist Russia has disappeared forever, and now a new, Soviet Russia ... stretches out the hand of friendship and fraternity to all peoples of the East and the Afghan people in the first place ...”

Another document to underlie the warming up of Soviet-Afghan relations was the Treaty of Neutrality and Mutual Non-Aggression in 1931, which intended to get Afghan Government’s commitment not to allow its territory to be used for anti-Soviet purposes.

Aware of the strategic balance of forces and limitations of the Soviet military capability, Stalin never established a communist party in Afghanistan, though he had done so in nearly every other country bordering Soviet Union by 1921. In 1921 Chicheria, instructed the

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6 In fact, the urgency of such a treaty became necessary from the point of defensive motivation of Soviet leaders. Soviet-Afghan relations had suffered a setback when in the aftermath of Bolshevik revolution, the pan-Turkish movement tried to intervene in new Asian Soviet Republics by organizing guerilla raids by the *Basmachis* from Afghanistan. The latter country, hence, had become militarily sensitive as the Red Army went into Afghan territory in hot pursuit of the raiders.

7 Arnold lists the founding dates of communist parties in other bordering Soviet Union: Korea, 1925; China, 1921; Mongolia, 1921; Iran, 1920; Turkey, 1920; Romania, 1921; Czechoslovakia, 1921; Poland, 1918; and Norway, 1923.

first Soviet ambassador to Kabul: “You should by all means avoid the fatal mistake of trying to plant communism in the country (Afghanistan)”

However, Stalin’s successors after the mid-1950s with a combination of three factors advocated a ‘forward policy’ to undermine the US policy of containment of communism in the Third World. They were:

i) Confidence in the stability of the Soviet imperial system in Eastern Europe and the its border in the far East.

ii) Opportunities provided by the breakup of the British, French, Dutch and Belgian Empires to extend the Soviet imperial influence with the independence of their constituent parts

iii) Military capability of Soviet Union

Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, during this period, entailed extensive economic, technical, and military assistance along with active support to pro-Moscow communist groups.

Party theorists under Khruschev decided to have political involvement in the non-communist post-colonial countries by

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supporting communist movements and extending aid to governments whose non-alignment with the west served Soviet strategic interests. Afghanistan was the first state to face this policy because of its contiguity to USSR as well as it had retained its historical strategic significance by maintaining and neutrality in post-war situation. On the other hand, the United States had recruited Afghanistan’s neighbour, Pakistan, into both the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) to secure its own strategic interests and sphere of influence in South West Asia. Pakistan, an ally of the United States in South Asia during the cold war opposed Afghanistan’s claims over the areas of Northwest Pakistan including the tribal territories, that were inhabited by Pashtun co-ethnics. The government of Afghanistan argued that the inhabitants of ‘Pashtunistan’ as is called those areas, should enjoy the right to self-determination. USSR also supported Afghanistan’s over the issue of ‘Pashtunistan’. The overlapping of interests between USSR and Afghanistan directly conflicted with those of the United States in the region. To maintain strategic balance in the region following the

9 Afghanistan, opposed Pakistan over the status of the Pashtuns. When British India became independent as India and Pakistan, Afghanistan argued that the tribal areas, too, should have had the option of declaring independence as the nation of Pashtunistan, which presumably would have been integrated into Afghanistan, making the Pashtuns a clear majority there. Instead the colonial authorities allowed the tribes to choose only between India and Pakistan, and they opted for the latter. The resentment and fear that the Pashtunistan issue aroused in the predominantly Punjabi rulers of Pakistan, especially the military and, continue to affect Pakistani perceptions of interests in Afghanistan.
dictates of the cold war politics, the United States engagement with Pakistan fostered an international strategic realignment in Southwest Asia. Pakistan received military and other supports from the United States, which also supported its positions on regional and international issues, while Afghanistan received similar supplies and support from the Soviet Union. From 1955 to 1958 the Soviet Union provided Afghanistan with $1.27 billion in economic aid and roughly $1.25 billion in military aid compared to the United States which furnished $533 million in economic aid.\(^{10}\) Some historians read a strategic aim behind Moscow’s act of assistance. John C. Griffiths in conversation with Brezhnev opined “Military aid has usually been the main goal of Russian economic penetration in the third world because of virtual inevitability of military coup or military backing for communist inspired coup.”\(^{11}\)

Briefly put, by the late 1970s, USSR had at its southern border an independent state, leaping toward its in a ‘special relationship’ recognized and unchallenged by the west. This ‘special relationship’ went through several stages. It began from engagement to interference in Post-Stalin period to intervention during Breznev’s period through Soviet-oriented Communist Organization, People’s Democratic Party


of Afghanistan (PDPA) founded in 1965. Nur Muhammad Taraki was secretary-general of the party and Babrak Kamal his deputy. In 1967 the party split into two factions. *Khalq*, led by Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin, and *Parcham* led by Babrak.\(^{12}\) Soviet KGB (Soviet State secret police) and GRU (*Glavnoya Politiches Knye Upravfeniye* or Main political directorate) also extended institutional and political support to the in PDPA activities as they helped recruit and train the party members. The KGB had invested in *Parcham* especially Babrak Karmal, and the GRU in *Khalq* especially in military officers.

The reunion of *Khalq* and *Parcham* factions of PDPA in 1977 reveals the extent of penetration of Soviet Union into Afghanistan is domestic affairs. On the reunion of the two factions of PDPA a written statement by a senior CPI official, V.K. Krishnan said that mediation between the Afghan factions occurred “with the knowledge and consent of [the] Communist party of [the] Soviet Union; otherwise [the] CPI would not have undertaken it. Possibly, the suggestion for such an initiative on the part of the CPI also came from Moscow”.\(^{13}\)

\(^{12}\) *Khalq* [the masses] and *Parcham* [the flag] were the names of faction’s newspapers.

