U.S. & NATO Foreign Policy in Afghanistan: Historical Analysis During the Soviet Invasion, The Creation of the Taliban, and the Implications of the U.S. & NATO Members' Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Zachary Pittman

Institute of World Politics

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Zach Pittman is a current Masters of Arts in Statecraft and International Affairs student with the Institute of World Politics. He previously worked for the Counterterrorism Group as assistant team lead for the Counter Threat Strategic Communications team and a Counterintelligence and Cyber analyst. His interests are in Middle Eastern and North African affairs, geopolitics, the Arabic language, culture and U.S. national security.

The Soviet Union and Historical U.S. Involvement

Over the past 50 years, Afghanistan's history has been constant tribal warfare and warfare with foreign nations such as the Soviet Union in 1979-1989. In 1965 the USSR saw an opportunity within Afghanistan to install a Communist regime with the rise of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The Soviet plan started unraveling in 1967 when the PDPA split into two factions - the Khalq and Parcham political parties and Kremlin attempted to avoid direct involvement within Afghanistan while both Communist-Nationalist parties feuded for power for over the next decade.

"In April 1978, Afghanistan's centrist government, headed by Pres. Mohammad Daud Khan was overthrown by left-wing military officers led by Nur Mohammad Taraki. Power was thereafter shared by two Marxist-Leninist political groups, the People's (Khalq) Party and the Banner (Parcham) Party, which had earlier emerged from a single organization, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan—and had reunited in an uneasy coalition shortly before the coup."[1]

Within months the Soviet Union officially intervened on behalf of the newly formed government of Afghanistan, fighting the non-Communist factions and ending the internal quarrels between

[1] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2020, May 11). *Soviet invasion of Afghanistan*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/event/Soviet-invasion-of-Afghanistan

the Communist parties. The Soviet Union's invasion and subsequent occupation caused mass migration due to their horrific war crimes committed against the civilian populations. To stop Afghans from supporting the opposing Mujahideen, the Soviet army ran bombing missions against the rural areas and targeted civilians such as children and women. The bombing missions caused mass migration into Pakistan and Iran, so "by 1982 some 2.8 million Afghans had sought asylum in Pakistan, and another 1.5 million had fled to Iran."[2]

The continuous killing of civilians and mass migration led to a refugee crisis and allowed the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which is the premier government intelligence agency, to take advantage from the situation. It took in Afghan refugee children from an early age and put them in Islamic theology schools, Madrassas, recruiting them later for war against the Soviet Union for two purposes - fight the Soviet foreign invaders and establish a government in Kabul that would be pro-Pakistani.[3] According to Sean Winchell "between 1983 and 1997, the ISI trained approximately 83,000 Afghan Mujahideen." (Winchell, 2003).

The U.S. was a minor player in the conflict until members of Congress and the CIA developed a plan (code-named operation Cyclone) to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan. The Americans funded and armed factions of the Mujahideen, which led to a stalemate for years until the CIA started supplying them with the Stinger surface-to-air portable missile systems. Those Stinger systems were easy to use and helped the Mujahideen fighters target the Soviet aircraft and armored vehicles that had been impenetrable to Afghan weapons until then .[4] The Soviet

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[2] Britannica, *Soviet invasion of Afghanistan*
[3] Winchell, S., (2003) Pakistan's ISI: The Invisible Government, International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence, 16:3, 374-388, DOI: 10.1080/713830449 retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/713830449
[4] Crile, G., (2003). Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History. Atlantic Monthly Press.

