



Strange Intimacies:

Indo-Afghan relations and the end of the War on Terror

A montage of Afghanese people, representing men, women and children from different backgrounds and of all major ethnicities in Afghanistan. | Weaveravel | CC BY-SA 4.0 DEED

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“You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive.”—as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and as portrayed in the BBC adaptation by Mark Gatiss et. al. (2010)

Afghan - Anglo War 1839 to 1842



First Anglo-Afghan War | Ailkhananin | CC BY4.0

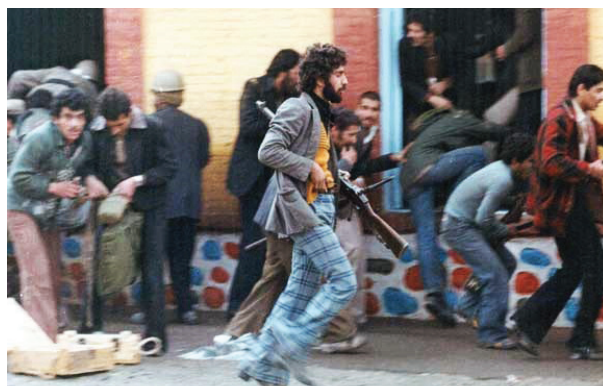
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN Afghanistan and India has been in constant flux for about two millennia. The commonly accepted historiographical analyses of Afghanistan position it as only a liminal part of South Asia historically and geographically. However, from Alexander the Great's foray into India in 330 BC, to the beginning of the Mughal Empire in 1526, Afghanistan was considered the birthplace of India as a nation. This political, cultural, and emotional position of Afghanistan as the original center of the Indian subcontinent was destabilized very late, in the mid-eighteenth century, with the British control of India and the centering of the far-eastern province of Bengal as the locus of British power. The three Anglo-Afghan wars of the nineteenth century and the first Cold War in the world, commonly known as the Great Game, cemented the perception of Afghanistan as the “ungovernable” frontier to British control.¹

This language of the dangerous, unstable, and defiant frontier has been echoed in the modern historiography as well, as is

apparent in the current discourse on Afghanistan after the end of the War on Terror. Walter Hakala, for example, adapts Richard Slotkin's definition of borderlands as “mythic space” to describe Afghanistan as one of the “never-never lands... whose meanings have more to do with myths than with historical representation.”² Nile Green points to Afghanistan's functioning as a *tabula rasa* for the Western imagination, a space of “anti-modernity,” characterized by “wildness, remoteness and emptiness.”³ And yet, as we have seen, this liminal geopolitical space has attracted the attention of imperial powers like the British, the Russians, and the Americans in modern times as well. This gravitational pull has always been somewhat inexplicable, as Lord Salisbury would write to Lord Northbrook, referring to Afghanistan, in 1875, “We cannot conquer it—we cannot leave it alone.”⁴

I think it is important to challenge the historiographical characterization of the relationship between South Asia and Afghanistan as one marked by estrangement. For example, the Indian-Bangladeshi author Syed Mujtaba Ali depicted

Kabul as a cosmopolitan locus of engagement, encompassing historical, cultural, political, and linguistic connections, where Indians could forge wider global anti-colonial solidarities. He vividly described this polyphonic lifeworld of gardens, bazaars, embassies, and French-speaking Afghan elite in his Bengali language travelogue *Deshe Bideshe (At Home and in Foreign Lands)* and his novel *Shabnam (The Dewdrop Woman)*. Leading up to the Afghan civil war and the deposition of the emir Amanullah Khan in 1929, Mujtaba Ali's eyewitness account remains one of the only such records of this vanished world recorded by a non-Western source.⁵ He contrasted the ways in which Afghanistan operated in the British colonial imagination as the unknowable, mythic frontier but evoked memories as the space of cosmopolitan precolonial belonging for Indians themselves. His novel *Shabnam* movingly described the autonomy and centrality of women in Afghan society and politics, and how that space was constricted by the civil war in 1929.⁶ Subhas Chandra Bose, in a daring escape from house arrest in 1941, made his way from Calcutta to the safety of Kabul disguised as a mute "Kabuliwallah," received an Italian passport in Kabul, and made his way to Europe as the suave Orlando Mazzota, from there to Germany and in a submarine to Singapore where he organized through the Indian National Army (INA) armed resistance to British rule.⁷ Therefore, it was the severely limited British imperial control in Afghanistan that also made it possible for Indians like Raja Mahendra Pratap, Syed Mujtaba Ali, and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose to imagine an existence beyond the paradigms of colonization and imperial control.⁸



