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Ca' Foscari
Dorsoduro 3246
30123 Venezia

**The Clinton Administration
and the Taliban:**
when geopolitical and economic interests
clash with reality

Relatore:
Prof. Duccio Basosi

Correlatore:
Prof. Matteo Legrenzi

Laureando:
Francesco Sergi Cucinelli
Matricola:
835582

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Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Pre-Invasion Afghanistan.....	6
1.1 Afghanistan: Culture and Society.....	6
1.2 Before the Invasion.....	10
Chapter 2: 1979-1989: The Afghan Quagmire.....	20
2.1 Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan.....	20
2.2 Alliances and Rivalries.....	28
2.3 The Afghan War: 1979-1985.....	33
2.3.1 Operation Cyclone.....	33
2.3.2 The Actual War.....	40
2.4 The Afghan War: 1985-1989.....	47
2.5 War Outcomes.....	56
Chapter 3: From the Civil War to the Rise of the Taliban.....	60
3.1 The Najibullah Regime: 1989-1992.....	61
3.2 Infighting and Chaos: 1992-1994.....	66
3.3 The Taliban.....	69

Chapter 4: The Taliban's Afghanistan.....	75
4.1 The Taliban and the Changing Regional Scenario.....	75
4.2 The Taliban's Ideology.....	77
4.3 The Changing Regional Scenario.....	88
4.4 The Taliban's Military Campaign in Afghanistan.....	94
4.5 The Taliban as a Governing Body.....	108
4.6 The Taliban, Drugs and Terrorism.....	116
Chapter 5: Clinton and the Taliban.....	127
5.1 Clinton's World.....	127
5.2 The New Great Game and the U.S.-Taliban Relations.....	139
Conclusion.....	162
Acknowledgements.....	165
Abstract.....	166
Bibliography.....	168

Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is outlining the relations between the United States and Afghanistan during the years of the presidency of William J. Clinton (1993-2001). In particular, the main focus is placed on the relations between the U.S. establishment and the Taliban movement, which took power in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s.

The terrorist attacks which targeted the United States at the turn of the twentieth century cast an ominous light on the events which took place in Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979. A vast array of specialised literature focuses on the reconstruction of the events which eventually led to the rise of the Taliban and their takeover of Afghanistan. It is indeed fundamental to retrace the events and the consequences of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, as they set a subtle mechanism in motion. The geopolitical and geostrategic considerations typical of the Cold War mind-set drove the U.S. administrations during the 1980s to foster and to generously finance fundamentalist movements in Central Asia. Basically, the theoretical framework constituted by the balance of power overshadowed any other type of reflection.

Therefore, as soon as the Soviet army withdrew from the Afghan quagmire, the United States had no more interests at stake in the region, and thus essentially forgot Afghanistan. Still, in a dramatic turn of events, the mechanisms set in motion by Washington in the Central Asian region, would eventually come back to haunt the American mastermind and its allies. During the Afghan jihad, the CIA played a pivotal role in channelling huge sums of money, weapons, and traineeships to the Afghan mujahedeen, whom President Reagan will address as 'freedom fighters'. In addition, the Central Intelligence Agency would even turn a blind eye on drugs trafficking and the development of an important network of Islamic fundamentalism. Since bleeding the Soviet superpower was the paramount objective, drugs, terrorism,

religious fundamentalism, and human rights respect represented minor and expendable concerns.

The dissertation is organised in order to provide the basic concepts necessary to understand and evaluate the factors and characteristics which rendered the rise of the Taliban possible, as well as the ground on which the relations with the United States took place.

The first chapter deals with the fundamental cultural and social Afghan background, which results instrumental in the understanding of core aspects of the Taliban ideology.

The second chapter concerns the Soviet decision to intervene military in Afghanistan. The invasion of the country, in late 1979, marked a watershed for the destiny of both the Soviet Union and Afghanistan. The subsequent decade of conflict was characterised by the involvement of a number of different countries, each with different and sometimes contrasting interests and needs. The governments of the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, India, and even Israel had a role in fomenting the Afghan jihadists against the infidel invaders. Eventually, the decision to military invade played a pivotal role in bringing about the end of the Cold War as well as the demise of the same Soviet Union. Moreover, the war itself and its long-lasting consequences unleashed a power, the Islamic extremism, which was never fully understood or correctly taken into account by the establishments in Washington.

The third chapter outlines the events that occurred in that period of time, between the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 and the rise of the Taliban in 1994, characterised by brutal infighting and internecine chaos. The political vacuum left after the fall of the communist Najibullah was never really filled in until the late 1990s. As a result, Afghanistan was a failed state, where anarchy and warlordism loomed large. The end of the Cold War brought about another fundamental consequence in the Central Asian stage: geopolitical and geostrategic considerations dwindled in importance, replaced by geo-economic factors.

The fourth chapter tries to analyse the impact the Taliban had on Afghanistan. The Taliban presented themselves as bringing about the resurgence of the Islamic tradition in order to gain the legitimacy they needed to take over the country. Still, their ideology was the result of an odd mixture between fundamentalist Deobandism and the traditional Pashtun code of behaviour, as such resulting alien to much of the Afghan population. The Taliban takeover of the country, and the consequent imposition of strict Islamic law, was rendered possible mainly due to the interference of outside actors, principally Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. These countries had particular interests in Afghanistan and in the final victory of the Taliban. Yet, the religious student's policies on issues such as drugs, terrorism, and human rights respect proved to represent a stumbling block for their official international recognition.

The fifth chapter, finally, attempts to describe the world in which the Clinton administration acted, and its relations with the Taliban. A significant change in the attitude of the Clinton administration towards the situation in Afghanistan should be noticed between its first and second term in office. This change was essentially due to a transformation in the domestic political scenario rather than a conscious and thorough re-evaluation of the US foreign policy and its role in the Middle East and on the world stage. Generally speaking, the Clinton administration demonstrated the lack of a comprehensive foreign policy framework, considering instead every single issue case by case. This kind of vision in international affairs was a direct consequence of Clinton's predilection of domestic over foreign policy.

As far as the U.S.-Taliban relations are concerned, in the 1990s Afghanistan found itself at the crossroads of trade in Central Asia. Therefore, new geo-economic interests were at stake in Afghanistan. It should indeed be taken into account what the journalist and expert Ahmed Rashid called 'the New Great Game', namely the challenge between oil companies to exploit the huge sources of gas and oil in Central Asia. The oil companies strategies, in fact, worked as a spearhead also for governments which, after the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, were willing to find new outlets in a part of the world so particularly rich in mineral resources.

Since Washington did not officially recognised the Taliban government in Afghanistan, official relations did not really exist. Yet, two major events must be taken into consideration.