\(^{13}\) Published in official organ of the Community Party of India, (CPI), *Party Life*, May 22\(^{nd}\), 1976
The unity of the two factions had little to do with putting up an alternative United revolutionary front as Halliday would put it in Leninist Jargon, “It was when Khalq learnt the need to work in the army and Parcham understood the perils of frontism, that a new genuinely revolutionary conjecture developed”\(^\text{14}\), it was rather a Soviet strategic move to reduce the possibility of Khalqi and Parchami military officers sabotaging each other’s coup plans which eventually happened in August, 1978.

It is well known that the PDPA’s coup in April 1978 (Saur Revolution) succeeded not because it had mass support or a superior organization but because of the firm entrenchment of its cadres in Afghanistan’s military structure. From 1956 to 1978, 3,725 Afghan military officers-mostly from the elite air force and armored corps were trained in Soviet Union.\(^\text{15}\)

Parcham and Khalq built their respective bases among the Soviet-trained army officers. The military, with its close Soviet contacts, became their main institutional base to run the state after the Saur revolution.

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\(^{14}\) Fred Halliday, “Revolution in Afghanistan”, *New Left Review*, no. 112, November-December, 1978, p. 27

At any rate, the PDPA regime, in Afghanistan following the Saur revolution was not regarded as being Marxist either by political observers or by the ordinary citizens of the country. On twentieth of May, a specialist of Afghan affairs, Louis Dupree, published a letter in the *New York Times* under the heading: “A communist coup is unjustified”. Also, the communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) congratulated the People’s Democratic party of Afghanistan in a language normally reserved for fellow communists but carefully avoided formally categorizing it as communist. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of the new regime left little room for doubt and to legitimize the Saur military coup the leadership justified it as a bona fide revolution that was based on the principle of socialist revolution. President Taraki wrote:

If the Great October Socialist Revolution in 1917 rocked the whole world, the Great Saur Revolution, which triumphed with the inspiration of the Great October Revolution, also jolted all the toiling people of the world and drew their best wishes. It was particularly an example for the developing countries to liberate their own toilers from the oppression of exploiters and to wrap up vestiges of imperialism and reaction.

Deputy Prime Minister Amin also stated:

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"We are struggling to uproot feudalism in order to pass directly from a feudal society to a society where the exploitation of a man by his fellow man will be unknown".\textsuperscript{18} However, the Afghan communist leaders were always conscious of the fact that they had created a revolution by proxy and found themselves unable to establish a political society "in which the polity specifically arranges itself for political contestation to gain control over public power and the state apparatus".\textsuperscript{19}

In fact when the PDPA siezed power in 1978, it did not organise any class-based mass organisation such as trade unions or peasant association. This reflected both the weakness of class formation in the society and the social character of the PDPA itself which was developed by the members of the military elite. According to an official biography of \textit{Khalq} leader Taraki,

comrade Taraki ...had intimated the party since the 1973 that it was possible in Afghanistan to wrest... political power through a shortcut (in asmuch) as the classic way in which the productive forces undergo different stages to build a society based on scientific socialism would take a long time. This shortcut could be utilized by working extensively in the armed forces. Previously, the army was considered as the tool of dictatorship and despotism of


ruling class and it was not imaginable to use it before toppling its employer.²⁰

As a result the regime, within few months of the coup, faced strong resistance from the peasantry as well as the members of the clergy for the ideological framework of policies sought to be implemented through authoritarian means. The policies viz. agrarian reform, elimination of illiteracy etc. used an explicit Marxist terminology which was real affront to a population deeply grounded in Islamic values. Also, the implementation of the regime’s policies involved the incursion of the state machinery into village community in a particularly brutal and unprecedented way. Hence, the regime’s domestic restructuring did not succeed in providing the government with a social base of support, but, on the contrary, it created a hostile consensus against itself and hardened rural resistance. In response to rural resistance and uprising the regime engaged in collective reprisals. One such as the killing of an estimated 1,170 unarmed villagers in Kerala, Kunar on 20th April 1978.²¹ These reprisals carried out by state on its citizens contributed to the erosion of the legitimacy of the new regime.

The resistance was largely orchestrated by local religious or social leader soon joined by Islamic militants and high state official of the old regime.

Far from stabilizing Afghanistan, the PDPA regime itself fragmented, and its policies soon led to the breakdown of state institutions carefully built up over the past century. The role of Afghanistan in the international security system threatened the Soviet political and military interests in face of the growing instability due to ‘elite fragmentation’ in PDPA leadership.  

In the event of generalized instability and fluidity of the internal situation in Afghanistan, Moscow feared that the United States interference in the affairs of Kabul with Pakistani assistance. Soviet inaction at this time could have led to growing chaos and eventual overthrow of Marxist regime in Kabul to a more pro-Western or pro-Chinese foreign alignment. Moreover, it could have had repercussions in Eastern Europe and other parts of the Third World.

Once again, the goal of protecting the borders of an empire seemed to call for intervention in the buffer state’s domestic politics. As Garthoff wrote: “The Soviet Leaders decided to intervene militarily in Afghanistan not because they were unwilling to keep it as

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22 Amin deposed Taraki in a coup on September 1979 and became General Secretary of the PDPA and head of the state on 16th September 1979. See Hafizullah Emadi, op.cit.,no.17,p. 88.
a buffer, but precisely because they saw no other way to ensure that it would remain a buffer.” 23 Responding to the situation, the Soviet Union sent troops to take control of Afghanistan in December 1979. Leonid Breznev, General Secretary of CPSU during an interview justified sending troops to Afghanistan on the grounds that “the unceasing armed intervention, the well advanced plot by external forces of reaction created a real threat that Afghanistan would lose its independence and be turned into an imperialist military bridgehead on our country’s southern border. In other words, the time came when we no longer could but respond to the request of the government of friendly Afghanistan. To have acted otherwise would have meant leaving Afghanistan a prey to imperialism, allowing the aggressive forces to repeat in that country what they had succeeded in doing for instance, in Chile where the peoples freedom was drowned in blood. To act otherwise would have meant to watch passively the origination on our southern border of a seat of serious danger to the security of the Soviet State.” 24

What ever the precise mixture of motivations, Soviet Union effectively moved its boundaries southward and broadened its military capability in the region. Its main concern was to defend its interests


24 Quoted in Hafizullah Emadi, op. cit., no.17, p. 90.
and to project itself as the dominant power in the region. The 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan has been explained by a political columnist in *Izvestia* in the following terms:

> We knew that the decision to bring in troops would not be popular in the modern world, even if it was absolutely legal. But we also knew that we would have ceased to be a great power if we refrained from carrying the burden of taking unpopular but necessary decisions, extraordinary decisions prompted by extraordinary circumstances." Soviet intellectuals.

