CHAPTER II

UNITED STATES POLICY TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN
HISTORICAL SETTING
CHAPTER II
UNITED STATES POLICY TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN:
HISTORICAL SETTING

For almost three decades, Afghanistan has been the focal point of global politics. The conflict over Afghanistan and the power struggle within the country had tremendous implications for the regional scenario in South and Southwest Asia. The Afghan situation also brought in intense superpower rivalry, which persisted at least until the late 1980s. The whole regional setting underwent major changes with the military intervention of the erstwhile Soviet Union in 1979 and, ever since, Afghanistan became an arena of intense battle, fought directly by the Soviet-Army, on the one side, and the mujahideen guerrillas, on the other. The Afghan war that dragged on for a decade, in fact, worsened the systemic crisis and brought in new forces of conflict. In such a scenario, the United States perceptions of, and policies towards Afghanistan had been critical, which were very much influenced by the regional as well as internal developments. The first part of this chapter deals with the geopolitical setting of Afghanistan. It will be followed by a discussion on the Afghan society and its ethnic, linguistic and religious composition. The third part will provide a profile of the political developments within Afghanistan. The US interests in Southwest Asia and its perception of the unfolding Afghan scenario have been examined in the fourth part. The historical setting of the US policy towards Afghanistan has been provided in this part.
Geopolitical Importance of Afghanistan

Afghanistan situates in the heart of Central Asia\(^1\) though it is generally identified as belonging to Southwest Asia. It occupies a distinct strategic location, bordering five nations of different ideologies and systems of government. Afghanistan's geographical situation and physical features have greatly influenced its history and the character of its people. Its longest border, of approximately 1,125 miles, is with Pakistan, to the east and south. The 510-mile border in the west separates Afghanistan from Iran, and there is a 200-mile border with the part of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (POK). The combined length of Afghanistan's northern borders with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, part of the erstwhile Soviet Union, is 1,050 miles. The shortest border (of 50 miles) is with the Uighur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang of the People's Republic of China, at the end of the long, narrow Wakhan (Wakhan Corridor), in the extreme northeast. The capital of Afghanistan is its largest city, Kabul, which is located in the east-central part of the country at an altitude of about 5,900 feet. The city is connected by road to most Afghan provinces and neighbouring countries to the north and east\(^2\). The boundaries of Afghanistan came into existence in the late 19th century against the backdrop of rivalry between Britain and Russia.

A distinct geographic feature of Afghanistan is its mountain range, the Hindu

---

\(^1\) The British Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, described Afghanistan as 'the cockpit of Asia' while poet Muhammed Iqbal called it 'the heart of Asia.' See Anthony Verrier, *Francis Younghusband and the Great Game* (London: Jonathan Cape. 1991).

Kush (in Afghanistan, Hendu Kosh), which acts as a barrier between the comparatively fertile northern provinces and the rest of the country. It creates the major pitch of Afghanistan from northeast to southwest. The Hindu Kush spreads out and extends westward carrying the names of Baba, Bayan, Safid Kuh (Paropamisus), and others, each section in turn sending spurs in different directions. The Kasa Murgh, south of the Hari River and the Hhsar Mountains are the other important ranges, which extend northward, and the Mazar and the Khurd extending a southwestern direction. On the eastern frontier with Pakistan, several mountain ranges effectively isolate the interior of the country from the rain-laden winds that blow from the Indian Ocean, accounting for the dryness of the climate. The Hindu Kush and subsidiary ranges separate Afghanistan into three distinct geographic regions, which are generally designated as the Central Highlands, the Northern Plains, and the Southwestern Plateau. The Central Highlands, belonging to the Himalayan chain, include the main Hindu Kush range. The Northern Plains extend eastward from the Iranian border to the foothills of the Pamirs, near the border

---

3 A north-south divide along the Hindu Kush mountain range splits Afghanistan. Marco Polo called the Pamir mountains, lying in the far north-east corner, 'the roof of the world' near China, Pakistan and Tajikistan. See Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (New York: Dell Publishers, 1961).

4 Its area of about 160,000 square miles is a region of deep, narrow valleys and lofty mountains, some peaks of which rise above 21,000 feet. High mountain passes, generally situated between 12,000 and 15,000 feet above sea level, are of great strategic importance and include the Shebar Pass, located northwest of Kabul where the Baba Mountains meet the Hindu Kush, and the Khyber Pass, which leads to the Indian subcontinent, on the Pakistan border southeast of Kabul. The Badakhshan area in the northeastern part of the Central Highlands is the location of the epicentres for many of the 50 or so earthquakes that occur in the country each year.
with Tajikistan. It comprises 40,000 square miles of plains and fertile foothills sloping gently toward the Amu River (the ancient Oxus River). This region is intensively cultivated and densely populated. Besides fertile soils, the region has rich mineral resources, particularly deposits of natural gas. The Southwestern Plateau is a region of high plateaus, sandy deserts, and semideserts. Most of Afghanistan lies between 2,000 and 10,000 feet in elevation. This signifies the strategic location of Afghanistan in the geopolitical context of the region.