In late 1997, a Taliban delegation visited the United States and had important talks with U.S. officers. Most importantly, U.S. official documents show that in the aftermath of Clinton's decision to strike bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan in August 1998, Mullah Omar called Washington. It was the first and only time Omar had direct contacts with the Americans, as he predicted the growing of anti-American feelings in the Muslim world. This telephonic conversation between Omar and a U.S. officer is usually overlooked or ignored, as it did not really bring about significant changes in the Taliban's attitude nor in the relations with Washington. Still, it has to be emphasised in the context of the scarcity of official contacts between the Taliban and the United States.

In order to outline the relations between the Taliban and the Clinton administration, it has been made use of a significant literature on the topic complemented with primary sources mainly constituted by U.S. official documents and cables.

Afghanistan's location



Chapter 1: The Pre-Invasion Afghanistan

1.1 Afghanistan: Culture and Society

Afghanistan, slightly larger than the state of Texas, is the meeting place of diverse physical and cultural worlds¹. This landlocked country, located in the centre of Asia, has historically been characterised by an impressive thrust of centrifugal forces, and many factors have coalesced to render the situation extremely unstable. First of all, the population in the country is deeply divided along ethnic, linguistic, tribal and racial lines. These divisions are made even more marked by a special pattern of population distribution into regions of the country². Another important centrifugal feature consists in the various and different interpretation of Islam by different ethnic and racial groups. Indeed, very often the Islamic doctrine is blended with local tradition and customs. Moreover, the lack of economic development and of a strong centralised government has often resulted in the preponderance of local and tribal ties over a shared national identity. These factors have very often combined together during the course of the Afghan history and, reinforcing each other, have contributed to the weakness of virtually any government since the coup d'état which overthrew the Shah and brought Mohammed Daoud Khan to power in 1973.

Generally speaking, ethnicity has always been the most important shaping factor in the Afghan society. The Pashtuns are the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan and the largest remaining tribal society in the world³. They constitute about half of the population, and they have historically produced the political leaders and rulers of the country. The Pashtuns have usually been spread in the South-East part of the country, and Kandahar has always been considered their stronghold. Their

¹ The National Security Archive. National Foreign Assessment Center, 1979, [Afghanistan: ethnic diversity and dissidence](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/ethnic%20diversity%20and%20dissidence). <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

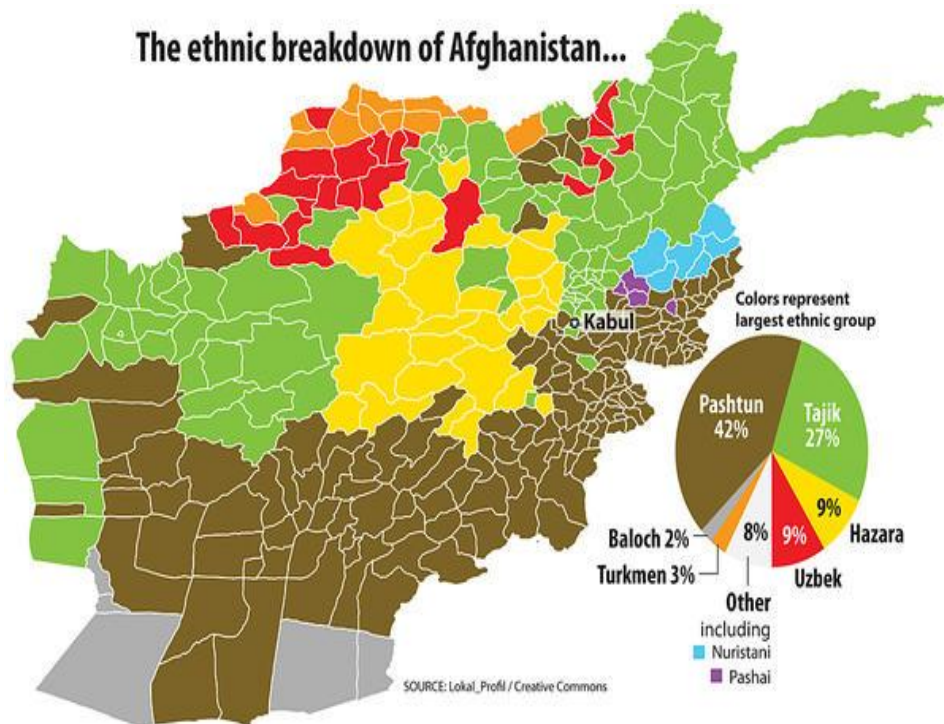
² Larry P. Goodson, [Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban](#), University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2001, p.12

³ *Ivi*, p.14

religion can be described as a particular mixture between Sunni Islam and their traditional tribal code, known as the *Pashtunwali*. Some major themes emerged from this conglomerate, dominating the Pashtuns' code of behaviour: *melmastia* (concerning hospitality to guests), *nanawati* (the right of asylum), *badal* (blood revenge), *tureh* (bravery), *meranah* (manhood), *imandari* (righteousness), *gharyat* (defence of property and honour), and *namus* (defence of the honour of women)⁴. Since the Taliban emerged mainly from the Kandahar area, and were predominantly Pashtuns, it is pivotal to understand their complex and intricate cultural background. Furthermore, the most important political figure, which emerged after the removal of the Taliban regime in late 2001, and President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, is himself a Pashtun. The Tajiks are another important ethnic group. They constitute about 25 per cent of the Afghan population, and they live in the northern part of the country straddling the border with the former Soviet Republic of Tajikistan. The Uzbeks make up around 10 per cent of the population, sitting mainly astride the border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. The other significant ethnic group living in the centre of Afghanistan is the Hazara people, who make up almost 10 per cent of the population. Moreover, Chahar Aimak, Turkmen, Nuristani, Baluchi, and Brahui are other minor tribes living in the country. However, international borders are extremely blurred in the Central Asian region, and strong ethno-linguistic and religious ties group together the people from different neighbouring countries. Indeed, many of the Afghanistan's most important ethnic groups overlap the artificial international borders: the Tajiks with Tajikistan, the Uzbeks with Uzbekistan, the Turkomans with Turkmenistan, while the Hazara people represent the only exception, living only in Afghanistan. Certainly the spread of the Pashtuns in Pakistan represents the most important of those overlappings of ethnic groups in neighbouring countries. Indeed, the 'Durand line' has always been a particularly blurred and porous border. It was established in late XIX Century as a result of an agreement between