Primakov and Bovin wrote: “At the end of 1979, the situation became critical...we could not and did not want to betray our sense of responsibility. The USSR could not have acted otherwise. It could not allow a victory by religions fanatics’, nor tolerate the 'counter revolutionary ignominy of Amin’s group.’

Of course, several factors encouraged and prompted the transition from Soviet involvement in Afghanistan in the post-Stalin period to a military invasion of the country during Breznev’s regime but certain themes show an unchanging pattern because of geography.

(i) As a bordering state, Afghanistan was an object of continuing Soviet interest and, it was generally conceded, legitimacy so.

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Contiguity generated demands and also facilitated the exercise of power;

(ii) The domestic situation in Afghanistan was in turmoil, and Soviet influence could not guarantee outcomes. Thus, Soviet aims progressively demanded greater certainty, implying direct control;

(iii) Soviet intervention was a defensive reaction to the growing concern over possible instability due to the spilling over cross border co-ethnics in the non Russian Central Asian Republics from Afghanistan;

(iv) An overestimation of the costs of suppressing Afghan tribal resistance and installing a more compliant Soviet Satrap;

(v) A fear that China and the United States would exploit a Soviet set back in Afghanistan and acquire influence in the Muslim World;

(vi) A shedding of restraint occasioned by the deterioration in relations with the United States;

(vii) A manifestation of traditional Russian imperialism, which had always sought to acquire additional territories along its periphery.
While, the willingness of the Soviet leadership to commit combat personnel in Afghanistan require muticausal explanations, but the strategic factor tops in the hierarchy of decisional considerations. Moscow expected that the accretion of local and regional advantages from its intervention in Afghanistan would improve the strategic context in which it conducts its diplomacy, stymie its adversary, and promote a wide range of political and military objectives. Under the broad category of ‘strategic context’ was subsumed a diversity of separated but interrelated aims, among which are; to prevent a US backed client from benefiting from regional instability or conflict and thereby to forestall any ‘demonstration effect’ that might rebound to US advantage, and to acquire, retain, and control military facilities in the region.

In this context, Afghanistan’s location as a bordering state gave the USSR ‘legitimate rights’ transcending the question of ideology. Phrases such as “in close proximity to” and “cannot remain indifferent.” Vis-à-vis Afghanistan serve as a code, alluding to some unidentified rights vis-à-vis bordering states. Soviet security concerns got a hype in the wake of Islamic revolution in Iran and its possible ‘demonstration effect’ on the Muslim co-ethnics dispersed along the

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28 ibid., p. 168
Soviet-Afghan border in the non-Russian republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. As James Critchlow has noted, 'the Soviet Muslims in Central Asia, mainly the Turkic and Iranian peoples', "share proximity and historical experience" with respect to bordering Muslim countries. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tadjikistan share over 800 miles of borders with Afghanistan. The Soviet Muslims "have had extensive opportunities to interact with conationalists in the Afghan population, which consists of four million Uzbeks and three million Tajiks, plus smaller but significant numbers of Turkmens".

The Soviets were naturally concerned about the loyalty of ethnic groups in the non-Russian republics of Central Asia bordering Afghanistan. These ethnic identities grew in importance because "many of the same Moslem ethnic groups involved in the counter revolution in Afghanistan are also found in very large number in Soviet Central Asia.... And Moscow worried about the possible effect of rising Moslem consciousness on its own substantial Islamic population, decided to try to short-circuit such phenomenon by action in Afghanistan".

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30 Ibid., p. 53.

It is not simply their common ethnicity determined by such factors as race, language, and culture that bound the Afghan ethnics with their counterparts in the USSR. Their common religion, namely Islam, is also an important factor in the overall equation.\(^\text{32}\) In fact since 1964, Soviet authorities followed a cautious policy of using Islam for pursuing their strategy towards the Muslim world beyond the Soviet frontiers. By opening communication channels between the Muslims of Soviet Central Asia, the Soviets wanted to create the impression that Islam was free in the Soviet land and that the Soviet union with its 43 million Muslim population was a better partner for the Muslim world than the west.\(^\text{33}\)

At the same time, the CPSU seemed to have reservation about using its Muslim cadres to promoting communist revolution abroad. This pattern was temporarily disrupted by the Saur revolution of 1978 and, subsequently by the military intervention of 1979 when the Central Asia Muslims were employed at all levels of Afghanistan’s

\(^{32}\) In the Iranian revolution and Afghan resistance, Islamic fundamentals played a crucial part in the first by providing the motive force that toppled the Shah of Iran in 1979, and in the other by providing the agents of counter revolution aiming at the ouster of the Soviet supported Marxist regime. Certain Islamic regimes, typified by those in Iran and Pakistan, harboured refugees from Afghanistan to aid them in their resistance to this Soviet regime in Afghanistan. The possibility that, if the resistance in Afghanistan succeeded, the three volatile Turkmens, Uzbeks and Tadjiks peoples, all of them being Muslims, might confront the Russians from the south creating an adverse impact in Soviet Central Asia.

administration as there were few Russians with sufficient knowledge of local conditions and language. Moscow’s sensitivity to Islam and its possible impact on its own Muslim population became evident when soon after the military intervention in Afghanistan. From January 1980, Kremlin began to systematically pull out army units with Central Asian soldiers and replaced them with purely Slav units, suspecting many of the Central Asian Muslims under the religions and political influence of the Afghans. Therefore, the fear that the religious fervour sweeping through Iran might inflict and inflame the similar passions in Afghanistan and also destabilize the Soviet Muslim population on the Afghan-Iranian border, might have been a factor in Soviet calculation leading to intervention in Afghanistan.