Union had 100,000 troops in Afghanistan, and by their withdrawal, they had estimated 15,000 deaths and a more considerable number of casualties.[5]

The Mujahideen forces eventually prevailed, and with the help of the CIA and ISI, forced the Soviet Union to withdraw entirely in 1989 after signing an agreement in 1988 with the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 led the United States to cut its funding for Afghanistan's covert action and aid. In his book "Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History the journalist George Crile says that *"the cut to the Afghanistan budget was against the advice of the CIA, knowing that the country was in dire need of infrastructure funding and unification of the tribes to create stability."* [6]

According to the New York Times (NYT) 1988 article, *"At the end of 1983, Mr. Wilson persuaded his colleagues to provide $40 million for weapons… The budget for the covert operation more than doubled, to $280 million in the fiscal year 1985 from $122 million in 1984, members of Congress said."* [7]

After Operation Cyclone officially ended, the U.S. agreed they saw victory in their mission within Afghanistan and left, but the actual result was a void that the Taliban and Al Qaeda later filled. In hindsight, the implications of the United States' policy not to invest in Afghanistan post-Soviet withdrawal led to the strengthened Taliban and Al Qaeda terrorist groups, which had haven internally to train members from various Muslim nations to fight their jihad globally.

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[5] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2020, May 11). Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/event/Soviet-invasion-of-Afghanistan

[6] Crile, G., (2003). Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History

[7] Pear, R,(1988), Arming Afghan Guerrillas: A Huge Effort Led by U.S., The New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/1988/04/18/world/arming-afghan-guerrillas-a-huge-effort-led-by-us.html

The ISI's success in the students recruited from the Madrassas led them to invest further in the Taliban. *"The ISI, taking notice of the Taliban's gains, secured financial backing from Bhutto's government and began to recruit students from madrasas all over Pakistan in an effort to support the fledgling Taliban, then led by Mullah Muhammad Omar"* (Winchell, 2003). The continual investment into the Taliban, their growth and control over the majority of Afghanistan, and the Taliban's refusal to cooperate with the United States in capturing Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden led the U.S. to combat the Islamic fundamentalist movement after September 11th, 2001 (9/11).

Pakistan’s ISI support ended after then President Musharraf ordered General Mahmud, ISI's Director-General, to travel to Kandahar and order the Taliban to give up Osama bin Laden; General Mahmud did the opposite and advised against this order (Winchell, 2003). President Musharraf replaced Director-General Mahmud with Lieutenant General Ehsan Ul-Haq, leading the ISI to stop their funding and training of the Taliban and assisting the U.S. with intelligence to combat Al Qaeda.

Banking and Foreign Aid

The ancient unregulated hawala trade or currency exchange system in Afghanistan allows financing for terrorism and the drug trade to go unchecked.[8] *"In Afghanistan, banking has made improvements, but most transactions go unrecorded or through, often cheaper than banks, and transfers can be picked up the same day, making it faster than a traditional bank."*[9]

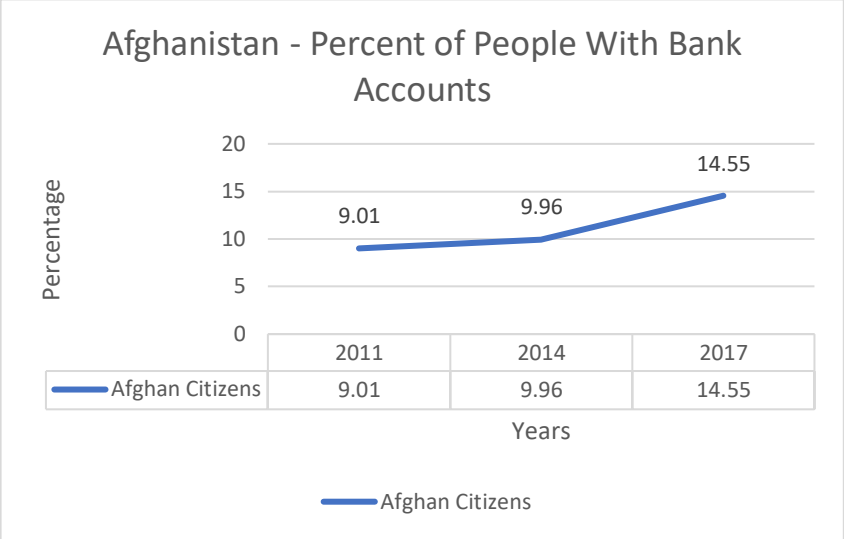


Figure 1 Chart created by Zach Pittman with data from The Global Economy, (2020). Afghanistan - Percent of People With Bank Accounts. Retrieved from https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Afghanistan/percent_people_bank_accounts/