⁴ *Ivi*, p.16

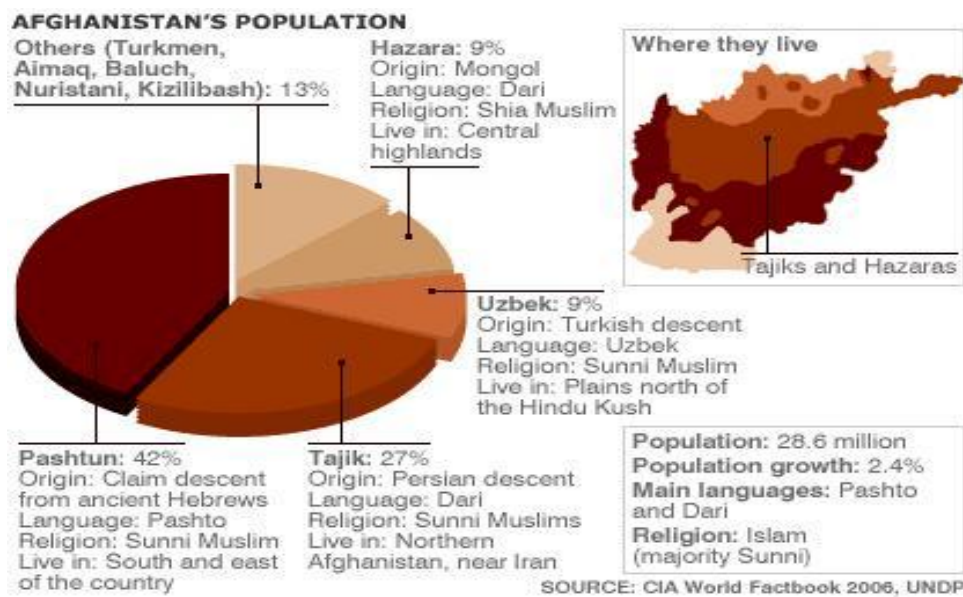
the British empire and the Afghan Amir, creating the State of Afghanistan so as to insert a ‘buffer zone’ between the British colonies and the Russian empire. It is named after the British diplomat sir Mortimer Durand, and it draws the international border dividing Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, in North-Western Pakistan the Pashtuns overlap the artificial border, being pervasively spread over both ends of the international frontier. Indeed, the ethnic, linguistic, and religious ties linking the Afghan and the Pakistani people in the area played a major role both during the Soviet invasion and the Taliban conquest of the country by acting as a constant source of enthusiastic fighters. Furthermore, during the never-ending conflicts that have affected Afghanistan over the last thirty years, Pakistan accepted to receive a huge wave of immigrants. A very significant number of migrants decided as well to move to Iran during the 80s and the 90s. As Larry Goodson points out, a result of the difficult situation in Afghanistan is that ‘...those neighbouring countries have built-in incentives for meddling in Afghanistan’s internal affairs’⁵.



⁵ Ivi, p.17

As far as religion is concerned, nearly 85 per cent of the Afghan population is Sunni Muslim, while about 15 per cent, mainly among the Hazara, is Shia Muslim⁶. Since the vast majority of the Iranian people share the Shia branch of Islam, the fate of the Hazara people has constantly been a concern for the Islamic Republic of Iran. The issue became particularly significant when the Taliban began their conquest of the country, for, while initially bringing about peace and stability, the Pashtun-dominated militia indulged in wanton and heinous ethnic cleansing.

Moreover, it is worth noting another socio-cultural pattern characterising the Afghan society's background, namely the ever-changing alliances and the constant betrayals between different Afghan leaders. Indeed, the researcher Larry Goodson emphasizes how 'Afghanistan's ethnic mixture has traditionally known a high propensity for violence, often between ethnic groups, sub-tribes, and even cousins. Only outside threats seem to unify the Afghans, and those alliances are temporary and limited. When the threat is eliminated or sufficiently reduced, people return to regular pattern of traditional warfare'⁷.



⁶ Phil Gasper. Afghanistan, the CIA, Bin Laden, and the Taliban, International Socialist Review, November-December 2001

⁷ Larry P. Goodson, *op. cit.*, p.17

1.2 Before the Invasion

On July 17, 1973 Mohammed Daoud Khan, former Prime Minister under the Shah rule, took power in a bloodless coup d'état. Daoud overthrew the government of his first cousin Mohammed Zahir Shah taking advantage of his absence, since the Shah was abroad in Italy at the time. For the first time in the Afghan history, the new ruler did not proclaim himself Shah, opting instead for establishing a Republican government. Mohammed Daoud became, therefore, the First President of the Afghan Republic. During the following years, the new head of government decided to take a different route from the past, beginning to distance Afghanistan from the USSR, seeking more aid from the West⁸, and starting to collaborate more closely with the Shah of Iran. The United States was enthusiastic about the new Afghan government and openly supported its foreign policy moves. 'In 1977, the State Department, remarking on Daoud's closer ties with Iran, stated that he had "made significant contributions to the improvement of regional stability - thereby helping to fulfil another principal U.S. objective"⁹. In addition, Daoud ruled domestically using an iron fist and nationalist tones, thus alienating the leftists who had previously supported his coup. The most important among the leftist parties was the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). 'It had been founded in 1965 by a group of 30 Afghans in Kabul. Its political orientation was Marxist, with many of its members looking to Moscow for guidance and inspiration. Many PDPA members, in fact, had studied or received military training in the USSR'¹⁰. However, the party soon divided internally in two opposing wings, called Parcham (Banner) and Khalq (The People). While the Parcham was supported by Persian-speaking young people mainly coming from the cities, the Khalq was supported mainly by Pashtuns coming from a more humble background. The prominent leaders, Babrak

⁸ Larry P. Goodson, *op. cit.*, p. 52

⁹ The National Security Archive. Steve Galster, [Afghanistan: lessons from the last war. Afghanistan: the making of US policies, 1973-1990](#). The September 11th Sourcebook, October 9, 2001. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

¹⁰ *Ibidem*

Karmal of the Parcham and Nur Mohammad Taraki of the Khalq, agreed on the basic purposes of the party, complaining about Afghanistan's backwardness regarding both the country's underdeveloped infrastructures and the unequal distribution of wealth and land. Yet, Taraki and Karmal were at odds over how to solve those problems. While the Khalq maintained the need of radical socialist reforms, the Parcham opted for the gradual introduction of socialist changes¹¹. By 1977 the two rival wings reunited in a lame and insecure alliance which paved the way for another coup d'état. Indeed, in April 1978 following Daoud's orders to arrest the leaders of the communist party, the PDPA, thanks also to the vital Soviet support, overthrew the republic government, while Mohammed Daoud was killed by army officers. The so-called 'Saur' Revolution, establishing a socialist regime subservient to the USSR objectives, seemed to mark the Soviet final victory in the 'Great Game'. (The expression 'the Great Game' was originally coined by the British officer Arthur Connolly, but became universally known thanks to Rudyard Kipling and his novel 'Kim'. The term referred to the political conflict between the British empire and the Tsarist Russia in Central Asia between the XIX and the very beginning of the XX century).