Politics of Resistance: International Strategic Response And Intra Ethnic Conflict in Afghanistan

To most Americans the Soviet action in Afghanistan in December 1979 was nothing less than an invasion, they viewed it as a part of a Soviet master plan, to undermine and overwhelm the west by increasing its control over oil-rich Persian Gulf. In his state of the Union Address on January 23, 1980, President Carter termed the invasion as the “most serious threat to peace since the second world war.”34 US National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brezezinski in his

statement on December 30, 1979, observed that the Soviet intervention was a “qualitative new step involving direct invasion of a country outside the Warsaw Pact through the use of Soviet armed forces.”\textsuperscript{35}

The Americans also alleged that a major intention behind the Soviet move in Afghanistan was to bring the oil-fields of the Gulf region under Moscow’s influence and control and thereby threaten the west as Carter stated in his state of the Union Address in 1980.

The region which is now threatened by Soviet troops in Afghanistan is of great strategic importance. It contains more than two-thirds of world’s exportable oils. The Soviet effort to dominate Afghanistan has brought Soviet forces to within 300 miles of the Indian Ocean and close to the straits of Hormuz—a waterway through which most of the world’s oil must flow. The Soviet Union is now attempting to consolidate a strategic position. Therefore, that poses a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil.\textsuperscript{36}

The apparent threat from the Soviet invasion prompted the United States to use its hegemony as a provider of financial aid and as a formidable power to coordinate cooperation among partners in Southwest Asia. Washington concentrated on solidifying the alliance


\textsuperscript{36} For the transcript of President Carter’s state of the Union Address to the US congress see The New York Times, Jan. 24\textsuperscript{th} 1980, p. A.12.
system through aid to Pakistan, consultations with Saudi Arabia, and elaboration of a cooperative system with these partners to provide aid to the Mujaheddin. The aid flows, reinforced by a common ideology of militant anti-communism, solidified relations between the United States and Gen. Mohammad Zia ul-Haq’s all the Pashtuns in the region under Pakistan’s control. Pakistan had its own strategic interests in supporting the Afghan resistance. Pakistan sought to link Pashtuns on both sides of the 2400 kilometre long Afghan-Pakistani border in a trans-territorial ethnic enclave, which Pakistan could use as a leverage, to influence the direction of the Afghan resistance. It also helped to end the long-standing Afghan aspiration of creating a theoretically independent but in practice Afghanistan linked ‘Pashtunistan’ in the Pashtun areas of north-western and western Pakistan. Also, under the cover of countering the Soviet invasion, Pakistan built a strong Afghan politico-military force to achieve the above goals as well as strategic depth against India in Central Asia from medium to long term. *Taliban* is a product of it.

Gen. Zia’s regime, who was seeking legitimacy for his own military dictatorship through the programme of Islamization took advantage of the latitude it received to create a system of aid that protected Pakistani security interests. It did so by weakening Afghan nationalism and favouring the most radical Sunni Pashtun Islamic groups.
Soviet intervention in Afghanistan might have been an answer to assure the allegiance of their own large Muslim population in the face of rising Islamic assertiveness but, in the process, it disturbed the Muslim ethnic population spread across the political map of southwest, Middle-East and Central Asia.

In Afghanistan’s case none of the ethnic groups live or inhabit it exclusively. None but the Pashtuns claim Afghanistan as their chief area of habitation, who are also spread across the ‘Durand Line’, which divides Pakistan and Afghanistan internationally. The groups living to the north of Hindu Kush range, which divides the country from east to west, are Turkmens, Uzbeks, and Kirghiz, all speaking Turkic languages and dialects. In addition, Persian speakers—Tajiks and other ethnics have also traditionally inhabited this region. All of these groups have large or major portions of their populations located within the Soviet Union.

In the west, Afghanistan serves as home for Persian and Turkmen speakers. Both the Turkmens and the Tajiks reside across the Afghan-Iran border. Therefore, culturally, several Afghan ethnic groups overlap into Iran as well. In the south and the east of Afghanistan live the major portion of Pashtuns together with Baluchis

37 The largest ethnic groups are the Pashtuns, followed by Tajiks, the Uzbeks and the Hazaras for details on Afghanistan’s ethnic groups and their demographic location see Appendix I and Map I
and Brahuis. All these three ethnic groups have co-ethnics spread across Pakistan and Iran.

The spread of co-ethnic spread across international border in this region created a complex set of dyads (The concept of dyads has been developed in chapter-I, Ethnic Conflict and International Security: Theoretical Considerations, pp.) in which international powers conducted their respective counter interventionist support for the Afghan resistance against Soviet invasion. The most important of these powers were Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the US. They began to promote Mujaheddin with religious and sectarian rather than nationalist orientation.

The Pakistani authorities, who had already provided military training to thousands of Afghan Islamists and who wanted to avoid at all costs the establishment of armed nationalist guerillas in ‘Pasthunistan’, refused to recognize parties and exiles associated with the nationalist mainstream in the old regime. To offset Afghan nationalism, Pakistan promoted the Pastun ethnic particularism and Pakistan’s Inter-service Intelligence (ISI) began to promote Hizb-I-Islami of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar—a Pashtun and radical Islamist having most elaborate organization and structure among the other seven resistance groups\textsuperscript{38} recognized by Islamabad.\textsuperscript{38} see Appendix

\textsuperscript{38} see Appendix
Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was also supported by President Bhutto in Pakistan. He welcomed Islamic exiles from Afghanistan and consistently favoured the Pashtuns among them. In 1970-71, war with India, the Islamists almost alone in Afghanistan had protested against their government’s pro-India policy. The influx of Islamic refugees after 1974 was a welcome opportunity especially if the Pashtuns among them could be used to counter Daoud’s nationalist propaganda among the tribes. Bhutto who had come to power in the wake of Pakistan’s loss of its eastern wing, was particularly sensitive to Afghanistan’s claim over ‘Pashtunistan’ and was eager to support the refugee Pashtuns as a source of counterpressure against Daoud.