The Afghan Society and Culture

The Afghan society is a mosaic of various ethno-tribal and linguistic groups. The population is made up of Pashtuns (Pushtuns), Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and Turcomans and Kyrgyz. It has been estimated that there are as many as 121 tribal communities in Afghanistan. The largest and most important ethnic group is the Pashtuns who account for about 38 per cent of the total population. Pashtun is the dominant nationality, both in terms of economic resources and numerical strength. The second largest nationality is Tajik, estimated at 25 per cent of the population. Pashto (Pushtu) and Dari, a dialect of Persian (Farsi), are Indo-European languages; they are the official languages of the country. More than one-third of the population speaks Pashto, the language of the Pashtuns, while about half of the population speaks Dari, the

---

5 The average altitude is about 3,000 feet. It covers about 50,000 square miles, one-fourth of which forms the sandy Rigestan Desert. Several large rivers cross the Southwestern Plateau.


language of the Tajik, Hazara, Chahar Aimak, and Kizilbash peoples. Other Indo-European languages, spoken by smaller groups, include Western Dardic (Nuristani or Kafiri), Baluchi, and a number of Indic and Pamiri languages spoken principally in isolated valleys in the northeast. Turkic languages, a subfamily of the Altaic languages, are spoken by the Uzbek and Turkmen peoples, the most recent settlers, who are related to peoples from the steppes of Central Asia. The Turkic languages are closely related; within Afghanistan they include Uzbek, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz, the last spoken by a small group in the extreme northeast.

The present society of Afghanistan contains a number of elements, which, over the centuries, and as a result of large-scale migration and conquests, have been superimposed upon one another. Dravidians, Indo-Aryans, Greeks, Scythians, Arabs, Turks, and Mongols have at different times inhabited the country and influenced its culture and ethnography. Intermixture of the two principal linguistic groups is evident in such peoples as the Hazaras and Chahar Aimaks, who speak Indo-European languages but have pronounced Mongoloid physical characteristics and cultural traits usually associated with Central Asia. The Pashtuns of Afghanistan principally inhabit the southern and eastern parts of the country but are also well represented in the west and north. They are divided into a number of tribes, some sedentary and others nomadic.

---

9 See Richard Tapper, *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Afghanistan* (London: Croom Helm, 1983); Afghanistan's nomadic population was at 2.5 million, which means that every sixth Afghan was a nomad. These nomads belong to different categories and they accept the authority of the *jirga* (council of tribal elders) to settle their personal affairs. In practical terms, central government laws and courts always remained confined to town and city, while 88 percent of the population residing in the rural areas has run its own affairs independently in accordance with ancient custom and practice. See Raja Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan* (London: Verso, 1988), p.129.
The traditional homeland of the Pashtuns lies in an area east, south, and southwest of Kabul; many live in contiguous territory of Pakistan. The two most important groups of the Pashtun tribal confederation are the Durrans, who live in the area around the city of Qandahar, and the Ghilzays, who inhabit the region between Kabul and Qandahar. The Durrans formed the traditional nucleus of Afghanistan's social and political elite. The Tajiks, mostly farmers and artisans, live in the Kabul and Badakhshan provinces of the northeast and the Herat region in the west; there are also pockets of Tajiks in other areas. They are sedentary in the plains and semi-sedentary in the higher valleys. The Tajiks are not divided into clear-cut tribal groups. The Nuristanis, who speak Western Dardic, inhabit an area of some 5,000 square miles in Laghman, Nangarhar, and Konarha provinces, north and east of Kabul. The Hazaras traditionally occupy the central mountainous region of Hazarajat.10 Because of the scarcity of land, however, many have migrated to other parts of the country. The Hazaras speak a Dari dialect that contains a number of Turkish and Mongolian words. The Chahar Aimaks are probably of Turkic or Turco-Mongolian origin, judging by their Mongoloid physical appearance and their housing of Mongolian-style yurts. They are located mostly in the western part of the central mountain region. The Uzbekns and Turkmens inhabit a region north of the Hindu Kush, and there are small numbers of Kyrgyz in the Vakhan in the extreme northeast. The Uzbeks are usually farmers, while the Turkmens and Kyrgyz are mainly semi-nomadic herdsmen. The Uzbeks are the largest Turkic-speaking group in Afghanistan. There are other smaller Turco-Mongolian groups. Afghanistan has very small ethnic groups of Dravidian and Semitic

speakers. Dravidian languages are spoken by the Brahuis, residing in the extreme south. There are also a small number of Jews, most of whom speak Dari in their daily lives but use Hebrew for religious ceremonies.