Group of Armed Revolutionaries during Iranian Revolution | iichs.ir (unknown photographer)
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Afghanistan signified not merely the limits, physical or mental, to the constrictive existence and experiences of Indians. Rather, it provided an alternative vision of the places and people who were ungovernable by the rules of colonialism and therefore functioned as exemplars of independent self-determination. The proud and undefeated Afghan became a model for emulation by South Asians, culturally and politically. South Asian narratives of intimacies with Afghans and Afghanistan provide an urgent corrective to its depiction as an ungovernable, defiant frontier. Indian investments and bilateral ties with Afghanistan over the last fifty years also challenge the overdetermined stereotype of Afghanistan as a static and "medieval" space engendering endless violence and repetitive failures of attempted neo-imperial control. We must remember that this narrative of Afghanistan being the "graveyard of empires" does a singular disservice to the Afghan people. It turns the Afghans into puppets to be maneuvered by external powers. In the words of the historian Timothy Nunan, "It makes Afghans bit players, rather than protagonists, to their own history. And it fails to explain why Afghanistan has been at the margins of geopolitics for much of its modern history, in particular for much of the twentieth century."⁹

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—Lord Salisbury

The most decisive moment with regard to Indo-Afghan ties in the twentieth century came with the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. This prompted the CIA led Operation Cyclone in the decade of the 1980s, with Pakistan's active help. As a result, geopolitics in South Asia changed forever. An influx of money from the United States (U.S.) and Saudi Arabia to the region and to interested actors "to fight a holy war against godless

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Scenes from the Afghan-Soviet War | LLLs | CC BY4.0

communism,” historians Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal contend, “gave martial rule in Pakistan a fresh lease of life while robbing the concept of jihad of its ethical meaning as an inner struggle, not an external war against infidels.”¹⁰ It also meant that from the decade of the 1980s onwards, not only Afghanistan, but also India and Pakistan have been the loci of almost continuous insurgency, terrorism, and warfare.

Even before the first Taliban regime’s violence took root in the mid-1990s, Afghanistan had already been devastated demographically and economically by the end of the Soviet occupation in 1989. According to historian Adam Tooze, who cites research by Marek Sliwinski and M. Siddiq Noorzoy, the scorched earth policy of the USSR in Afghanistan and the Afghan counterinsurgency led to the death of between 9-10 percent of the prewar population—anywhere between 1.25–1.75 million people. Using a slightly more sophisticated methodology, Noor Ahmed Khalidi arrived at a figure of 876,825 casualties. Tooze says, “The heaviest toll was taken of men of middle age. Sliwinski estimated that of all men between the age of 31 and 50, 22 percent did not survive the war.” Afghanistan was one of the only countries in the world to see such a demographic

decline post-1950.¹¹ During this twenty-year period between 1980 and 2000, Afghanistan was also the only country in the world with a lower life expectancy for women than for men. However, from 2000–2021, female life expectancy at birth increased to comparable levels as that of males. Even in the small periods of relative peace and democratization in Afghanistan during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, access to higher education and healthcare for women remained a problem, though there was a significant rise in the percentage of women joining the professional workforce. However, the second Taliban takeover has pushed women out of the public sphere once again, and impossibly narrowed their chances of being educated or finding any measure of equality with Afghan men. Endemic gender-based violence is also, once again, on a stupendous rise.