A sub element of the banking issue in Afghanistan is the amount of foreign aid received. Foreign aid helps develop the country's alternative farming, building schools, roads, creating a stable government, and official banking institutions accessible for more Afghan people. A benefit to Afghanistan continuing to build banks and gaining more users is that this will keep accountability of where money is going and where it is coming from, e.g., corruption, drug trafficking, terrorism, waste, and fraud. The low accessibility to banks, ATMs,

[8] Editor's note: hawala is an informal value transfer system used in the Muslim world that is based on honor and a huge network of brokers. It is usually outside of government or other control and it is thus convenient for different terrorist organisations.

[9] The Economist, (2020, November 28). *Hawala Traders Are Being Squeezed by Regulators and COVID-19.* Retrieved from Merchant bankers - Hawala traders are being squeezed by regulators and covid-19 | Finance & economics | The Economist

and the low amount of bank accounts possessed by Afghan nationals compared to the usage of hawala networks hinders the Afghan government from creating another avenue of security and prosperity. It is possible to see a decline in illicit funding of terrorism and drug trafficking if the number of Afghan nationals having and using bank accounts increases. No current data suggests that official banking systems will replace hawala, nor is there data to suggest that even with more bank accounts opened, the illicit funding of terrorism and opium trafficking in Afghanistan will diminish. However, having a reliable

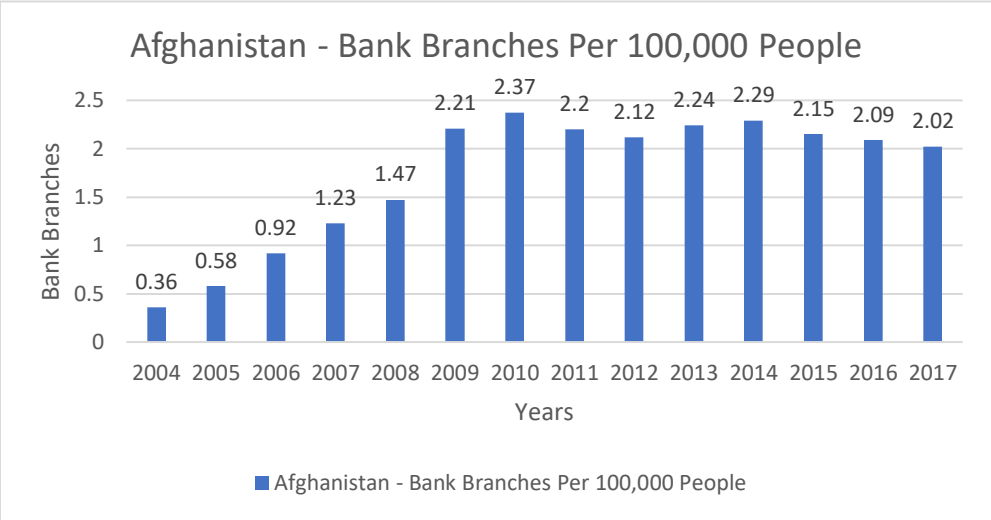


Figure 2 Chart created by Zach Pittman with data retrieved from The Global Economy, (2020). Afghanistan - Bank Branches Per 100,000 People. Retrieved from https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Afghanistan/bank_branches/

banking system in place for citizens to use, make transfers and take loans will help track any possible illicit funds, build businesses, and ensure financial stability.