About 99 per cent of the people of Afghanistan are Muslims, of whom some three-fourths are members of the Sunnite sect (Hanafi branch). The others, particularly the Hazaras, Kizilbash, and a few Isma'ilis, follow Shi'ite Islam. The Nuristanis are descendants of a large ethnic group, the Kafirs, who were forcibly converted to Islam in 1895; the name of their region was then changed from Kafiristan (Land of the Infidels) to Nuristan (Land of Light). There are also a few thousand Hindus and Sikhs. The precepts of Islam pervade the national life, playing a vital role in education, law and social behaviour.11 Islam in Afghanistan has long been a mixture of orthodoxy and Sufism. Although most Afghans are Muslims, regional and tribal differences take precedence over religious and ideological beliefs, in the realm of politics.

Conflicts among the native tribal groups were common in Afghanistan and as a result the Pashtuns established supremacy in the nineteenth century. The Pashtun expansionism continued until the regime of Amir Abdul Rehman (1880-1901). It is this age-old rivalry that formed the background of the deep divisions, which always existed between the Pashtuns and the Hazaras, Tajiks and the Nuristanis. Two Pashtun tribal considerations have been competing for

---

central power since the foundation of Afghanistan in the eighteenth century.12 The Durrans who formed the ruling dynasties from 1747 to 1978 and the Ghilzais who constituted the majority of both the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and the Peshawar based opposition parties. This bitter legacy of history may be kept in view to understand the problems of Afghanistan since the 1970s.

**The Afghan Economy**

Afghanistan is one of the most backward countries in the world13 and the distribution of income in the country has been so uneven that a substantial number of the population is still under-nourished and ill-housed. According to various estimates, the per capita income in the country is among the lowest in the world.14 Expressing dismay over Afghanistan’s situation, a World Bank report said that pessimism was justified as even in areas where development activities were undertaken with heavy inputs of capital investment and foreign advice, returns had been dismally low.15

Despite a series of policy initiatives towards industrialisation, Afghanistan has

---


14 In 1990 it was US $ 220. See *World Geographic Encyclopedia*, n.2, p.15.

been a predominantly agricultural and pastoral country. Farming is the mainstay of the economy, employing an estimated eighty-five per cent of labour force. However, the Afghan society has been a distinct form of feudal set up. In 1978, the revolutionary government in Kabul released certain statistics, according to which 5 per cent of the landowners were in possession of 45 per cent of all cultivable land. Thirteen million people had no land titles. During this period, the share of industry in Afghan GNP was 17 per cent.

Afghanistan is endowed with many vital natural resources. Extensive surveys have revealed the existence of a number of minerals of economic importance. The most important discovery has been that of natural gas, with large reserves, about 75 miles west of Mazar-e Sharif. Pipelines deliver natural gas to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and to a thermal power plant and chemical fertilizer plant in Mazar-e Sharif. Many coal deposits have been found in the northern slopes of the Hindu Kush. High-grade iron ore has been discovered at Hajigak, 60 miles northwest of Kabul. Copper is mined at Aynak, near Kabul, and uranium is extracted in the mountains near Khvajeh Rawash, east of Kabul. There are also deposits of copper, lead, and zinc near Kunduz; beryllium in Khas Konar; chrome ore in the Lowgar valley near Herat; and the semiprecious stone lapis lazuli in Badakhshan. Afghanistan also has deposits of rock salt,

---

16 However, only 10-12 per cent of Afghan land is cultivable and most farms require enormous amount of labour to keep them productive.


beryl, barite, fluorspar, bauxite, lithium, tantalum, gold, silver, asbestos, mica, and sulfur.

Notwithstanding these resources, industrial development in Afghanistan has been so poor. Afghanistan's foreign trade has also been very small throughout modern times, and the country has regularly paid more for its imports than it has earned from its exports. The country's principal exports are natural gas and dried fruits. Other significant exports include carpets, fresh fruits, wool, cotton and livestock. However, Afghanistan earns very little foreign exchange.20

The Political History of Afghanistan

Afghanistan emerged in recorded history in the 6th century BC when it was incorporated into the Persian Empire. Along with the rest of the Persian Empire, Alexander subjugated the region about 330 BC. After his death most of the region fell under the domination of Alexander's general, Seleucus I Nicator, and later under that of the Indian king Chandragupta. Another Greek dynasty established itself in Bactria (northern Afghanistan) and founded a state that lasted from 256 BC until about 130 BC. The Greco-Bactrian state yielded in turn to Iranian nomads called the Sakas and then to the Kushans, who adopted Buddhism. In the 3d and 4th centuries AD, the Sassanid Persians invaded the country from the west. The Ephthalites, or White Huns, were largely in control of Afghanistan when the Arabs swept into the region in the middle of the 7th century.