The Saudi Arabia and US approaches to the Afghan resistance reinforced the Pakistani agenda. United States along with the Saudis who, substantially financed and supported it, paid little attention to what Pakistan wanted to achieve out of the crisis, as long as Islamabad’s activities helped them to realize their goals.

The Saudis wanted not only to appear as the defender of Islam against Communism; but also to export their brand of traditionalist, Sunni Wahabi Islam to Afghanistan and to ensure that their main regional rival and Shi’ite Iran was denied the opportunity to make any sectarian or political gains. The Saudis also tended to view non-Pashtun resistance groups as a potential threat to their own interests.
Thus, Saudi Arabia backed, willingly or unwillingly Pakistan’s support for the Pashtun *Mujaheddin* groups.

The US leading the western aid for Afghan resistance also ignored Pakistan’s role in distributing it because what Washington wanted was to make sure that Pakistan remained firm as a frontline ally against Soviet expansionism. Also, the US objectives were to turn the Afghan adventure into a costly and humiliating operation for the Soviet Union; to prevent the Khomeini regime from exploiting the Afghan crisis to its advantage; to reassure Washington’s allies that its post-Vietnam isolationism was coming to an end; and to rebuild US influence in the region, which had been shattered after the Shah’s fall in Iran 1979.\(^{39}\)

Therefore, both Saudi Arabia and US, the main international aid providers to the Afghan resistance ignored Pakistan’s support and preference of ethnic Pashtuns, especially Hikmatyar’s, *Hizb-I-Islami*, to the nationalist minded Afghan groups. Thus, when leaders of some nationalist parties, supported by tribal leaders and some traditional clergy; tried to organize a national resistance through a *Loya Jirga*,\(^{40}\) Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States refused to recognize or

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40 Great council; highest representative institution in Afghan state.
aid the Jirga. In doing so, US, Saudi Arabia and especially Pakistan reinforced Pashtun ethnicity as a basis of political identity, and consequently aggravated latent ethnic differences within Afghan resistance.

The Islamic regime of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran was preoccupied with its own domestic consolidation in the wake of Islamic revolution of 1979, so, it was opposed to its involvement in any scheme which could make it appear to be cooperating with its arch adversaries—US and its regional allies. In the situation, Iran decided to channel a limited amount of aid, but in a manner which would enhance its own regional interests. It selected those groups of *Mujaheddin* which it regarded as receptive to Iranian influence—mainly three Shi’ite groups which represented a segment of Afghanistan’s 15-20% Shi’ite population. In order to strengthen its clients vis-a-vis Sunni Pasthuns based in Pakistan, Iran induced Shia parties to unite into a single party, the *Hizb-I-Wahadat* (unity party) in early 1990s. Iran’s activity in Afghanistan increased only after the withdrawal of Soviet forces during the Gorvachev’s era. Iran’s Afghan policy moved closer to that of Gorvachev’s in an attempt to balance the increasing pressure from the US, Pakistan and Saudi coalition. The Iranian strategy was to bloc a take over by the US, Saudi and Pakistani backed groups under the ageis of Interior Islamic Government of Afghanistan

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41 Barnett R. Rubin, op. cit., no.15, p. 38.
(IIGA)\textsuperscript{42} and, it favoured the Najibullah regime without Soviet troops to the \textit{Mujaheddin} backed by rival states. It also gave some humanitarian and economic aid to Najibullah.

Thus the internal instability created in Afghanistan because of Soviet military intervention created intra-ethnic polarization in which each internal group was used by ‘regional linkage states’ for their own strategic motives. The external actors and their form of support for the Afghan resistance strongly encouraged the ethnic divide within the \textit{Mujaheddin} by the time the Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan.

Two new developments in the beginning of 1990s gave greater urgency to the further ethnicization of Afghan politics. These were the end of Soviet support for the Najibullah regime in Kabul, and the emergence of Soviet Central Asian republics as independent states, opening to the outside world as a new and resource-rich region. The dissolution of Soviet Union deprived Najibullah of any powers and executive authority. On March eighteenth, 1992, Najibullah announcing his resignation promised to transfer all “powers and executive authority”\textsuperscript{43} to interim government set up by the United Nations.

\textsuperscript{42} At the insistence of their foreign sponsors, the seven recognized Sunni \textit{Mujaheddin} parties chose an Interim Islamic Government of Afghanistan in 1989. The IIGA had also excluded the Shi’ite groups and predominately composed of Pashtuns.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{New York Times}, March 19\textsuperscript{th} 1992.
Najibullah’s departure from Kabul created a power vacuum into which four principal armed groups rushed to occupy. These groups had different ethnic compositions and different sources of foreign support, according to the regions in which they were based. For example, Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former commander of Afghan army led largely the Uzbek group from the former government forces. It also included members of other ethnic groups from northern Afghanistan. He received support from the Uzbekistan and the Russians. Ahmed Shah Masood and Burhanuddin Rabbani led mainly Tajiks with member of some other northeastern ethnic groups. The received support from Saudi Arabia after Rabbani became acting president in 1992. Gulbuddin Hikmatyar led mainly the Pashtun groups and received support from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Finally, *Hizb-i-Wahdat*, which had a base in the Hazarajat, were armed and financed by the Iranians.

The ethnic alliance in the conflict changed over time as the domestic and international balance of power shifted. At first, Masood, Dostum and Hizb-i Wahadat took joint control of Kabul in 1992. But the predominance of Masood and Rabbani, both Tajiks, alienated both *Hizb-i Wahdat* and Dostum having Shi’ite and the Uzbeks following respectively.

Meanwhile, Pashtuns in the Afghan military reacted to the takeover of Kabul by the northerners and aligned with Hikmatyar.
The conflict seemed to pit non-Pashtuns against Pashtuns. Historically, it may be noted here that Pashtuns as the largest ethnic group have always dominated the Afghan politics and state.