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The decade of the 1990s, during the civil war and then the Taliban takeover, coincided with a global media spotlight on Afghanistan like never before—the Taliban’s extremist



Taliban member with chest flags, Kabul | Callum Darragh | CC public domain



Women in burqa with their children in Herat, Afghanistan Arnesen | CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED

policies, connections to the global al-Qaeda regime of Osama bin Laden, and their brutal violations of human rights and repression of women were highlighted and exemplified in their act of demolishing the great sixth century Bamiyan Buddha statues in 2001. After the tragic events of 9/11 and the declaration of the War on Terror, a certain genre of images of Afghanistan proliferated in the global media in the last two decades. We are all familiar with the montages of mountainous, arid landscapes, women in full blue *niqabs*, the constant presence of American soldiers and UN peacekeeping forces, the burning poppy fields, and the suicide bombings. Tony Stark being kidnapped



The taller Buddha of Bamiyan before (left picture) and after destruction (right). | UNESCO/A Lezine CC public domain

and tortured by inexplicably Urdu-speaking Taliban operatives—and emerging as Iron Man out of his personal ordeal, is a great example of the success of this particular political and media narrative.¹² Global audiences of Marvel Films are, of course, not supposed to care that an Afghan would speak Dari, Pashto, or any other number of dialects. They would probably not speak Urdu, which is mostly spoken by Indians and Pakistanis and is considered the language of poetry and prayer in the subcontinent.

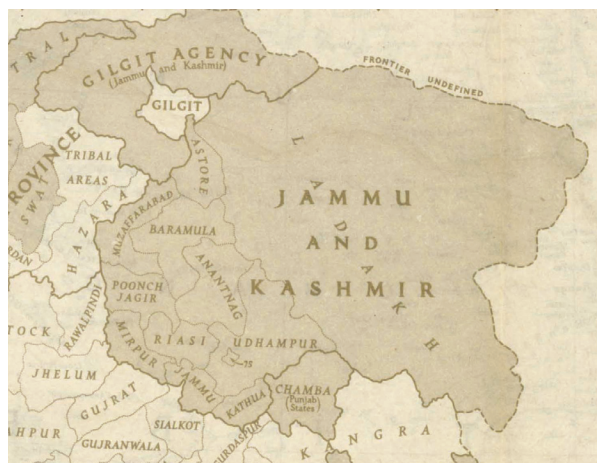
The unveiling of a new global regime of invasive military wars, state-sponsored surveillance, and legally sanctioned torture and extra-judicial killings have been justified by the almost mythological air of lawlessness and violence these images impart to this region of the world. It has also justified the civilizational rhetoric of nation-building in Afghanistan and resulted in immense aid provided to the country, which increased only the oligarchic nature of political power sharing, high rates of corruption in the bureaucracy, and a national economy completely dependent on and crippled without foreign aid. The total expenditure for the United States of these post 9/11 War(s) on Terror have exceeded 8 trillion USD, by the conservative estimates of Brown University’s “Costs of War” Project.¹³



Terrorist al Qaida | GagogaSus | CC BY4.0

Repercussions of Soviet and U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and such a long-standing era of troubles have been deeply felt not only within India but in its relationship with its regional neighbors. Political, socioeconomic, and military partnerships, both formal and informal, have been repeatedly interrupted by non-state actors engaged in terrorism both in Afghanistan, but also on South Asian soil. India has had to contend with its neighbor Pakistan's role in both Afghanistan and the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Political scientist Sumantra Bose says, "The Pakistani military's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had, during the 1980s military regime of General Zia-ul Haq, acquired vast resources and autonomy as the nodal agency coordinating the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—sponsored war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. By 1989 Soviet forces were on their way out of Afghanistan, and the ISI was in a position to focus on the new war in Kashmir."¹⁴ In India, the instability in Afghanistan and the resurgence of the Taliban in the last decade have spelled renewed anxieties about Kashmir, looking back to the period between 1989 and 1995, when at the end of the Soviet occupation, there was an influx of *mujahideen* into the valley, allegedly helped by the ISI and the Pakistan Army, in order to wage a shadow war. By August 1993, Afghan insurgents from the Hezb-e-Islami party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar

were operating in Kashmir. By 2001, of the total number of insurgents killed in Kashmir by the Indian military, about 3000 were apparently of Afghan and Pakistani origin.¹⁵ The fears of Pakistan's shadow games in Afghanistan remain a talking point in the Indian media thirty years later, as political commentators and diplomats often point to the enduring Kalashnikov culture in the border villages and towns of Pakistan, where there is a substantial Pashtun presence. More recently, the irresistible rise of the



Jammu and Kashmir in 1946 map of India. This is one of the last few maps of Jammu and Kashmir produced during the British Raj, just before the independence of India and Pakistan. | National Geographic CC public domain



State-sponsored surveillance, and legally sanctioned torture and extra-judicial killings have been justified by the almost mythological air of lawlessness and violence these images impart to this region of the world.

Haqqani network, which, with the help of Pakistan's ISI, emerged as kingmakers in Afghanistan at the end of the War on Terror in 2021, has further complicated India's considerations regarding its future policy in Afghanistan. The Haqqani network was behind the June 2011 attack on the Intercontinental Hotel, and two major suicide bombings, in 2008 and 2009, against the Indian Embassy in Kabul.¹⁶ The Haqqanis were also allegedly involved in assaults against the U.S. Embassy, the NATO headquarters, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters, the Afghan Presidential Palace, and the Afghan National Directorate of Security headquarters on 13th September 2011.¹⁷

The Kargil War between India and Pakistan in 1999 and the Indian Parliament attack in 2001 were seen by the Indian establishment as a continuation of the spillover of Pakistani terrorism into India, aided by the presence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. President Pervez Musharraf's audacious bid to occupy Kashmir during the Kargil war was financed by the billions of dollars that had poured into the Pakistani establishment as reward for their cooperation in helping the United States in counterterrorism operations against Arab members of Al-Qaeda, who had been sheltering in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region with the help of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban.¹⁸ This animus-filled perception has endured in India-Pakistan bilateral ties.

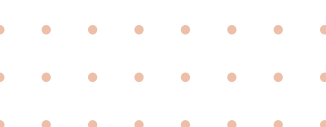
In contrast to Islamabad, New Delhi promised Afghanistan an independent window to international foreign relations, without compromising Afghanistan's territorial integrity. This was also in contrast to Pakistan's ISI, which in collusion with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar hoped to erase the colonial border of the Durand Line to create a merged Pashtun homeland.¹⁹ India's claims of friendship were bolstered by military, medical, and financial aid, including infrastructural development. Similarly, alliances were pursued with non-

Pashtun Afghan leaders like Burhanuddin Rabbani and the leader of the Northern Alliance, Ahmed Shah Massoud, through diplomatic backchannels. Cultivating these particular alliances were aimed at increasing and protecting India's interests in the region and at frustrating Pakistani diplomacy and interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs that could also destabilize India's political and economic regional supremacy in the subcontinents. Massoud's assassination in 2001 and Rabbani's murder in 2011 both came at great cost not only to Afghanistan's aspirations for a Taliban-free democratic future and for the stability and sovereignty of the Afghan government, especially during Hamid Karzai's Presidential term, but also for India's hopes for friendly regional aspirations in Afghanistan and safeguarding its interests with respect to Kashmir.