20 A large part of its foreign trade took the form of barter deals with the former Soviet Union and other communist countries.
Arab penetration affected Afghanistan probably more decisively than any previous foreign influence.21 Centuries passed, however, before Islam became the dominant religion. Arab political control was superseded meanwhile by Iranian and Turkish rule. Complete Turkish ascendency in the area was established late in the 10th century and early in the 11th century by the Muslim Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (971–1030). Islamic culture subsequently achieved brilliant heights under the Afghan or Iranian Ghuri dynasty (1148–1215). The Ghurids gradually extended their rule into northern India but were overwhelmed by the hordes of the Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan, who came down from the north about 1220. Most of the country remained under Mongol control until the close of the 14th century, when Tamerlane, a Turkoman Mongol conqueror, seized northern Afghanistan. Among Tamerlane's most prominent successors was Babur, founder of the Mughal dynasty of India, who conquered Kabul about 1504. Later in the 16th century, Safavids from Iran and Uzbeks from the north made inroads in the region. The Iranians and the Mughal successors of Babur faced continuous Afghan revolts.

During the 17th century, the native Afghans began to grow in power. The Ghilzai tribe conquered the Iranian capital of Esfahan in 1722. Subsequently, Nadir Shah, who in 1738 reestablished Iranian authority over virtually all of Afghanistan, launched a vigorous Iranian counteroffensive. Nadir was

---

assassinated in 1747, whereupon the Afghan chiefs selected one of his generals, a member of the Abdali tribe named Ahmad Shah, as their ruler. Ahmad Shah became known as Durri-i-Dauran (Pearl of the Age). The Abdali were thus designated thereafter as the Durani. Ahmad Shah enlarged his realm, acquiring eastern Iran, Baluchistan, Kashmir, and part of the Punjab. The emirate disintegrated under the succeeding rulers of his dynasty, falling in 1818. Anarchy prevailed during the ensuing period. In 1826 Dost Muhammad Khan (1793–1863), a member of a prominent Afghan family, took control of eastern Afghanistan, assuming the title of emir in 1835.\textsuperscript{22}

Meanwhile, Dost Muhammad had appealed to British colonial authorities in India for support of Afghan territorial claims in the Punjab. When the British rejected his appeal, he turned to Russia for help. Fearing that the Russian sphere of influence would be extended to the Indian frontiers, the British Governor-General in India, George Eden, earl of Auckland (1784–1849), presented Dost Muhammad with an ultimatum that included demands for the expulsion of a Russian representative at Kabul. These demands were refused, and in March 1838 an Anglo-Indian army invaded Afghanistan, precipitating the First Afghan War (1838–42). Meeting little opposition, the army captured Kandahar in April 1839 and Ghazni in July. When Kabul fell in August, Shah Shuja, a grandson of Ahmad Shah, was installed on the Afghan throne in place of Dost Muhammad, who surrendered to the British. On 2 November 1841, Akbar Khan, a son of Dost Muhammad, led a successful revolt against Shah

\textsuperscript{22} For details, see Vartan Gregorian, \textit{The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969); Mohammed Ali, \textit{Afghanistan : The Mohammadzai Period} (Kabul, 1959).
Shuja's forces and the Anglo-Indian garrisons. An Anglo-Indian punitive expedition reinforced the garrisons for a brief period, but in December 1842 the British finally left the country. Dost Muhammad was then released from custody and allowed to resume his throne. Relations between Afghanistan and British-held India remained tense until 1855, when Dost Muhammad concluded a peace agreement with the Indian government.

Fratricidal strife among the emir's sons kept the country in turmoil for more than a decade after his death in 1863. Shere Ali Khan (1825–79), his third son and successor, aroused the enmity of the British by adopting a friendly policy toward Russia in 1878. Another British ultimatum was ignored, and in November 1878 Anglo-Indian forces again invaded Afghanistan. In the course of the ensuing conflict, known as the Second Afghan War (1878–79), the Afghans suffered a series of severe reversals. Kabul was occupied in October 1879; Yakub Khan, son of Shere Ali, who had succeeded to the throne in the preceding March, was forced to abdicate; and in 1880 Abd-ar-Rahman Khan, grandson of Dost Muhammad, was placed on the throne.²³

During his reign, which lasted until 1901, Abd-ar-Rahman Khan settled boundary disputes with India and Russia, created a standing army, and curbed the power of various tribal chieftains. In 1907, during the reign of Habibullah Khan, the son and successor of Abd-ar-Rahman, the British and Russian governments concluded a convention pledging mutual respect for the territorial

The integrity of Afghanistan. Habibullah was assassinated in February 1919. His brother Nasrullah Khan, who held the throne for only six days, was deposed by the Afghan nobility in favour of Amanullah Khan, the son of Habibullah. Determined to completely remove his country from the British sphere of influence, Amanullah declared war on Britain in May 1919. The British, faced at the same time with the growing Indian liberation movement, negotiated a peace treaty with Afghanistan the following August. By the terms of the agreement, concluded at Rawalpindi, Britain recognized Afghanistan as a sovereign and independent nation. In 1926 Amanullah Khan changed his title from emir to king.