In terms of foreign aid pledges by nations, in 2020 India promised $80 million for 150 projects, including a dam.[10] Meanwhile Japan has offered $720 million over four years[11], and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has pledged another $100 million to help the Government of Afghanistan respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.[12] The European Union (EU) has pledged $1.2 billion from 2021-2025,[13] while the United States promised $300 million for 2021[14], and the United Kingdom is donating £155 million for 2021. [15]

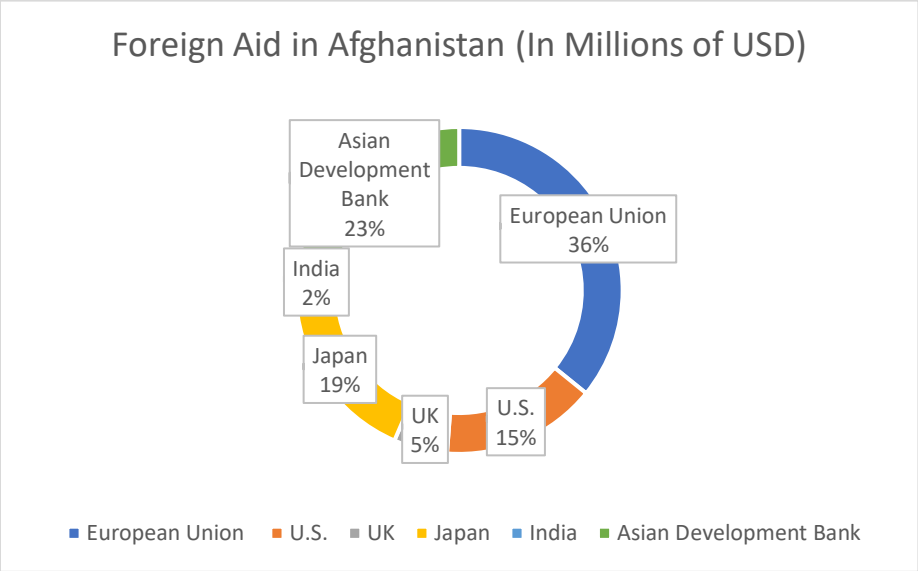


Figure 3 Zach Pittman created the chart using Foreign Aid for 2021-2024; Data retrieved from https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-25/donors-pledge-13-billion-for-afghanistan-as-u-s-looks-to-exit

Foreign aid is essential to developing

[10] Shubjahid,R., (2020) India pledges aid to rebuild Afghanistan, commits to projects worth $80 million, The Indian Express, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-pledges-aid-to-rebuild-afghanistan-commits-to-projects-worth-80-million-7064393/

[11] Japan Today (2020), Japan pledges $720 mil for Afghan reconstruction at int'l conference, https://japantoday.com/category/politics/update1-japan-pledges-720-mil.-for-afghan-reconstruction-at-int%27l-confab

[12] Asian Development Bank (2020), ADB Approves $100 Million Grant to Support Afghanistan's COVID-19 Response, https://www.adb.org/news/adb-approves-100-million-grant-support-afghanistan-covid-19-response

[13] EU Parliament, EU reconfirms support for Afghanistan at 2020 Geneva Conference, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2193

[14] Walsh, J.,(2021), U.S. Promises $300 Million Boost In Aid To Afghanistan. Here's Why., The Forbes, https://www.forbes.com/sites/joewalsh/2021/04/21/us-promises-300-million-boost-in-aid-to-afghanistan-heres-why/

[15] UK Government, (2021), UK pledges £155 million aid to support peace and stability in Afghanistan, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-pledges-155-million-aid-to-support-peace-and-stability-in-afghanistan

Afghanistan's infrastructure and promoting government stability to enforce regulations. It assists with elements such as education, banking, employment opportunities, and domestic security.