The Peshawar Accord signed in 1992, which established an interim regime in Afghanistan collapsed around the issue of Pashtun and non-Pashtun conflict over power sharing. Contrary to Islamabad's expectation, the resistance leader who led the Mujaheddin to Kabul was not Hikmatyar, but his Tajik rival, Ahmed Shah Masood and invited the Pakistan-based Mujaheddin to set up Afghanistan's first Islamic government. Pakistan publicly called for a negotiated internal settlement between the resistance factions. The settlement known as Peshawar Agreement with apparent backing from Islamabad, allocated the post of presidency for the first two months to a minor Mujaheddin leader, Sibghatullah Modjaddi and then to Rabbani. It accorded the subordinate position of Prime Minister to the Hizb-i-Islami, in expectation that Hikmatyar would fill it. Ahmed Shah Masood himself occupied the position of Defense Minister. Pakistan balked at Tajik domination of the new Rabbani led Islamic government, with Masood as its military strong man, which would have spelled the defeat of its Pasthonist policy. For this reason, Hizb-i-Islami of Hikmatyar backed
by Pakistan refused to honour its commitment under the Peshawar agreement.44

Thus, Pakistan's policy of supporting an ethnic based resistance was transformed into a support for one side in a brutal internal conflict. Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) continued to build up logistical and armed support for Hikmatyar. Within a few months of the Rabbani takeover Hikmatyar commenced a sustained military assault over Kabul. The ferocity and intensity of this campaign, resulting in more than 25,000 dead and half the city destroyed over the next two years, could not have been sustained without extensive Pakistani aid.45 The longer this campaign continued, lesser the Rabbani government was able to consolidate its hold on power and to broaden its power base by bringing more than a couple of Pashtun Mujaheddin leaders into its administration. In the end, however, Hekmatyar's failure to dislodge the Rabbani government presented the ISI and Pakistan's political leadership with serious dilemmas. Islamabad now either had to abandon its Pashtun efforts, or to opt for


a even deeper ethnicisation of the Afghan conflict. It opted for the latter.46

Pakistan’s Interior Minister Naseerullah Babar, who was a retired army general with excellent links with the ISI and considerable experience in dealing with Pashtuns in the region, decided to abandon Hikmatyar. He set out to craft a fresh Pastun force of ultra-fundamentalist Taliban militia. Although mystery still shrouds the Taliban, it is now clear that some of its leaders were drawn from the orthodox and puritanical Islamic elements from the southern province of Kandhar and Uruzgan in Afghanistan, who had become disillusioned with the intra-Mujaheddin power struggle. Their fighters were mostly raised from Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns, who were studying in madarsas (religious school usually part of the mosques) in Pakistan, knew little of Afghanistan or the wider world and urged to fight for the cause of a highly eccentric and discriminatory Sunni Islam. To all appearances, the militia was created purely as a fighting force, with a decentralized and faceless leadership. This was a deliberate attempt, not only to prevent the militia from becoming embroiled in personality driven leadership struggles, which had marred the Mujaheddin, but also to enable Pakistan to make leadership changes as it deemed necessary.

The *Taliban* application of Islamic extremism to impose a theocratic order, forbidding women to work or to be publicly educated, and its use of draconian measures to punish those, who violate their form of Islamic practices and values, is aimed at claiming wider and deeper ideological legitimacy than the *Mujaheddin*, and to Islamise the imposition of dictatorship, the like of which Afghanistan had not experienced in its modern history.

With the *Taliban*’s initial successes in capturing Kandhar, by late 1994, and the non-Pasthun western province on the Iranian border by the late 1995- the militia assumed wider marketability. The Saudis started financing the *Taliban* as an anti-Iranian force. The United States perceived them as useful, not only for enforcing the US containment of Iran, but also for providing it with a new niche to secure ideological leverage against the anti-US political forces of Islam in the region, and for expanding Washington’s access to Central Asian resources.\(^{47}\) At least two international consortia—one led by UNOCAL of the US and Delta Oil of Saudi Arabia, and another Bridas of Argentina-perceived the *Taliban* as potential help in order to secure their bid to construct a $2.5 billion pipeline across Afghanistan to export gas from Turkmenistan to South Asia.\(^{48}\) Drug traffickers

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quickly embraced the Taliban for their liberal approach towards poppy cultivation and production of heroin. Afghanistan was estimated to account for 30% of the world opium production in 1997, despite the Taliban’s emphasis on being incorruptible.\footnote{Daily Telegraph, London, 3\textsuperscript{rd} April 1997}

As the Saudis pumped millions of dollars into their budget, mostly through Pakistan’s ISI; as US officials established regular contacts with the militia leaders; as UNOCAL dubbed the Taliban takeover as a ‘positive development’; and as the drug traffickers made lucrative deals with them, the Taliban soon became unstoppable.\footnote{On UNOCAL, see Reuters, 1\textsuperscript{st} October 1996. On the Taliban’s success see John Burns, “Beyond Afghan Battle lines, Taliban sparks war of words”, 17\textsuperscript{th} October 1995.}

The Rabbani government in Kabul could not sustain Taliban’s numerical, financial and military strength and surrendered Kabul to Taliban by September 1996 without much fighting.\footnote{Edward Barnes, “Friends of Taliban”, Time, 4\textsuperscript{th} Nov. 1996.} The Taliban Military take-over of Kabul was a watershed in the Pakistan-driven ethnicisation of the Afghan conflict. It clearly transformed the conflict into an ethnic power struggle of Pashtuns against non-Pashtuns, with the Shi’ite, Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek people joining forces to defend their traditional territories in northern and central Afghanistan—especially after the Taliban’s acts of ethnic cleansing of Tajiks in the
areas that had overrun north of Kabul. Moreover, *Taliban*’s success enhanced the regional dimension of the conflict; it brought Afghanistan’s neighbours to dwell on their cross-border ethno-cultural ties to anti-*Taliban* groups.