The popularity and prestige that King Amanullah had won through his handling of the British were soon to be dissipated. Deeply impressed by the modernization programs of Iran and Turkey, he instituted a series of political, social, and religious reforms. Constitutional rule was inaugurated (1923), the titles of the nobility were abolished, education for women was decreed, and other sweeping measures aimed at the modernization of traditional institutions were enforced. The hostility provoked by the king's reform programme led to a rebellion in 1929, and Amanullah quickly abdicated and went into exile. His brother, Inayatullah, who succeeded him, was deposed, after a reign of three days, by Bacha Sakau, a rebel leader. In 1929, Amanullah's uncle, Nadir Shah, supported by several thousand tribesmen, defeated the rebels and executed Bacha Sakau. The crown was given to Nadir Shah.²⁴

²⁴ For details, see Leon B. Pouliada, Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan 1919-1929: King Amanullah's Failure to Modernize a Tribal Society (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); also see Gregorian, n.22; and Newell, n.23.
The new ruler gradually restored order in the kingdom. In 1932, he initiated a programme of economic reforms, but he was assassinated the following year. His son and successor, Zahir Shah, who was only 19 years old at the time of his accession, was dominated for the next 30 years by his uncles and cousins, particularly by his cousin and later brother-in-law, Prince Muhammad Daoud Khan. The government intensified the modernization programme begun by Nadir Shah and established close commercial relations with Germany, Italy, and Japan. Zahir Shah proclaimed neutrality at the outbreak of the Second World War; in 1941, however, at the request of Britain and the Soviet Union, more than 200 German and Italian agents were expelled from the country. The US established diplomatic relations with Afghanistan in 1942.25 In November 1946 Afghanistan became a member of the UN.

The Afghan government closely scrutinized the events attendant upon the establishment in 1947 of India and Pakistan as independent states. Of particular concern to Afghanistan was the incorporation into Pakistan of the North-West Frontier Province Tribal Areas, a neighbouring region largely populated by Pathans. Pakistan ignored Afghan demands for a plebiscite in the Tribal Areas on the question of self-determination. In retaliation, Afghanistan voted (1947) against the admission of Pakistan to the UN. Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan continued to be strained during the next several years. Sporadic frontier clashes occurred between Pakistani forces and Pathan tribesmen, especially after 1949, when the latter, with the approval of the

25 US-Afghan relations will be discussed in the subsequent section.
Afghan government, launched a movement to establish an independent state to be called Pashtunistan.26

In the fifties, Afghanistan had to encounter new realities in the region. It expressed its displeasure over a US-Pakistan military-aid pact concluded in 1954. The following year, Soviet Premier Bulganin, visiting Afghanistan, proclaimed support for a state of Pashtunistan. Subsequently, the USSR and Afghanistan issued a joint statement advocating peaceful coexistence, universal disarmament, and UN membership for China. The Soviet government simultaneously extended technical-aid loans to Afghanistan. Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan improved briefly during the late 1950s. In 1961, however, the Pashtunistan dispute again flared up and relations were not fully restored until 1967.27

In 1963 King Zahir removed his cousin Muhammad Daoud, who had been prime minister since 1953, and took full control of the reins of government. The following year, he promulgated a new constitution, providing for a more liberal form of government. The first legislative elections under the new constitution were held in September 1965. Afghanistan experienced major economic difficulties in the late 1960s. The situation was worsened by three years of drought, during which 80,000 Afghans were believed to have died of starvation. By 1973, the Soviet Union, the U.S., and China were all sending aid.

---


27 Ian Talbot, n. 26, p. 99.
In 1968 King Zahir had made overtures to Daoud, and a degree of harmony was believed to have been restored between them. In July 1973, however, Daoud seized power, deposed the king, and proclaimed Afghanistan a republic. A new constitution was approved in early 1977, and Daoud was elected to the powerful post of president. He appointed a civilian cabinet and maintained the country’s policy of non-alignment. In April 1978, Daoud was killed during a violent coup d’état. The new rulers, organized in a Revolutionary Council led first by Nur Muhammad Taraki, and later by Hafizullah Amin, suspended the constitution and initiated a programme of ‘scientific socialism’. This led to armed resistance by various factions of the Afghan society, especially among the mountain tribes.