The critical factor of foreign aid is ensuring independent overwatch agencies to mitigate waste and fraud. For years, however, Afghanistan has suffered from a systematic corruption and persistent lack of data to prove or disprove information on funding, where funding goes, and in other cases, it is difficult to trace the origin of funding. An example of reported fraud that led to an investigation by USAID, The United States' Special Inspector General for Afghanistan (SIGAR) released a report in June of 2015 about the $769 million investment the U.S. had made into Afghanistan's education sector. USAID claimed a successful program regarding the financial investments, but SIGAR stated that the data that USAID used was not verifiable and wasted or used in cases of fraud[16]. USAID responded that *"there is no specific evidence or allegation at this point that the U.S. assistance funds have been misappropriated*[17]."

The current implications of the withdrawal by NATO and the U.S. left a resurgence of the Taliban. We will see a decrease in accessibility to banking branches to citizens. The Taliban and majority of civilians have used the Hawala system for generations, and it allows more privacy than a central institution would. Ultimately leaving speculation what will happen to the recently expanded banking system. The Taliban's resurgence and the withdrawal of NATO & the U.S. will cause a decline in the accessibility to bank branches in Afghanistan, especially outside

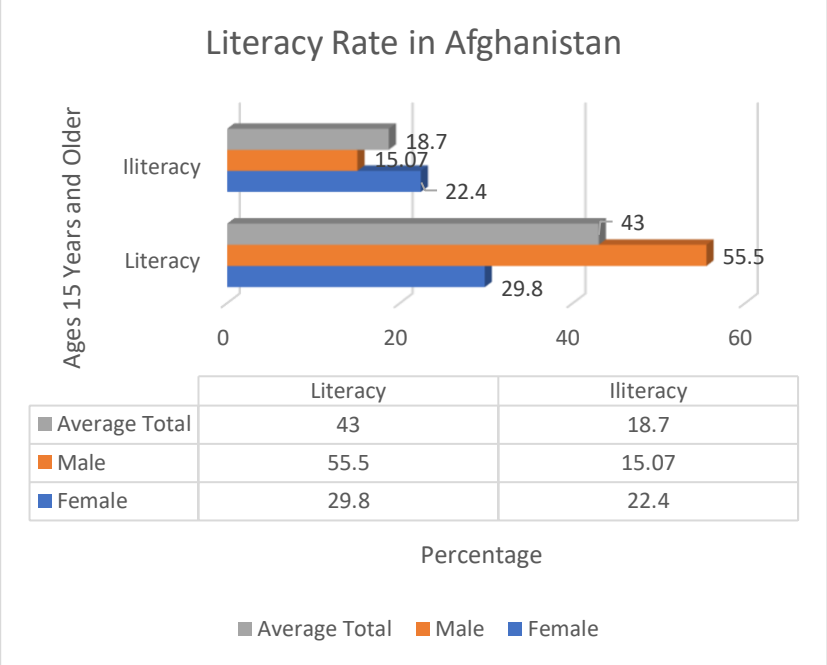
[16] Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2015, June 11). *Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Official letter to USAID.* Retrieved from SIGAR-15-62-SP.pdf
[17] Ibid

of large cities like Kabul. Other nations' involvement like China will fill the void on this issue and even establish Chinese-owned or investments into the Afghanistan banking system.

Education

Afghanistan's literacy rates climbed for both boys and girls; however, there are signs of decline for young girls with the resurgence of the Taliban and COVID-19 shutting down schools[18]. The Taliban in the past made it difficult for women and young girls to have access to education and now there is already evidence that they are unwilling to allow women's rights or access to education for women. [19] If the Taliban continue to capture regions within Afghanistan, it will destroy the progress within Afghanistan's education system.