Tehran perceived *Taliban* as an ideological and geopolitical challenge posed by the wider US-Saudi-Pakistani strategy of containing Iran. It responded by augmenting its support for both the Afghan Shi’ites and General Dostam and Masood. Tehran thus came to share a common interest with Afghanistan’s Central Asian neighbours, especially Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, whose recycled communist leaderships felt deeply threatened by the *Taliban*’s brand of fundamentalist Islam. Nor could Russia sit idle, given its strategic interest in maintaining a strong position in Central Asia and close ties with Iran. Moscow, too, began to shore up the defenses of the Central Asian republics and provided some help to the Afghan anti-*Taliban* alliance. Similarly, India could not feel comfortable with any strategic gains by Islamabad in the region. New Delhi enhanced its diplomatic activities in support of the Rabbani government at the UN, and provided some humanitarian aid and logistical support for the maintenance of its airforce.

However, overseas assistance could not prevent the destructive personal rivalries between, and within, the diverse groups in the anti-*Taliban* alliance. In late May 1997, one of Dostam’s key
commanders, Abdul Malik Pahlavan bent on taking revenge against Dostam for killing his brother and one of his close allies-was reportedly persuaded during a trip to Islamabad to defect to the Taleban. His defection caused Dostam to flee to Turkey and changed the balance of forces, opening the way for the Taleban to attempt to overrun Dostam’s territory and placing the militia closer to proclaiming control over most of Afghanistan.

The Taleban’s apparent successes led Pakistan to recognize formally the militia as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) followed with their own acts of recognition, despite the fact that the Taleban had not formed a structurally recognizable government. Yet this development increased the determination of various non-Pashtun Afghan micro-societies to defend their own ethnic survival, and placed greater pressure on Iran and the Central Asian republics to promote their own interest in Afghanistan more effectively. As the alliance with Pahlavan quickly broke down—because the Taleban offered Pahlavan only the junior post of Deputy Foreign Minister and reneged on their promise to leave him in control of northern Afghanistan – the opposition forces inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Taleban, chasing them out of most of the northern territories in which they had

recently appeared. In the process, there were four other important developments.

First, Pahlavan and his *Hezbi Wahdat* allies killed hundreds of *Taleban* fighters and captured several thousands of them, including a number of senior *Taleban* officials and commanders and several Pakistani officials, among them was the newly appointed Pakistani ambassador to Kabul.53 Two thousand of the captured *Taleban* were subsequently massacred by Pahlavan - a contemptible act which tarnished his image and was widely condemned both inside and outside Afghanistan. Second, Masoud was able to come out of hiding in the Panjshir Valley to make substantial territorial gains north of Kabul, blocking the Salang Pass and trapping an expeditionary *Taleban* force of some 3,000 in the north of HinduKush. Masoud has retained and expanded his territorial gains to date, with his forces digging in about 15 miles north of Kabul. Third, these events provided irrefutable evidence of the deep involvement of Pakistan and former Afghan Khalq communists - whose faction dominated the first Marxist government in Kabul for some 20 months prior to the Soviet invasion in support of the *Taleban*. This proof was unifying and a

53 At least one of these captured commanders, Abdul Razaq, Taleban’s nominee for governor of Mazar-I-Sharif, became the Deputy Minister of Planning in Afghanistan’s first communist government. On the Pakistani ambassador, see *Hindustan Times*, 2 June 1997.
morale-boosting factor for the anti-Taleban opposition. It also helped to bolster the opposition’s regional supporters.

Finally, Washington began to refocus its attention on Afghanistan, and especially on the Taleban’s behaviour and Pakistan’s support for it. Its understanding of, and attitude towards, the Taleban had been heavily influenced by the Assistant Secretary for South Asia, Robin Raphel, who had met Taleban leaders on several occasions.\(^{54}\) Raphel apparently believed that the militia constituted a force which, under Pakistan’s control, could serve US interests in the region.\(^{55}\) This view was also supported by certain elements within the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—an organization with close links to ISI. However, US policy towards Taleban underwent a change in the wake of growing Islamic threats to western interests to the Clinton administration, especially following Raphel’s replacement by Karl F. Inderfurth, and the appointment of Thomas Pickering as Under-Secretary of State in early 1997. Geostrategically, US-Iran reapproachment in the middleeast and the growth of Indo-US strategic partnership, in early to late 1990s, provided foreign policy options to the Clinton administartion in southwest Asia. It could no longer comfortably embrace the Taleban, either politically or ideologically.


The US found the group’s treatment of women oppressive, its rule-enforcement measures leading to massive violation of human rights, and its involvement in opium production and drug trade to finance international terrorism inimical to current trends in the US foreign policy. Further, Washington realized that the Taleban would not be able to unite and govern Afghanistan on its own. For these reasons, it could not continue to support Pakistan as the Taleban’s patron. This shift in US attitudes was formulated in a policy statement calling for the creation of ‘an Afghan government that is multi-ethnic, broad-based, and that observes international norms of behaviour’. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright openly deplored the Taleban during a visit to Pakistan in mid-November 1997 as a backward and regressive force and she said: "I think it is clear why we are opposed to the Taleban... Because of their approach to human rights, their despicable treatment of women and children their general lack of respect for human dignity’’. \(^{56}\) She also said that the US believed that the Taleban were not ‘in a position’ to occupy all of Afghanistan. ‘There are other parties’, she went on, “who need to be recognized and there needs to be a government that is composed of them’’. \(^{57}\) Albright’s message, which was repeated by Hillary Clinton in a White House speech to mark International Women’s Day in March 1998, and again by Albright on the same day, unsettled Pakistani leaders.

\(^{56}\) Reuters, 18th Nov. 1997.

\(^{57}\) ibid
Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan—a Pashtun, who had taken up the Babar’s mantle as the Taleban’s most significant supporter in Nawaz Sharif’s government had openly been critical of the change in the US approach.\(^58\)

These developments together with the European Unions’ consistent strong criticism of the Taleban and Pakistan’s backing of it have been critical in deterring any countries other than Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE from recognizing the Taleban government, and in enabling the Rabbani government to retain Afghanistan’s seat at the UN, as well as most Afghan embassies abroad. They have also been instrumental in helping the anti-Taleban forces of the Northern Alliance, composed of the Jamiat, led by Masoud, Junbeshi Milli, headed by Dostam (who returned from self-exile in late 1997), and the main Shi’ite group of Hezbi Wahdat, led by Karim Khalili, to halt the Taleban’s advances to the north.