**United States and Afghanistan: Perceptions and Relations before 1978**

Southwest Asia occupies a significant position in the geo-strategic considerations of the United States. This region has been identified as an important source of critical western energy supply. For long, Southwest Asia acted as a political barrier to potential Soviet domination of the Eurasian landmass and connecting seas. The gravity of the emerging local conflicts arose largely from the proximity of the Soviet military power and its influences on

---

political developments in the states of the region.29

However, the United States interest in Afghanistan remained dormant for long. The emergence of Afghanistan in the security discourse of the American foreign policy and the consequent perception about the country could be traced back to the developments after the Second World War. Nonetheless, Afghanistan was not a popular country in the United States. Rather, the view from the West in general, was of a remote and hostile land visited only by the adventurous.30 This was well summarised in the ‘Introduction’ to the special issue on Afghanistan by a Washington-based journal, *World Affairs*:

In truth, before 1978...almost nobody wanted to know anything about Afghanistan. The press treated it not merely as remote but almost as a joke: ‘Afghanistanism’ was the label for news stories about unimportant events in obscure places that nobody was interested in, the sort of squibs used to fill up a few lines of space at the bottom of a newspaper column...In the academic world, Afghanistan was limbo, and for the most part, a specialization in Afghan studies was a short route to a professional dead end; only a few dedicated souls preserved.31

---

29 The Soviet interest in Southwest Asia, though explained in geostrategic terms, were defined primarily in the context of its politico-ideological goals and the perceived hostility of the US and its allies.


The United States had its first official interactions with Afghanistan during the reign of Amanulla (1919-29). However, Washington did not show much enthusiasm in extending recognition to the regime.\textsuperscript{32} Subsequently, Cornelius Van H. Engert, a US diplomat stationed in Persia, paid a visit to Amanulla's court, who later recommended recognition of Kabul.\textsuperscript{33} But this too was rejected. The US had also indicated its unwillingness to welcome Amanulla when he expressed his desire to visit Washington in 1928. During the years that followed, at least until 1934, the question of recognition did not emerge at all. Leon B. Poullada observes that the State Department's "ignorance about Afghanistan was abysmal". He writes:

Wallace-Murray, the leading State Department's 'expert' during much of this period, assured an American Congressman that the United States could not extend diplomatic recognition to Afghanistan because "Afghanistan is doubtless the most fanatic, hostile country in the world today". This attitude prevented the US government from opening a diplomatic mission in Kabul until 1942; even then, it was done only as a wartime measure, in case a need might arise to use Afghanistan for transit of lend-lease supplies to the USSR.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} According to Leon B. Poullada, who was Economic Counselor of the US embassy in Kabul in the 1950s, a mission sent by the King Amanulla to secure recognition of the government was 'snubbed' by the US, thereby 'deeply offending the Afghans'. See Leon B. Poullada, "The Failure of American Diplomacy in Afghanistan", World Affairs, Vol. 145, No. 3, Winter 1982/83, p. 231.


\textsuperscript{34} For details see Poullada, n.32; also see US National Archives, NEA Memorandum of Conversation, File 890.h.00/122.
However, during the Second World War, the United States-Afghan relations improved considerably when Cornelius Van H. Engert, the American Minister in Kabul, made efforts to help the ailing economy of Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{35} This, in fact, offered new opportunities for strengthening bilateral relations between Washington and Kabul. During this period, the Afghan officials sought the US help in modernising the country and strengthening the internal security. The American companies were also invited to do business in Afghanistan, offering oil exploitation concessions, aviation development rights and investment opportunities. In 1946, Afghan Prime Minister Shah Mahmud Khan declared that he was convinced that Washington's championship of the small nations would guarantee "my country's security against aggression".\textsuperscript{36} The US was apparently not very keen on reciprocating all these Afghan overtures. In 1949, the Afghan government was reported to have sent a minister to Washington to get a major loan for Afghanistan's development. Prime Minister Shah Mahmud during a conversation with President Truman said:

The Afghan government tends to think of the loan as of political as well as of economic importance, possibly increasingly so in the light of manifestations of Soviet interest and offers of assistance to Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{35} Landlocked, as it has been, Afghanistan found it difficult to carry on exports and imports and Engert, in collaboration with the British did his best to help Kabul tide over this.


\textsuperscript{37} Poullada, n. 32, p. 233.
The US economic aid to Kabul began in 1949 and in three decades' time the aid totalled $550 million.38 But this seemed to have little impact on Afghanistan because the aid was not much and the conditions were not liberal.39

In the late 1940s, Afghanistan had sought American weapons to deal with the threats from tribesmen as well as to meet the situation arising from the British withdrawal from the Indian subcontinent.40 But the US did not show any enthusiasm in responding to Kabul's request for military help. An official report of the US says:

Despite its prodigious security assistance of ports, elsewhere, the Truman Administration remained uninjured either with Afghanistan's strategic importance or with the efficacy of the American military aid containing Soviet expansion in that theatre.41

In the early 1950s, Pakistan emerged as a determining factor in the United States policy towards Afghanistan. The strained relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the issue of Pushtunistan seemed to have dictated

38 See the US, Staff Report, n.36, p.5.
41 The US, Staff Report, n. 36, p. 5.
Washington's policy responses. The US refused to extend military aid to Kabul when a request was made by the new government of Muhammed Daoud in October 1954. This created further misgivings in Afghanistan. The US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, was reported to have said:

> After careful consideration, extending military aid to Afghanistan could create problems not offset by the strength it would generate. Instead of asking for arms, Afghanistan should settle the Pushtunistan dispute with Pakistan.43