According to Brookings Institute report from 2017, there is mixed evidence about the correlation of education, literacy levels, and terrorism or extremist views.[20] However, another factor that the report argues is that *"a lack of adequate employment opportunities for educated individuals is fueling support for violent extremism among the general population"* (p. 3). Education rates affect



[18] Afghanistan Times (2021, March 02). *Taliban Ban Girls From Education In Takhar*. Retrieved from Taliban ban girls from education in Takhar – Afghanistan Times

[19] Merchant, N. (2021, May 05). *US Report: Taliban Will Likely Curtail Afghan Women's Rights.* Retrieved from US report: Taliban will likely curtail Afghan women's rights (pri.org)

[20] Bhatia, K. & Ghanem, H., (2017, March). How Do Education and Unemployment Affect Support for Violent Extremism. Retrieved from global_20170322_violent-extremism.pdf (brookings.edu)

employment and business opportunity. In this sense lack of access to education is also an exploitation tactic by the Taliban to repress children, particularly girls, from education and allowing the Taliban control on the local population where schools are not accessible due to safety. Thus, leaving children vulnerable to recruitment, harassment, or death by the Taliban or other terror groups. In UNESCO's Education for All report *"barriers to access to education include: insecurity, poverty, and child work, lack of schools in remote areas, long walking distance to schools, and harassment of children on their way to school"*[21] (p. 12). A final aspect of formal education is preventing the Taliban or other terror groups from manipulating children's beliefs through propaganda in the Taliban-controlled Madrasas.

Another vulnerability Afghanistan faces is high rates of illiteracy among the population. However, promising data from UNESCO showed a steady increase in literacy rates for both genders, from the exit of the Soviet Union to 2018. Literacy rates were adversely affected at the height of the Taliban, specifically for women and young girls. The withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO women and young girls are already facing the adversity of completing or even attending education due to lockdowns with COVID-19,

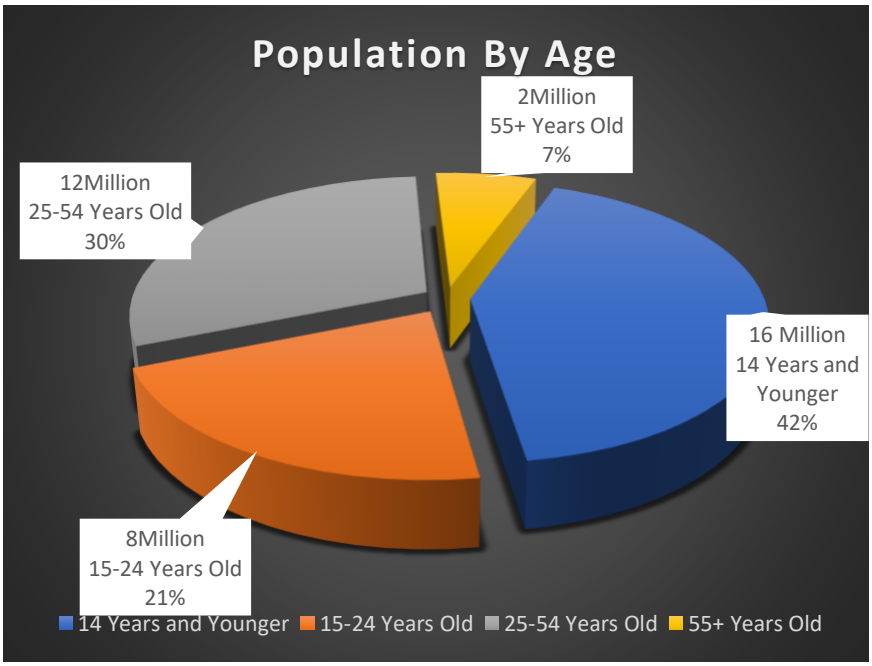


Figure 4 Zach Pittman created the chart using data from 2018 Afghanistan Literacy and Illiteracy Rates 15 Years and Older. Data retrieved from http://uis.unesco.org/country/AF and https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html

[21] UNESCO Education for All, (2015). Afghanistan: Education for All 2015 National Review. Retrieved from Afghanistan national Education for All (EFA) review 2015 report; 2014 - 232702eng.pdf (unesco.org)

Taliban regulations, and low family income. The withdrawal effects on literacy rates are speculative, but current events have proven that the Taliban are adversely affecting women's rights and access to education, which will create a decline in literacy rates.