Starting from April 1978 Nur Mohammad Taraki became president of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. However, probably the most important exponent of the Khalq faction was the able politician Hafizullah Amin. Nevertheless, within a really short period of time the façade of unity between the two opposed communist wings disappeared. In July 1978 Khalq and Parcham split again and some major characters of the latter, most notably Babrak Karmal, were sent abroad as ambassadors. Very soon, the situation in Afghanistan plunged into crisis. The USSR suspected Amin of being pro-American, and possibly an agent of the CIA¹², while the government's programme of radical secular reforms almost immediately provoked outcries in the countryside. Resistance rose spontaneously and it soon came to be led by conservative

¹¹ *Ibidem*

¹² John K. Cooley, Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism, Pluto Press, London, 2000

Islamist groups, who declared themselves as ‘mujahedeen’ (‘holy warriors’). In March 1979, a major revolt in Herat against the Taraki government took place. As the Soviet intelligence noted, the revolt was supported from abroad, mostly by the new revolutionary Iranian regime headed by the supreme religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini¹³. Indeed, in January 1979 the U.S.-supported Shah Reza Pahlavi abdicated his throne, enabling the Islamic government led by the Ayatollah to seize power. Thus, the geopolitical scenario in Central Asia changed altogether. Before the pro-American Shah was overthrown by the strict Islamist revolution, the U.S. could safely project and protect its interests in the area. The American-Iranian cooperation was based on a mutual agreement implying massive military assistance provided by the U.S. in exchange for the access to Iranian military bases and, even more importantly, the safeguarding of the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf to the Western world, preventing at the same time the potential spread of Soviet influence over mineral-rich areas. In this context, Afghanistan was not of great geopolitical importance and its relations with the Soviet Union did not seem to pose a threat to the U.S. interests in Central Asia. Indeed, ever since the American government and the Central Intelligence Agency arranged a coup d’état in 1953 aimed at overthrowing Mohammad Mossadeq and restoring the Shah Reza Pahlavi, the U.S. conceived Afghanistan merely as a ‘buffer’ state and Soviet actions as attempts to counterbalance American prominence in the area. A National Intelligence Estimate written in 1954 affirmed that ‘Soviet attention to Afghanistan is part of a general effort to counter recent Western (particularly US) gains in the Middle East-South Asia area’¹⁴. Basically, Afghanistan was of very little importance to the United States, while the surrounding area – most notably the Persian Gulf and the ports of the Indian Ocean – were deemed critical. Therefore, Washington’s politics toward the country between 1973 and the mid-90s aimed at the prevention of ‘excessive’ Soviet influence in the area, seeking at the

¹³ *Ibidem*

¹⁴ The National Security Archive. Steve Galster, [Afghanistan: lessons from the last war. Afghanistan: the making of US policies, 1973-1990](#). The September 11th Sourcebook, October 9, 2001. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

same time to strengthen ties with Pakistan in order to strike a more favourable balance of power.

During the first half of 1979, a series of crucial events occurred laying the foundations for the development of a decade-long war which played a paramount role in the final demise of one of the two world superpowers. In particular, four fundamental features have to be highlighted: the formation of a fledgling opposition to the DRA marked by a strict Islamist nature, the greater involvement of neighbouring countries in the Afghan domestic affairs, the US closer attention to the evolution of the situation, and the increasing requests of direct Soviet intervention by the DRA leadership (in particular by part of Taraki).

The reforms implemented by the Khalq, undermining the very basis of the Afghan society, triggered the formation of a motley opposition. Dissidents, as a reaction to those secular and atheistic changes, gave a traditional and fundamentalist religious distinguishing feature to their opposition. What is more, many dissidents fled to Pakistan, where charismatic leaders founded the Sunni Islamic Afghan rebel alliance. This alliance came to be known as the 'Peshawar seven', for it was formed by seven major Sunni Islamist parties. Among those parties, the Hizb-i-Islami led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Jamiat-i-Islami headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani gained the greater importance in the eyes of Washington and, by proxy, Islamabad. These parties called for a jihad, or holy war, against the PDPA¹⁵. In the meantime, other groups of rebels gathered in the Afghan mountains and in the Panjshir valley under the leadership of the commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. Some Shiite Afghans also put up a fight against the communists, basing their operations in Iran, where the Ayatollah Khomeini offered them support.

The US found itself in a stalemate and waited for the situation in Afghanistan to develop. During the first months of 1979, the politics to implement there was shrouded in indecision. A secret memorandum of the Department of State after the Afghan coup in the April of the

¹⁵ *Ibidem*

previous year to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance clearly summarized the political dilemma faced by the US government:

“We need to take into account the mix of nationalism and communism in the new leadership and seek to avoid driving the regime into a closer embrace with the Soviet Union than it might wish...”

At the same time the memorandum seemed to push for a hard-line approach to the new government:

“Anti-regime elements in Afghanistan will be watching us carefully to see if we acquiesce in or accept the communist takeover...Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and others of our friends in the area will see the situation clearly as a Soviet coup. On the domestic front, many Americans will see this as an extension of Soviet power and draw the parallel with Angola, Ethiopia, etc.”¹⁶.

Therefore, the US initially kept a compromise position, but as opposition to the PDPA grew increasingly stronger, Washington’s discomfort about the new government’s reforms rose. Moreover, tension between the two countries increased as a result of the assassination of Adolph Dubs, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, in February 1979 after a kidnapping attempt. Developments in the country started to draw the attention of some anti-Soviet ‘hawks’ within the administration of the democrat Jimmy Carter. In particular, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski was very much distrustful about Soviet plans and actions, suspecting a likely ‘domino’ effect which would have affected the entire Central Asian area, including some U.S. allies. Brzezinski, in fact, tried to spur the administration to be “more sympathetic to those Afghans who were determined to preserve their country’s

¹⁶ *Ibidem*

independence”¹⁷. Brzezinski’s attention to the evolution of the events in Afghanistan would eventually result in the accomplishment of partial covert aid to the Afghan mujahedeen even before the actual Soviet invasion took place.

By mid-March 1979, the government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was facing an ever-increasing disgruntlement. A revolt in Herat seemed to pose a serious threat to the survival of the socialist regime. In this context, Mohammad Taraki began urging Moscow of the need for a closer Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. In particular, Taraki requested the dispatch of a limited contingent of Soviet troops in order to crack down on the growing opposition. Some secret documents represent a worthwhile account of both the difficult situation faced by the Khalq and the initial hesitation by part of the Soviet leaders in complying with Taraki’s requests. Indeed, in the course of a telephone conversation between Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin and Afghan Prime Minister Nur Mohammad Taraki on March 17 or 18, 1979, the latter admitted that: “There is no active support on the part of the population”, exerting pressure on Kosygin by asking him “[to] extend practical and technical assistance, involving people and arms”. However, the Soviet Premier’s replies were cautious, reflecting the awareness of the complexity of the situation: “It is a very complex matter...the whole world will immediately get to know this”, nevertheless reassuring the Afghan leader stating that: “It is a complex political and international issue, but, irrespective of this, we will hold consultations again and will get back to you”¹⁸. On that same day, a meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union took place. It was presided by the General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, with the attendance of prominent personalities, such as Yuri Andropov, Andrei Gromyko, Alexei Kosygin, Konstantin Chernenko, Dmitry Ustinov, and Mikhail Gorbachev. The top secret transcript of the meeting was centred

¹⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983, p. 427

¹⁸ The National Security Archive. Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin and Afghan Prime Minister Nur Mohammad Taraki, 17 or 18 March 1979. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

on the deterioration of the conditions in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and on the possible Soviet responses. The document highlights the USSR nervousness and concern about the growing opposition faced by the Khalq government. Issues rose about the opportunity of a more direct Soviet intervention. Indeed, Premier Kosygin made known his opinion maintaining: “I don’t think that we should pressure the Afghan government to request a deployment of forces from us”. Other concerns emerged regarding the possible consequences of a greater Soviet involvement on the process of détente. In fact, a direct intervention in the Afghan scenario could have easily been perceived as a unilateral act, posing a serious threat to the period, known as détente, of thawing relations between the world superpowers. The USSR Minister of Foreign Relations, Andrei Gromyko, expressed such a concern affirming:

“...all that we’ve done in recent years with such effort in terms of détente, arms reduction, and much more – all that would be thrown back...we must keep in mind that from a legal point of view too we would not be justified in sending troops”.