After 2001, India continued to build and maintain close diplomatic ties with forces aligned with democratic impulses within Afghanistan. In this regard, India was fortunate during the tenure of President Hamid Karzai. Karzai, like many elite Afghan men and women, had been educated



Soldiers of the Indian Army depicted after capturing a hill from Pakistani forces during the Kargil War. Indian Army | Open data license India



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Former President Hamid Karzai responds to a reporter's question during a joint availability with President George W. Bush in the East Room of the White House. | Paul Morse | CC public domain

in India and had fond memories of his time there, as well as close personal relationships with the Indian political and bureaucratic establishment. During his regime, India's investments in Afghanistan, included the building of power plants and health facilities; creating sanitation and potable water projects; and providing educational scholarships to more than 1,000 Afghan students per year to Indian universities, including admission to India's prestigious IITs, IIMs, and AIIMS facilities. These endeavors led to a surge in popular approval for Indian presence on Afghan soil. William Dalrymple, the popular historian, says, "An ABC/BBC poll in 2009 showed 74 percent of Afghans viewing India favorably, while only 8 percent had a positive view of Pakistan."²⁰ Ashraf Ghani was more distant in his approach than his predecessor and ineffectually tried to keep the Taliban in control by playing India, Pakistan, and U.S. interests in Afghanistan against each other. However, both Karzai and Ghani claimed India was strategically important in their regional foreign policy plans and welcomed Indian presence and investments in Afghanistan. Partly this was in a bid to distance themselves and their prospective governments from Pakistani interference and Pakistan's continued association with and covert support of the Taliban leaders. It was also to demonstrate to the United States and allied powers that Afghanistan counted on India as a model for its

journey toward democratization, in line with state-building measures initiated by the Western coalition.

The fracturing of U.S. diplomatic relationships with its traditional ally Pakistan, and a reconfiguration of the political dynamics between Pakistan and China on one hand and the United States and India on another, since 2010, has led to a more complex political negotiation in Afghanistan. In any case, Pakistan, despite its faltering relationship with the United States and the Coalition, continued to receive billions of dollars for allowing use of its military bases and ports by Western forces for troop movements and equipment transfers to Afghanistan. India, on the other hand, desperate to keep its strategic partnership with Karzai and protect its investments in Afghanistan, continued to adopt a reconciliatory approach, even when it was clear that Karzai was in secret talks with certain factions of the Afghan Taliban.

According to the political analyst Avinash Paliwal, New Delhi's deepest fears were a repeat of the tragedies of the 1990s, beginning with the murder of President Najibullah and the establishment of the first Taliban regime. He also contends that despite rapprochement between India and the United States, beginning during the Bush administration and strengthening during the Obama administration, Washington and New Delhi still could not figure out a joint policy on Afghanistan or a way to work fruitfully together. India was



US representative Zalmay Khalilzad (left) and Taliban representative Abdul Ghani Baradar (right) sign the agreement in Doha, Qatar on February 29, 2020. State Department photo by Ron Przysucha CC public domain



Two U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III loadmasters, assigned to the 816th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron, prepare the cargo bay for passengers in support of Operation Allies Refuge at Hamid Karzai International Airport, Afghanistan, Aug. 20, 2021. | U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Taylor Crul | CC public domain

also increasingly concerned with the conciliatory overtures being made to the Taliban by the United States and Britain through a series of talks mediated by Qatar, which sidelined the Afghan government in Kabul as well as New Delhi, from the negotiations. Matters were further complicated by parallel Chinese mediations held in Urumqi, with Pakistani observers, in 2015, right before the United States initiated a new round of Doha Dialogues in 2016.²¹ As we all now know, the continuation of these U.S. negotiations with the Taliban, mediated by the Qatari state, led to the Trump administration's 2020 deal with the Taliban under the Doha Agreement. The resultant tragic withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan in 2021 under President Joe Biden left millions of Afghans to the terror and starvation that awaited them under a resurgent Taliban regime.²² In the aftermath of the United States' hasty withdrawal and freezing of the assets of Afghanistan's Central Bank, the country's economy collapsed, and essential goods and services became impossible to provide to the populace. For example, in the two freezing winters since 2021, starvation and child malnutrition has been widespread, with more than 14 million children at risk of hunger-related deaths and of trafficking.²³ Afghanistan's healthcare services have buckled beneath the strain. The Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital in Kabul, named after India's

erstwhile prime minister, built with Indian aid and staffed by Indian physicians, has seen an endless influx of gravely ill children who the physicians and medical staff have struggled to accommodate and treat with dwindling resources.²⁴

The withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan in 2021 under President Joe Biden left millions of Afghans to the terror and starvation that awaited under a resurgent Taliban.