Even in the unlikely event that the Taleban gains control over all of Afghanistan and obtains international recognition as the country’s legitimate government, neither the internal ethnic features nor the international strategic dimension of the conflict, is likely to disappear in the foreseeable future. In the first instance, the ethnic Pashtuns, whom the Taleban claim to represent, are themselves not

homogenous, but are divided along tribal, clan and family lines. With the Taleban leadership centred in Kandahar, the Pashtuns of south-eastern and eastern Afghanistan would not find the militia an acceptable ruling force. This is evident in frequent armed challenges that the Nangarhari and Kunara Pashtuns have mounted on the militia, and in the former head of the mujaheddin Governing Council of Nangarhar, Haji Abdul Qadir, joining the Northern Alliance. Even if the Taleban's unity continues for longer than expected, in the worst-case scenario for the non-Pashtun groups and their leaders would cross the border into relevant neighbouring countries (such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) and use these territories as launching attacks against the Taleban – just as the mujaheddin used Pakistani territory against the Soviets. This has already been happening to some extent, with Masoud reportedly using bases in Tajikistan.

Conclusions

The destructive ethnic conflicts and power plays in and around Afghanistan has been hampering inter-state cooperation in the region. Even if regional states are interested in promoting economic cooperation among themselves having established in 1988 the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) – its chances of success remain doubtful. As long as the Afghan conflict is not settled on a viable basis involving a multi-ethnic rather than mono-ethnic
government in Afghanistan, and as long as Pakistan does not forego its strategy of transforming Afghanistan into its trans-border ethnic enclave, no neighbouring country can afford to trust and cooperate with either the Taleban or Pakistan. For this reason, it is premature for multinational companies to plan construction of cross-regional projects – a fact which UNOCAL recognized in March 1998, shelving its pipeline plan.59 A Taleban-dominated Afghanistan would not end the conflict in that country, nor would it reduce tension in the region.

It also appears that the Taleban will continue to cause serious security concerns for Afghanistan’s western and northern neighbours and for Russia. In September 1996, Moscow reiterated its stance on the borders of its former Central Asian republics to be common of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and it stated that it would defend them against any threat.60 The Central Asian republics that border Afghanistan riddled with their own ethnic and cultural divisions are concerned about the fate of their ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks in Afghanistan under the Taleban rule, and about their own security. In response, the Central Asian republics have provided a considerable amount of political and logistic support to ensure the viability of the anti-Taleban northern alliance.

It is also conceivable that the Taleban might, with a change in regional circumstances, be able to defy their Pakistani patrons and extend their Islamic extremism beyond Afghanistan’s borders—notably into Pakistan itself. Many popular supporters of the militia in Pakistan have already publicly identified Pakistan as the next target, given its deep ethnic and social divisions, economic difficulties and law and order problems. This boomerang effect has already emerged. The Taleban have reportedly provided support to some extreme Sunni groups against their Shi’ite counterparts in Pakistan. A serious military clash occurred in mid-March 1998 between the Taleban and Pakistani border guards. Furthermore, the Taleban’s success has also galvanised Muslim militants in Jammu and Kashmir. Several Taleban leaders have already identified the Kashmiri separatists’ cause as their own, and vowed to ‘liberate’ Kashmir from India in the same way they claim to have liberated Afghanistan. It is reported that several insurgent groups operating in Kashmir valley recruit their members from Afghanistan. Most recently conflagration in Kargil amply demonstrated Taliban’s involvement along with Pakistan as their regional patrons. The militia’s complete triumph in Afghanistan might thus cause wider regional instability and insecurity with serious implications for global order.

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Finally, these trans-border ethno-nationalist pressures raise serious questions about the future of the nation-state and state sovereignty in Southwest Asia. They could well change the nature of sovereignty in the region by encouraging increasingly ethnicised and tribalised cross-border entanglements. Given that a fundamental feature of all states in the region is multi-ethnicity and confused national identity, cross-border ethnicisation of the Afghan crisis could have an inspiring and radicalising effect on forces which could, in turn, tribalise and fragment neighbouring states. No country is more vulnerable in this respect than Pakistan. The predominantly Pashtun legislators of Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province (NWFP) passed a bill in late 1997 to change the NWFP’s name to Pakhtunkhwa (Pashtunist) province — a development which encouraged many elements in the NWFP’s neighbouring province of Baluchistan to call for the expulsion of Pashtuns from Baluchistan. This request has caused much consternation to Islamabad, which fears that these developments could stimulate a secessionist movement in the NWFP and Baluchistan province.

Finally, the Afghan phenomenon has deepened the split within the Muslim world between those supporting the Taleban (such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia) and those opposing it (such as Iran and many Arab Islamic movements). At the same time, the Taleban’s puritanical Islam helps its adversaries, who have sought to discredit
the political forces of Islam as incapable of achieving social-political transformation without recourse to Western interests and values. It enables them to present the Taliban's brand of Islam as repugnant to civilized existence and to continue their policy of geopolitical exclusion of Islam.

It is time the Afghan conflict received greater attention from the international community, and in particular the concerned power(s), with support from the UN, the EU and the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Pakistan will have to be pressured to wind back its support of the Taliban as the best way to induce the Afghan elements of the militia's leadership to work for a political solution. Such a solution would involve the Taliban negotiation with the Northern Alliance for a cease-fire and the creation of a transitional, regionalised federative government. Central authority would be devolved to provide a reasonable degree of autonomy for different ethnic groups in their traditional areas of concentration. Such an arrangement would have to be managed as a prelude to constructing a viable longer-term political order in Afghanistan. In the meantime, it would be helpful for Washington to reach an understanding with Iran and Russia on the Afghan problem. Any rapprochement between Washington and the more moderate Islamist government of President Mohammed Khatami in Tehran could prove very beneficial in this respect. If Washington provides decisive leadership, the EU, the OIC and the UN could all
help to devise and implement a peace process. The alternative to this is a continuation of the Afghan conflict, with further devastating consequences not only for the Afghan people, but also for regional stability.