Therefore, the possibility of deploying troops in Afghanistan was firmly ruled out in March. Still, all the members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union eventually agreed on the consideration expressed by Yuri Andropov. The then Chairman of the State Committee for State Security, the KGB, remarked that:

“...bearing in mind that we will be labelled as an aggressor, but that in spite of that, under no circumstances can we lose Afghanistan”¹⁹.

¹⁹ The National Security Archive. Meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, March 17, 1979. Deterioration of Conditions in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and Possible Responses From Our Side. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

Thus, Moscow decided to adopt a fence sitter policy. Yet, as the opposition grew stronger, the situation precipitated. In this context, the Soviets advised Taraki to implement a more moderate policy in order to alleviate the political pressure on the Khalq. The PDPA leader was recommended to dismiss Hafizullah Amin, to reconcile with the Parcham wing, and to adopt a ‘democratic nationalism’ line.

However, Amin, anticipating Taraki’s moves, ousted him on September 14, 1979. Few weeks later, the former President of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was killed on Amin’s orders. As Soviet dissatisfaction with the new ruler mounted, plans for an invasion intensified. In December, an attempt of assassination on Amin’s life took place, possibly with Soviet complicity²⁰. The new Afghan leader thus found himself in the position of publicly accusing the Soviet Union of plotting to overthrow a legitimate government, while being completely dependent on military and economic support from Moscow. Ultimately, the failed attempt to Amin’s life left the USSR with a very limited range of options. Bradsher explicitly summarised the Soviet frustration:

“[I]t must have been clear to Soviet leaders that their efforts to control the situation in Afghanistan had failed yet again. They had been unable to direct Afghan policy...in the summer of 1979, they had failed to get rid of Amin and use Taraki as a more amenable leader in September, they had failed to rein Amin in during the autumn, and now they had failed to destroy him in a quiet, plausible way...[I]t was time to...use brute force where diplomacy and conspiracy had failed”²¹.

The USSR leadership opted therefore for a dramatic show of force. The purpose was stated: overthrowing the rule of Amin, whom the Soviets judged was about to establish a personal dictatorship possibly in collusion with the United States, and installing a more moderate government led by Babrak Karmal. On December 24, Soviet troops

²⁰ Larry P. Goodson, *op. cit.*

²¹ Henry S. Bradsher, cited in Larry P. Goodson. *Op. cit.*, p. 58

began to cross the border between the USSR and Afghanistan. On December 27, about 5000 Soviet soldiers advanced on Kabul, and after fierce fighting, Amin was killed the following day. For the first time since the end of World War II, the Red Army intervened in a country outside the boundaries marked by the Warsaw Pact. A valuable account of the evaluation of the Red Army intervention in Afghanistan is provided by a top secret document dated 31 December 1979. It is a report on the events occurred in Afghanistan on 27-28 December 1979 produced by the Communist Party's leadership. It presents Soviet concerns about Amin's liaisons with the USA and the religious fundamentalists, and expectations about the new regime headed by Karmal. Indeed:

“...efforts were made to mend relations with America as a part of the ‘more balanced foreign policy strategy’ adopted by H. Amin. H. Amin held a series of confidential meetings with the American charge d’ affaires in Kabul. The DRA government began to create favourable conditions for the operations of the American cultural center...H. Amin attempted to buttress his position by reaching a compromise with leaders of internal counter-revolution. Through trusted persons he engaged in contact with leaders of the Moslem Fundamentalist opposition...in this extremely difficult situation, which has threatened the gains of the April revolution and the interests of maintain our national security, it has become necessary to render additional military assistance to Afghanistan... the new leadership vowed to fight for the complete victory of national-democratic, anti-feudalistic, anti-imperialistic revolution...in matters of foreign policy, they pledged to strengthen in every possible way the friendship and cooperation with the USSR”²².

²² The National Security Archive. Andropov-Gromyko-Ustinov-Ponomarev Report on Events in Afghanistan on 27-28 December 1979, dated 31 December 1979.
<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

Within few days since the first troops crossed the border, the number of Soviet soldiers increased quickly, reaching the figure of more than 100,000 people. Thus, the decade of Soviet occupation of Afghanistan had begun.

Chapter 2: 1979-1989: The Afghan Quagmire

2.1 Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, begun on December 25, 1979, sparked an immediate reaction by part of the international community. Voices of condemnation rose from many countries, obviously led by the United States. The Red Army intervention in Afghanistan seemed to definitively put an end to the period of general easing of relations between the world superpowers known as *détente*. Almost 10 years of talks and negotiations, which brought to a significant easing of tensions between the US and the USSR, were abruptly undermined by Moscow's decision to invade militarily Afghanistan. A 'Second Cold War' thus began.

As a result, geopolitical and geostrategic considerations made a comeback in the limelight of the superpowers' agenda. The United States widely perceived the Soviet aggressive move into Afghanistan as posing a grave and strategic threat to U.S. vital interests.

During a conference of American and Russian leaders and scholars held in Oslo in 1995, US General William Odom, with the agreement of the academic and analyst of Middle East affairs Gary Sick, scolded his Russian colleagues claiming:

“Your people take over in Angola. Then in Ethiopia. Then in South Yemen. Then comes the Iranian Revolution. I know, I know – you weren't behind the fall of the Shah ... but those events could still, in our view, have been used to your advantage in the region. And then you send massive numbers of troops into Afghanistan, giving you a capacity to strike deeply into our vital interests in the Persian Gulf. Are you gonna tell 'em that these events were completely unrelated in your own minds?”

Still, the Soviet move was actually motivated by concerns about the stability of the political situation along its southern flank. Moscow, therefore, presented its intervention in Afghanistan as a merely defensive move. During that same Oslo conference, Soviet General Valentin Varennikov, who had been part of the decision-making circle in the Kremlin, disagreeing with Odom's statement, sustained Soviet defensive stance asserting:

“The US had long dominated Iran under [Shah Muhammad Reza] Pahlavi. The US Navy controlled the Indian Ocean. Pakistan – we, we can be honest here, I think – Pakistan took its order from Washington. That was clear, and was [already] training and supplying the Islamic guerrillas that opposed the regime of Amin and Taraki, whom we supported. So the threat to the Soviet Union was not ‘from’ Afghanistan. It was from the US, via its overwhelming influence in this region”²³.