Employment and Agriculture

Opium and poppy are a large amount of revenue for Afghanistan. Introducing other crops to create diversity is difficult due to the terrain, weather, and money necessity. In Agriculture, many important sub elements are essential for reducing the total opium production; however, discussing only alternative crops and other revenue streams.

Afghanistan's other three significant factors in the illicit exporting of opium are the lack of established border control, refugee camps, and lack of transportation regulations/enforcement.

Figure 5 Zach Pittman created the chart using data from 2018 Afghanistan's population by age groups. Data retrieved from http://uis.unesco.org/country/AF and https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html.

Figure 6 Afghanistan Combined Map – Terrain; Chart created by Zach Pittman with Data retrieved from The Long War Journal, UNHCR, and Geopium.org to combine into one map.Created using Google's My Maps. Retrieved from https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=10cA5B0JGX70qV1Y-muLv6JlJB9D-eYdT&ll=33.22120009653508%2C67.09251992564514&z=6

The border control element, transportation regulation, and refugee camps displayed in Figure 6. All three of these elements control the flow of opium and cash from sales. Currently, border control is fragile and has significant level of corruption that allows illicit trafficking and terrorist activity. Adrien Morel reports that "*despite significant improvements in customs collection since 2015, considerable leakage persists because of insecurity, entrenched corruption, and*

insufficient processing points along thousands of miles of permeable borders… Insurgent's levy taxes on trafficking and trade in areas that they control."[22]

Regional Instability and Opportunity for Adversary Nations

The U.S. and NATO withdrawal left a void in counterterrorism in which a resurgence of the Taliban has grown. A fabricated peace agreement continually violated by the Taliban shows convincing evidence that the NATO counterterrorism mission has not ended. The terrorist group ISIS even has claimed multiple recent attacks within Afghanistan, such as the attack on the HALO Trust[23][24] and the attack on a mosque in the Shakar Darah district of Kabul[25]. Counterterrorism efforts are collapsing with the Taliban capturing most Afghan provinces, ISIS re-emerging, and Al Qaeda potentially returning to Afghanistan. The withdrawal's implications mean that even though most troops will leave, the U.S. and NATO will continue counterterrorism operations within Afghanistan. The more likely scenario is that the U.S. will continue intelligence and special operations within Afghanistan to appease the public and continue supporting the current government of Afghanistan.

The instability of Afghanistan and the formal withdrawal of the U.S. gave more opportunity for China to increase relations and influence with the Afghan government. China has opened negotiations with Afghanistan and the possibility of expanding more projects within

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[22] Morel, A. (2020, January 22). Afghanistan's Borderlands: Unruly, Unruled, and Central to Peace. Retrieved from https://asiafoundation.org/2020/01/22/afghanistans-borderlands-unruly-unruled-and-central-to-peace/

[23] Elwazar, S. & Popalzai, (2021, June 10). *ISIS claims responsibility for attack on mine-clearing workers in Afghanistan.* Retrieved from Afghanistan: At least 10 killed in attack on Halo Trust mine-clearing workers - CNN

[24] Associated Press reposted by Al Arabiya English, (2021, June 10). *ISIS claims killing deminers in north Afghanistan.* Retrieved from ISIS claims killing deminers in north Afghanistan | Al Arabiya English

[25] AFP reposted by Al Arabiya English, (2021, May 16). *ISIS claims attack on Afghanistan mosque that left 12 worshippers dead.* Retrieved from ISIS claims attack on Afghanistan mosque that left 12 worshippers dead | Al Arabiya English