This apparently prompted the Daoud regime to approach the Soviet Union for military aid. Poullada observes:

> American failure between 1942 and 1954 to respond to the genuine economic and security needs of a friendly and pro-western Afghan government, and to understand the political imperatives behind the Pushtunistan problem, set the stage for the stunning successes of Soviet diplomacy.44

The US embassy in Kabul obviously failed in meeting the challenges presented by the Daoud government. The American Ambassador, Angus Ward, and the Prime Minister Daoud could not even maintain personal relationships. The US foreign office was unable "to deal with the broader responsibilities of relations

42 Bhabani Sen Gupta, *Afghanistan: Politics, Economics and Society* (New Delhi: Select Book Service Syndicate, 1988), p. 10; Gupta says that Pakistan was far more attractive to the US than Afghanistan or even Iran as the key nation that could make the US a key lever in the stability and security of the Persian-Gulf, South Asian region and in this major policy decision, the US was influenced by the British foreign office; also see Leon B. Poullada, "Pushtunistan", in Ainsley T. Embree (ed.), *Pakistan’s Western Borderlands* (Durham, N.C.: Caroline Academic Press, 1977).

43 See Poullada, n.32, p.235.
44 Ibid., p. 235.
with remote Third World countries. In the Kabul embassy, there was not a single officer who had an adequate background in Afghan affairs or who could do more than mumble a few words of bazaar farsi."\(^{45}\) Poullada cites from a secret study report of the American Joint Chiefs of Staff:

> Afghanistan is of little or no strategic importance to the United States. Its geographic locations, coupled with the realization by Afghan leaders of Soviet capabilities, presages Soviet control of the country whenever the situation so dictates.\(^{46}\)

The US National Security Council had a similar perception about Afghanistan. The United States, however, believed that notwithstanding the possibilities of a Soviet threat, it could do very little to counter it.\(^{47}\) Nonetheless, the US embassy in Kabul began to understand the long-term implications of the Soviet-Afghan relations. The officials under the new leadership of Sheldon T. Mills formulated a plan to prevail upon Washington. The plan was envisaged to be an integrated programme of aid to education and civil aviation, road links to Pakistan, etc. However, the execution of the plan involved a lot of problems at the ground level, unlike the experience of Soviet aid. In 1957, the National Security Council observed:

> Afghanistan has incurred so huge a burden of debt to the communist

\(^{45}\) According to Poullada, the US assessment of the importance of Afghanistan was "totally inadequate." see Ibid., p. 236.


\(^{47}\) Poullada says that besides 'ignorance' and 'apathy', "appeasement became a dominant theme of American diplomacy in Afghanistan", ibid., p. 240.
bloc as to threaten its future independence. The Afghans hope to have the best of both worlds in aid but the capability of the United States to shape events in South Asia is severely limited. The United States should try to resolve the Afghan dispute with Pakistan and encourage Afghanistan to minimise its reliance upon the communist bloc for military training and equipment and to look to the United States and other free world sources for military training and assistance.  

The United States policy towards Afghanistan, however, did not undergo any significant change in the late 1950s or early 1960s. However, it sought to improve relations with Kabul since the removal of the Daoud regime in 1963. The internal situation was found to be to America’s interest due to the democratic political experiment under way in Afghanistan. Yet, as Poullada points out, the US diplomacy failed to make good use of the situation and “the American economic aid declined in every year of the democratic experiment.”

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Washington had made a reassessment of the possibilities and prospects of improving its position in Afghanistan. It had come to the conclusion that Afghanistan, being a landlocked country, had little bearing on the US regional interests nor was the latter in a position to counter the Soviet thrusts it had gained since 1950s. Robert G. Neumann, US Ambassador to Kabul during 1966-73, recalled that Dulles had rejected Afghan requests for military help, due to the ‘location and poor communications’ of

---


49 The new government sought to transform the political system from an oligarchy into a constitutional monarchy.

50 Poullada, n. 32, p. 244; According to him no special effort was made to give strong visible support to the governments during 1963-73 when Daoud recaptured power.
Afghanistan which would warrant Washington to sustain ‘enormous logistics effort’, thereby risking an escalation of the cold war with Moscow.51

Theodore L. Eliot Jr., who succeeded Neumann, found additional reasons for supporting the position of Dulles.52 Neumann, however, brought forth a policy review for the State Department in June 1971. It says:

For the United States, Afghanistan has at the present limited direct interest; it is not an important trading partner; it is not an access route for US trade with others; it is not presently...a source of oil or scarce strategic metals...there are no treaty ties or defence commitments; and Afghanistan does not provide us with significant defence, intelligence or scientific facilities...However, Afghanistan has important interests for us which have in large part derived from its strategic location between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

The United States has long understood that Afghanistan has had little choice but to have close relations with the USSR. Among the factors are: the long border, the slowly developing desire to transform the economy and the concomitant need for massive economic assistance.53

In 1973 Daoud took over power and announced the establishment of a “republican system, consistent with the true spirit of Islam.” The United States

---


52 Two major considerations are: (1) the US’s close relations with Pakistan; (2) the possibility of Soviet more apart Afghanistan in the event of Washington sending military aid to Kabul.