The so-called ‘Cold War paranoia’ seemed to equally affect both the United States and the Soviet Union. Indeed, Varennikov continued reminding the Americans that “this was *our* sphere of influence” and “*our* borders, not *yours*”. As a result, the only possible choice for the Kremlin was to get deeply involved in Afghanistan. “It did not explain why we did something as stupid as sending in the Soviet Army. But I think it explains why we did not want the regime in Kabul to fall”²⁴, eventually admitted Varennikov.

However, Soviet undertaking caused the effect of radicalising Carter's attitude toward foreign policy menaces. At that time, the President of the United States was indeed facing another major issue: the Iran hostage crisis. On November 4, 1979 a group of Islamist students took over the American embassy in Teheran in order to show support for the Iranian revolution. As a result, 52 Americans were held hostage. In the State of the Union Address held on January 23, 1980, President Carter steadfastly

²³ John K. Cooley, *op. cit.*, p. 18

²⁴ *Ibidem*

affirmed that “The United States will not yield to blackmail”, and referred to the hostages as “innocent victims of terrorism and anarchy”²⁵. The hostage crisis also marked the beginning of US economic sanctions against Iran, sanctions which importance will come to the fore in the mid-90s, playing a significant role in the definition of Iranian position in the so-called ‘New Great Game’ in Central Asia. In addition, it is commonly acknowledged that the hostage crisis, together with Operation Eagle Claw, the disastrous attempt to rescue the Americans held captive, was of fundamental importance in Carter’s failed bid for re-election.

President Carter’s response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan assumed four main courses of action. Carter asked the Senate for the postponement of the ratification of the SALT II agreements (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) signed on June 18, 1979. The US President decided the imposition of an embargo on technological provisions and grain supplies to the USSR. The most blatant measure undertaken by the US government was surely the decision to boycott the Olympics which would have taken place during the summer of 1980 in Moscow. Many other countries imitated the US behaviour and did not take part in the Olympic Games. In addition, on January 23, 1980, during the same State of the Union Address where he condemned Iran for the abduction of American citizens in the Teheran embassy, Carter announced his doctrine to the world. Indeed, President Carter stated that the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan posed “a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil”, jeopardising vital U.S. interests, and proclaimed:

“The region which is now threatened by Soviet troops in Afghanistan is of great strategic importance: it contains more than two-thirds of the world's exportable oil. The Soviet effort to dominate Afghanistan has brought Soviet military forces to within 300 miles of the Indian Ocean and close to the Straits of Hormuz, a waterway through which most of the world's oil must flow. The Soviet Union is now attempting to consolidate a strategic position,

²⁵ The American Presidency Project. Jimmy Carter: The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress. January 23, 1980. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>

therefore, that poses a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil.

This situation demands careful thought, steady nerves, and resolute action, not only for this year but for many years to come. It demands collective efforts to meet this new threat to security in the Persian Gulf and in Southwest Asia. It demands the participation of all those who rely on oil from the Middle East and who are concerned with global peace and stability. And it demands consultation and close cooperation with countries in the area which might be threatened.

Meeting this challenge will take national will, diplomatic and political wisdom, economic sacrifice, and, of course, military capability. We must call on the best that is in us to preserve the security of this crucial region.

Let our position be absolutely clear: an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force”²⁶.

Therefore, Afghanistan, “this underdeveloped, tribal-country, tucked deep inside the rugged crossroads of Asia and deemed strategically insignificant by the United States for decades”²⁷, gained a sudden and unexpected geopolitical importance.

President Carter’s National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, had a major role in the drafting of the so-called ‘Carter doctrine’. The Polish-American statesman was considered an anti-Soviet ‘hawk’ within the administration and, standing firm in his suspicions of the Soviets, he discouraged the president instinctive moves toward the easing of tensions. Brzezinski, from his ideological standpoint, saw himself as

²⁶ *Ibidem*

²⁷ The National Security Archive. Steve Galster, [Afghanistan: lessons from the last war. Afghanistan: the making of US policies, 1973-1990](#). The September 11th Sourcebook, October 9, 2001. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

fighting ‘for the soul of mankind’, and Moscow’s intervention in Afghanistan triggered his harsh reaction. Brzezinski then affirmed that:

“The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan precipitated a two-pronged American response: direct U.S. assistance to the native resistance in Afghanistan in order to bog down the Soviet army; and a large scale build-up of the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf as a deterrent to any further southward projection of Soviet political or military power. The United States committed itself to the defence of the Persian Gulf region, on par with its western and eastern Eurasian security interests”²⁸.

Thus, as Brzezinski admitted, the Soviet Union’s undertaking in Afghanistan and the Carter administration public outrage, produced a double reaction. On the one side, Soviet intervention was used in order to implement a programme of increased military expenditure, which had actually already begun. On the other side, it justified the aid given to the mujahedeen, which affectively had begun few months before the invasion. Indeed, the same National Security Advisor admitted that U.S. aid to the rebels dated back to July 1979, when President Carter signed a series of secret legal documents, known as Presidential Findings, authorising the Central Intelligence Agency to conduct covert and limited actions in support of Afghan opposition. Brzezinski, in a candid interview given to a French news magazine in January 1998, revealed:

“According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the mujahedeen began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan [in] December 1979. But the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise: indeed, it was July 3, 1979, that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that

²⁸ Zbigniew K. Brzezinski. The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives, Basic Books, New York, 1998

in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention... We didn't push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the possibility that they would...

That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap...The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: we now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War”²⁹.

As the Cold War rose to new life and a renewed phase of confrontation between the world superpowers was about to begin, geopolitical interests outweighed any other kind of consideration. As a result, the Carter administration was aware and eager to back and support the reactionary social forces embodied by the mujahedeen. A classified report of the State Department, dated August 1979, openly maintained that:

“The United States’ larger interest...would be served by the demise of the Taraki-Amin regime, despite whatever setbacks this might mean for future social and economic reforms in Afghanistan...the overthrow of the DRA [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan] would show the rest of the world, particularly the Third World, that the Soviets’ view of the socialist course of history as being inevitable is not accurate”³⁰.

Later that same month, the U.S. State Department had the audacity to show a pathetic degree of hypocrisy when the spokesperson Hodding Carter affirmed that the United States “expects the principle of non-intervention to be respected by all parties in the area, including the Soviet Union”³¹.

²⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski interview to Le Nouvel Observateur (France), cited in Phil Gasper, *op. cit.*

³⁰ William Blum. Killing Hope: US Military & CIA Interventions since World War II, Zed Books, London, 2003

³¹ *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 4, 1979. Cited in Blum, *Killing Hope*.