Afghanistan through its Belt Road Initiative (BRI) project[2627]. China has opened negotiations with the Taliban, playing both sides of the fence due to their focus on economic gain within Afghanistan. *"In June 2019, Beijing publicly declared that it had hosted a Taliban delegation led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. When President Donald Trump suddenly canceled the talks with the Taliban in September 2019, China attempted to inject itself into the process by inviting the group to Beijing for a two-day intra-Afghan conference in October."*

China's interest within Afghanistan has been clear about resources in exchange for investment into infrastructure. Beijing understands that Afghanistan cannot pay with currency financially, but the billions of dollars in precious resources can offset investment costs. According to Caspian Report's YouTube video, *"China is interested in Afghanistan's resources to maintain its market share of rare earth metals. Currently, Beijing is the top supplier in the market, but its growing domestic demands going to renewable consumption have reduced its total exports. Thus, to supply its foreign and domestic associates, China seeks to find alternative sources and bring them online."*[28]

Afghanistan can invest within itself, but the lack of stability, growth of the Taliban, lack of resources, and lack of businesses willing to invest Afghanistan does not have opportunities of long-term resource mining projects. China and the U.S. are the best options for Afghanistan. China has an opportunity in the region due to the neighboring Xinjiang province with

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[26] Saraswat, A., (2020, April 17). *Chinese Interests in Afghanistan: From Indifference to Strategic Involvement*. Retrieved from https://diplomatist.com/2020/04/17/chinese-interests-in-afghanistan-from-indifference-to-strategic-involvement/

[27] Kaura, A., (2020, August 7). *What does China's growing engagement in Afghanistan mean for the US?* Retrieved from What does China's growing engagement in Afghanistan mean for the US? | Middle East Institute (mei.edu)

[28] Caspian Report. "Afghanistan Sits on $3 Trillion in Minerals." March 18, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9pOQioOEGg&t=156s

Afghanistan, and if they complete their logistics network with Pakistan, it will also allow more accessible transportation of minerals from Afghanistan.

An article by Anushka Saraswat in the Diplomatist states that Beijing and Kabul have a memorandum of understanding for the BRI project.

"China and Afghanistan are connected in northern Afghanistan via Sino–Afghanistan Special Railway Transportation Project and the Five Nations Railway Project, and projects to connect with Southern Afghanistan via the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)… According to the Ministry of Public Works and AFRA, Afghanistan Rail Network will be beneficial in the transportation and industrial construction of goods and commodities. It will also resolve the problem of transporting Afghanistan's mineral products to regional ports." [29]

The BRI project within Afghanistan comes partially due to a lack of consistent U.S. policy within the country, and warming ties between Beijing and Kabul. Afghanistan cannot afford to pay back China except by allowing China to extract their precious resources, leaving Afghanistan without export trade products cutting down their potential revenue, and creating a strong dependency upon China.

Conclusion

The Withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO are leaving various Afghanistan gaps filled by foreign nations like China. The banking system in Afghanistan still has sparse numbers of users in the nation, leaving the hawala system the primary currency exchange system. It leaves endless possibilities for untracked illicit funding, including funding for terrorism and a lack of data on

[29] Saraswat, A., (2020, April 17). Chinese Interests in Afghanistan: From Indifference to Strategic Involvement. Retrieved from https://diplomatist.com/2020/04/17/chinese-interests-in-afghanistan-from-indifference-to-strategic-involvement/

the system, how much or how little spent, for drug trafficking or funding terrorism. China has begun the BRI project in Afghanistan by creating logistics networks for the transportation of resources. The Taliban gained influence and captured most provinces within Afghanistan, and ISIS re-emerged, taking ownership of two recent attacks. Afghanistan's education system is suffering due to COVID-19, and with the Taliban growing strength, women and young girls are not to have access to education. The implications of the withdrawal affect the security internally in Afghanistan, but the government and all sectors are at substantial risk. The U.S. and NATO have left an enormous void filled by adversary nations like China; The U.S. and NATO decision leaves a weakened influence and distrust towards Western intervention due to lack of consistent policies and commitment.

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