After the sudden end of the War on Terror, the U.S. retreat from the region, and the second takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021, India was faced with a reconfiguration of its policy with respect to Afghanistan once again. This came at a moment of other regional considerations. The relationship between India and her neighbors, Pakistan and China, has been triangulated and mediated in some measure through their individual and collective entanglements in Afghanistan. These new power shifts being mediated



Taliban fighters in a captured Humvee after the Fall of Kabul, August 2021. | Voice of America News CC public domain

through a shadow competition in Afghanistan post-2021, however, pose unique dangers for the South Asian subcontinent. There is a prehistory of conflict between these three nations. On one hand, India-China went to war in 1962 after the Dalai Lama's flight to India in 1959, and India had disputes with China over him being given refuge by India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Also, as a result of the Sino-Pakistan 'Boundary Agreement' of 1963, Pakistan handed over 5,180 square kilometers of disputed "Indian" territory in Aksai Chin in the state of Jammu and Kashmir to China. Pakistan and India, on the other hand, have been at war at least four times in the past 75 years, in 1947-1948, in 1965, in 1971, and in 1999. Since 1965, but more aggressively between 2019 and 2022, China has also sliced away Indian territory in the North-East and in Ladakh—an estimated conservative total of about 38000 sq. kms.²⁵

China, India, and Pakistan are all nuclear-capable, and at least for India and Pakistan, threats of a nuclear war have been omnipresent since 1997-98. Economic considerations for all three nations go hand in hand with their political interests in Afghanistan. China has a geopolitical desire to expand its OBOR (One Belt One Road) project through Afghanistan and develop the China-Pakistan Energy Corridor or CPEC.

Afghanistan stands to gain sea access to the Pakistani Karachi and Gwadar ports by being part of the initiative.²⁶ The success of OBOR and CPEC would also lay to waste Indian infrastructural initiatives, such as the roads that it built to link Afghanistan to Iran's Persian Gulf port of Chabahar. In terms of hard political realities, as mentioned earlier, the prominence of the Haqqani network in the current Taliban regime has been seen as a victory of Pakistan's policies in Afghanistan and a moment of rare loss of face for India in its avowed role as the leader in subcontinental politics.²⁷



On the second day of the Taliban's rule in Kabul, Hamid Karzai International Airport was crowded with people trying to travel abroad, but stopped by Taliban militants. | VOA | CC public domain

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The retreat of the United States from Afghanistan has led to a power vacuum, and China has stepped into the breach. There has been widespread political speculation in Asia that it signals a new era of tensions between the world's two superpowers, the United States and China, and the beginning of a new Cold War. These new regional tensions bring further complications to the Indian subcontinent with China's imperial turn and its desire to dominate Asia economically and politically through an establishment of a new Silk Route. Though it has not yet offered official recognition to the Taliban regime, China has significant investments to protect, including mining rights to Afghanistan's USD 3 trillion worth of reserves of lithium, chromite, copper, nickel, and cobalt.²⁸ China's state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation just signed a deal to invest in the Amu Darya oil and gas project development.²⁹ But each of these projects would also require substantial investments by the Chinese government. China is also deeply concerned that Taliban insurgency will spill over in the Uyghur Muslim majority Xinjiang province once it finishes building a crucial arterial road through the Wakhan Corridor that connects to Xinjiang. There have been attacks on Chinese workers and Chinese properties in Kabul that are a cause of rising worry for Beijing, as partisan newspapers in India have delighted in reporting.³⁰