Therefore, Brzezinski's aims clearly reflected the geopolitical interests at stake in the bipolar conflict over Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf area. The then National Security Advisor also acknowledged without any qualms that the importance of geostrategic interests significantly overshadowed the possible adverse consequences of the anti-Communist alliance founded by the United States. In fact, the development of a new international terrorist network and the global extent of South Asian drug trafficking did not have a great deal of clout on their strategic calculations. The same Brzezinski had the occasion of reasserting that the importance of ensnaring the Soviets in the Afghan quagmire was greater than the possible long-term backlashes. Indeed, during the same interview to the French news magazine, when asked whether he regretted arming and training future terrorists, he replied:

“Which was more important in world history? The Taliban or the fall of the Soviet empire? A few over-excited Islamists or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?”³²

Hence, Washington decided to exploit the anti-Communist religious conviction, and occasionally zealotry, of conservative Muslim societies, such as the Saudi Arabian and those of the Persian Gulf, as well as the power of the Shah's Iran, as mighty allies in the crusade against the atheistic Soviet Union. Seeking alliances in the Muslim societies also served for another purpose. In fact, rallying Arab countries on its side to the defence of the Islamic Afghanistan, would have been a valuable move to gain those countries' favour, seriously undermined by US constant support of Israel. In order to foster the enthusiasm of the Afghan mujahedeen, the National Security Advisor, meeting the rebels, would even come to state: “Your cause is right, and God is on your side”.

However, a drastic U-turn in President Carter stated policy became necessary in order to implement the covert aid designed by the CIA and intended for the Afghan mujahedeen. Since the beginning of his term in

³² Zbigniew Brzezinski interview to Le Nouvel Observateur (France)

office, Carter had put a particular focus on the respect of human rights in his political agenda. Once again, the geopolitical interests embedded in the Cold War confrontation resulted in the diversion of the original political guidelines. Carter had, in fact, immediately targeted Pakistan's President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq along with Anastasio 'Tacho' Somoza of Nicaragua in his moralising campaign. The Pakistani president was perceived in the United States as being a smiling dictator who hanged his predecessor, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and killed democracy. In addition, Washington had serious concerns about Pakistan's will to go on with its nuclear programme. Islamabad's development of an atomic bomb would have thrown the world into the nightmare of a nuclear conflict with its archenemy: India. Pakistan's withdrawal from the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) caused further tensions with the United States. However, the nadir in international relations between Washington and Islamabad was reached in November 1979, when a group of students seized the U.S. embassy in the capital and Pakistani authorities proved extremely slow to respond. Therefore, in late 1979, U.S. relations with Pakistan were, as National Security Council staff member put it, "about as bad as with any country in the world, except perhaps Albania and North Korea."³³ In 1977, President Carter had cut off all U.S. aid to and military cooperation with Pakistan.

However, as geopolitical issues gained prominence in the US President agenda, vague desires of human rights respect soon faded away. Washington now needed Zia's approval to use Pakistan as a base for its covert operations. The Pakistani President, emerging as the godfather of the Afghan jihad, endorsed US requests, leading to the result that for most of the 1980s U.S. politicians were happy to overlook his human rights violation.

Furthermore, as far as Zia ul-Haq is concerned, the scholar Artemy Kalinovsky provides a profound and meaningful interpretation of Zia's emergence in the Muslim world:

³³ Quoted in Artemy Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 2011, p. 6

“The devout Zia’s seizure of power was a harbinger of the general turn away from secular-leftist solutions to problems of development in the Muslim world and toward a religiously oriented politics, often referred to today under the catch-all term ‘political Islam’. Disappointment with the modernisation programs and attempts at unity by leaders like Nasser in Egypt or the Ba’athists in Syria and Iraq led Arab intellectuals toward solutions based more on Islam than on secular modernity...in Islam these intellectuals found the possibility of unity, resistance to Western imperialism, and provisions for mutual welfare that had eluded them since independence...

To the Islamist intellectuals as well as their supporters, the intervention in Afghanistan was the latest and perhaps most egregious example of Western imperialist arrogance, a forced secular modernism that was being imposed from outside and that they were duty-bound to fight.”³⁴

Therefore, to fight the communist invader, Zia accepted to render Pakistan the base for anti-Soviet operations. Still, the core clause included in the agreement consisted in the funnelling of all US aid to the Afghan mujahedeen through Pakistan’s intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

The so-called ‘Operation Cyclone’ had begun.

2.2 Alliances and Rivalries

Since the end of World War II, two sets of conflicting geostrategic interests have dominated the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. On the one end, Washington has strongly been determined to have unhindered access to the oilfields present in the Persian Gulf area. Naturally, this implied the containment and the prevention of Soviet

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 7

expansive goals in the region. On the other end, the United States aimed at supporting and securing the territorial integrity of the State of Israel, making it the predominant country in the area. Soviet invasion of Afghanistan seemed to pose a grave threat to the achievement of those objectives. Still, paradoxically enough, Moscow's move gave the U.S. the opportunity to conjugate those conflicting strategic interests.

The Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan justifying the act by invoking the doctrine of 'intervention by invitation'. Indeed, the Kremlin claimed that it actually was the Taraki government which requested a greater Soviet involvement in the country's internal affairs. The USSR had already used such a justification before. In fact, the Brezhnev doctrine bestowed legitimacy to similar interventions which occurred in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Soviet intervention in Afghanistan had a defensive nature. Basically, it stemmed from the Kremlin's determination to prevent another hostile government from taking power along its southern flank. Indeed, while the Soviet Union borders in the West were roughly secured, its boundaries with Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China represented dangerous exceptions. The scholar Morris McCain explained that:

“In terms of proximity, Pakistan is to the Soviets as Cuba is to the Americans...as long as Pakistan remains allied with the West and China, Moscow will make sustained efforts to destabilise the government in Islamabad”³⁵.

Therefore, Pakistan's alliance with the United States, though sometimes strained and not always trustful, had the result of turning India, albeit officially non-aligned and neutral, into a strategic partner of the Soviet Union. Ever since India and Pakistan gained independence in 1947, the two new countries had several territorial disputes and wars occurred. In particular, the territorial controversy over the possession of Kashmir caused severe frictions, and up to this day an international

³⁵ Morris McCain, cited in Hafeez Malik. Soviet-American Relations with Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1987

recognised border has still not been established. The ever-tense relations grew even more strained after India announced the success in testing its own atomic bomb in 1974. As a consequence, Pakistan hastened in its turn to develop the nuclear device. The risk of a nuclear war has always been present ever since. Therefore, Pakistan's meddling in Afghanistan stemmed from the desire of achieving the so-called 'strategic depth'. Essentially, it consisted in the implementation of a policy seeking the more or less direct control of Afghanistan in order to prevent encirclement from hostile India and a Soviet-controlled Afghanistan. Speculations rose about the military or non-military nature of 'strategic depth'. Indeed, India accused Pakistan of the will of putting into practice a military 'strategic depth', using the Afghan territory as a rallying point, in the case of a successful Indian attack, where it would have been possible to retreat, reorganise, and launch a counter-offensive. Yet, Pakistan refused to accept this military version, maintaining instead that the policy regarding Afghanistan was not aiming at controlling it, but at ensuring a peaceful, friendly and stable relation with the country, thus improving at the same time the relations with other Islamic countries, such as Iran and Turkey. Moreover, Islamabad's interests in the Afghan domestic affairs clearly derived from the ethnic melting pot which straddled the border between the two countries.