53 See Hammond, n. 51, p. 28; also see B. S. Gupta, n. 42, pp. 15-16.
recognized this government. However, the Daoud regime was, at first, suspicious towards the United States. The American Ambassador in Kabul, therefore, requested the State Department to undertake a detailed review of the Ward period to convince the new government of the US position that it favoured the Daoud regime and would look forward to close collaboration with Kabul.\(^{54}\)

Meanwhile, the American Ambassador in Kabul, Theodore Eliot, continued to assess the internal dynamics of the Daoud regime. He observed:

> While Daoud’s domestic platforms might be described ‘populist’, and includes calls for land reform and educational policy, he publicly eschews socialism and carries the banner of unreconstructed Islam during all his public speeches.... Daoud, having used the left to gain power, is now methodically trying to whittle it down....In looking forward its future the Afghan left must contend with an entrenched autocrat who does not brook competition.\(^{55}\)

Though the Daoud regime appeared to distant itself from Moscow, it was difficult for Kabul to do so. However, the American press and the diplomats who served in Kabul during the time understand that the Soviet influence in Afghanistan was much greater than that of any other power.\(^{56}\)

Bruce Flatin, the political counselor of Ambassador Eliot stated:

> The US government for years had made it clear to the Soviets that the United States understood Soviet security interests in Afghanistan and had no thought of disturbing the peaceful relations between the USSR

\(^{54}\) See Poullada, n. 32, p. 246; also see Hammond, n. 51, p. 43; Poullada says that the US aid effort was substantially strengthened during this period and a good measure of political support was offered to improve Afghan-Pakistan relations.

\(^{55}\) Secret aerogramme No. A-20 from Kabul to the State Department, dated 30 April 1975, quoted in Hammond, n. 51, p. 43.

and Afghanistan. The United States never tried to weaken the Soviet-Afghan relationship. We recognized that the Soviet Union had vital interest in Afghanistan, while the United States did not. Any attempt on our part to replace the Soviet Union would have been a no-win situation. There was no point in our picking a quarrel with the Soviets over Afghanistan. No American interest would have been served by such a policy.57

The United States perceptions and policies began to change when Jimmy Carter became president in 1976. The National Security Council, led by Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, formulated the concept of regional influence and identified the Shah of Iran as the first of the heads of state with which Washington could engage itself. The Shah of Iran was also eager to play a crucial role in the complex scenario of the Persian Gulf and South Asia; Afghanistan would provide the link between the two even more than Pakistan.58 The US ambassador Eliot was reported to have advised the Daoud regime to cultivate closer ties with Iran and other countries of West Asia. The US had also apparently asked Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Japan to provide more economic assistance to Kabul.59 However, the changes that had come about in the regional situation in the late 1970s profoundly affected the United States perceptions and polices. The decline of American power was also predicted by many, particularly in the context of the setbacks in Vietnam, followed by Angola and Mozambique. What

57 See Hammond, n. 51, p. 41.

58 According to B. S. Gupta, the Carter administration prevailed upon the Shah of Iran to assume the responsibility of sharing the burden of policing the strategic region of the Gulf. See B. S. Gupta, n. 42, pp. 21-22.

59 According to Louis Dupree, the Shah of Iran had promised to provide Afghanistan with $2 billion in economic aid over ten years, of which $50 million was actually given in 1974. The Shah had also persuaded the Daoud regime to build a railroad linking Kabul to Iran. See Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan 1977: Does Trade Plus Aid Guarantee Development?* (Hanover, N. H: American Universities Field Staff Report, South Asia Series, 21, 3 August 1977), p. 4.
contributed to this declining image of the United States were the revolution in Iran in the late 1970s and the developments in Afghanistan after 1978.

In sum, the United States policies towards, and relations with Afghanistan till 1978 were dictated heavily by the perceptions of relative insignificance of the country to Washington's global and regional strategic considerations. Various reports and assessments of the Department of State, National Security Council, Pentagon Joint Chiefs of Staff and periodic reviews and plans of the American ambassadors to Kabul all indicated the low priority attached to Afghanistan in the US strategic calculations till 1978. It is also fairly evident that the United States did not have, for long, an accurate assessment of the internal political dynamics and the requirements and priorities of the Afghan governments. However, the United States acknowledged the role and influences of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and even pointed out that Washington had very little to counter the onward Soviet thrust in Afghanistan. The situation began to change in the late 1970s when the regime of the Shah of Iran collapsed and the developments in Afghanistan since the 1978 revolution culminated in the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979.