Similarly, Pakistan's jubilation in outfoxing India in Afghanistan was soon subsumed in a domestic, political, and economic crisis, galloping inflation and fuel prices, as well as energy production deficits that resulted in power blackouts across the nation. Pakistani politicians have been desperately trying to negotiate an IMF bailout. In the midst of this turmoil, the country was rocked by one of the deadliest suicide bombings it has faced in recent times,



with a death toll of more than 100 victims, in a Peshawar mosque on January 30, 2023.³¹ No terror outfit has claimed responsibility for the attack yet, but for the residents of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, this attack revives horrific memories of violence by the Pakistani Taliban, including the killing of over 147 children and teachers in a school in Peshawar in 2014. Another bomb blast in Quetta in the province of Balochistan on February 5, 2023 targeted a military convoy, and in this case, the fringe group Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan claimed they were responsible.³² The current situation should be a stark reminder that Afghanistan's violence has always spilled over into its neighboring countries and destabilized their internal security in turn. Therefore, a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan is in the best interests of India, Pakistan and China, who should consider carefully what they each have to lose if the game of political upmanship continues.

If the Taliban manage to govern Afghanistan with any measure of competence, and the Chinese OBOR projects are successful, the Taliban will earn billions of dollars in the process. This could entirely replace the drug trade, which is their most important source of revenue. It would

China is concerned that Taliban insurgency will spill over in the Uyghur Muslim majority Xinjiang province once it finishes building the Wakhan Corridor that connects to Xinjiang.



Kabul, Afghanistan view | Weaverave
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also free the Taliban, and hopefully the Afghan people, from dependence on Western aid, which has caused untold damage to the country. It would also mean Chinese and by association, Pakistani stranglehold over Afghanistan's politics and economy. India would have to contend with an adversarial superpower in its own backyard, not to mention an aggravation and worsening of the political and military situation in Kashmir and Ladakh. It would lead to a further repression of the population in Jammu and Kashmir by the Indian government's military and security apparatus.

India has justifiable reasons to be wary of these developments, and it has been very cautious in trying to gauge the situation. India's hardliner Hindu-right administration finds the problem of three Muslim-majority neighbors in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan threatening on ideological grounds. It has adopted discriminatory immigration rules for refugees from Afghanistan based on religion, but Indo-Afghan relations are a problem to contend with, in view of India's sovereignty and internal security. A new conciliatory approach has been adopted by the Narendra Modi administration in dealing with the Taliban government, and it has facilitated more generous aid to the Afghan people. In India's budget for 2023, Nirmala Sitharaman, the finance minister, declared a USD 25 million infrastructure development package for Afghanistan. The news was welcomed with joy in Kabul.³³

The Taliban have also requested the resumption of flights between Kandahar, which is their spiritual headquarters, and New Delhi and a reopening of India's consulate there.³⁴ Both parties, the Taliban and the Indian government, are fully aware of the fragility of this momentary rapport, and it remains to be seen how long these overtures of friendship can be sustained, given the ideological differences between these two powers.

Riding the Afghan tiger has always been an incredibly risky venture, as history is witness, and getting off safely has almost always been impossible. There is no reason to believe that the new political dispensation in Afghanistan will not experience or exercise more violent changes in the near future. This is a tinderbox situation, and as always, Afghanistan is serving as a proxy for external neo-imperial ideologies and political maneuvers. This genealogical pattern is not unfamiliar to historians—Afghanistan served the same purpose in the nineteenth century between Britain and Russia, in the twentieth century between the USSR and the United States at the height of the Cold War, and in the twenty-first century between the so-called enlightened and liberal Western world order led by the United States and the dark forces of "jihadi" terrorism. China, India, and Pakistan are perhaps setting the board for a new iteration of this eternal "Great Game."³⁵

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The Great Game, of competing imperial interests of Russia and Britain in Asia in the nineteenth century and its influence on British policy in South and Central Asia is described in Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim*; Rudyard Kipling, Paula M. Krebs, and Tricia A. Lootens, *Rudyard Kipling's Kim*, Longman Cultural Edition, Boston: Longman, 2011.
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