As mentioned before, the convergence of interests between the United States and Pakistan resulted in the consequent approach linking the Soviet Union and India. The Middle Eastern- Central Asian geopolitical-geostrategic chessboard was completed with the involvement of China and Iran. Due to the deeply rooted ideological rivalry regarding the leadership of the communist movement worldwide, China aligned with the United States against the Soviets. On the contrary, Iran was somehow pushed to mingle with the USSR in an odd alliance, in which a Shia fundamentalist regime would occasionally join forces with an atheistic totalitarianism to fight Sunni extremism and what Ayatollah Khomeini addressed as the 'Great Satan'.

Nevertheless, Iran's relations with the USSR were anything but well-established, constantly swinging between occasional cooperation and

occasional antagonism. The Iranian leader even condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, labelling the USSR as ‘the other Great Satan’, while supporting the Shia Afghans during the conflict. In addition, while relations between Pakistan and Iran were quite friendly and cordial, the relations between Iran and India were not necessarily warm; quite the opposite they fluctuated from cordiality to indifference and even animosity. However, Iranian involvement in the Afghan quagmire would soon be very much limited by the outbreak of the war between Iran and Iraq (1980-1988). The Shia country would anyway take part in the Afghan conflict acting as a safe haven for millions of refugees. A U.S. document accounts for the support Iran gave to the Afghan resistance:

“Iran has maintained relations almost exclusively with Afghan Shiite resistance groups and severed ties with the mainstream Peshawar-based resistance because of its heavy dependence on support from the West (US) and the conservative monarchies from the Gulf. Iran’s major attention, training, and aid has been rendered to pliable and responsive Shiites...Shortages of weapons and ammunition within Iran, cause by large-scale offensives against Iraq, have limited Iran’s material support to client groups in Afghanistan since late 1983...

The Soviets also publicly and privately have criticised Iran for its activity in Afghanistan and have warned that relations will continue to suffer unless Teheran halts its activities in Afghanistan...the Khomeini regime’s support to Afghan resistance groups runs counter to the Soviet objective of installing a pliable Marxist regime in Kabul. Iranian revolutionary rhetoric ‘to assist oppressed people dominated by Godless and corrupt rulers’ enjoins the Teheran regime to continue its support to the Shiite resistance elements in Afghanistan.”³⁶

³⁶ The National Security Archive. [Iranian support to the Afghan resistance.](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/)
<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

To complete the picture of alliances, countries such as Egypt, Poland and even Israel took part in the conflict mainly by providing arms and equipment. Certainly, among the anti-Soviet coalition, Israel has been the most successful in concealing the traces of its involvement in the training of those Muslim warriors, who would afterwards turn against the Israelis founding Muslim organisations such as Hamas.

Saudi Arabia also held a major role, not only by funnelling arms, equipment and fervent fighters, but mainly by channelling huge sums of money to the Afghan rebels. Indeed, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski was able to exploit his position to secure an agreement from the king Khalid by which Saudi Arabia would match U.S. contributions dollar for dollar. This agreement, kept by the Central Intelligence Agency director Bill Casey under the Reagan's administrations, would come to the fore in the mid-80s, when the U.S. allocated over 500 million dollars in a single fiscal year. By virtue of that agreement, Saudi Arabia matched that figure. As a result, the ISI, through which any covert aid would have been channelled, received the astronomical figure of 1 billion dollars in a single year to be funnelled to the Afghan mujahedeen they liked the most.

Finally, a huge number of Muslim fervent fighters came from many other Islamic countries to bring their support and fight in the jihad against the godless invaders. As the Pakistani journalist and scholar Ahmed Rashid reported:

“Between 1982 and 1992 some 35,000 Muslim radicals from 43 Islamic countries in the Middle East, North and East Africa, Central Asia and the Far East would pass their baptism of fire with the Afghan mujahedeen. Tens of thousands more foreign Muslim radicals came to study in the hundreds of new madrassas [religious school] that Zia's military government began to fund in Pakistan and along the Afghan border. Eventually more than 100,000 Muslim radicals were to have direct contact with Pakistan and Afghanistan and be influenced by the jihad [against the USSR].

In camps near Peshawar and in Afghanistan, these radicals met each other for the first time and studied, trained and fought together. It was the first opportunity for most of them to learn about Islamic movements in other countries, and they forged tactical and ideological links that would serve them well in the future. The camps became virtual universities for future Islamic radicalism.”³⁷

Contingents of the so-called ‘Afghan Arabs’ gathered from all over the world, and among those jihadists a young Arab sheik stood out for his fierce determination to fight the unbelievers: Osama Bin Laden. Rashid’s report clearly shows how the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the subsequent jihad against the atheistic invader laid the foundations for the development of an international terrorist network and for the rise of the Taliban. Anyway, the consequences of Washington’s short-sighted activity will come back to haunt the country only toward the end of the 1990s.

2.3 The Afghan War: 1979-1985

2.3.1 Operation Cyclone

As early as Jimmy Carter took office in the White House, he resolved that the Central Intelligence Agency should be ‘cleaned up’, wiping off the stigma of a secret and obscure agency devoted to plot murders and other crimes worldwide. The disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1960 was still vivid and cumbersome. Jimmy Carter decided to appoint a trusted man as director of the CIA, Admiral Stansfield Turner. The new director immediately worked in the direction recommended by the president and streamlined the agency. Since that moment on, the CIA would run more prudent and cautious operations. As Turner asserted:

³⁷ Ahmed Rashid. *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2002, p.130

“The majority of the espionage professionals from what could I see believed that covert actions had brought more harm and criticism to the CIA than useful return, and that it had seriously detracted from the Agency’s primary role of collecting and evaluating intelligence.”³⁸

As soon as the USSR invaded Afghanistan, it was evident that the US intervention should have involved a covert operation. High-profile military or paramilitary operations were neither feasible nor conceivable.

“In Nicaragua, Salvador, Angola and Vietnam, they quickly became public knowledge around the world. By committing large numbers of its own personnel, along with US special and other military forces, it became a strong target for opposition at home in the United States and abroad, even among allies.”³⁹

Therefore, the new type of CIA operations should involve as few actual American personnel as possible, assuring at the same time that the actual fighters were as well trained and motivated as possible. This was a method already used and refined by Richard Nixon’s National Security Advisor and then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in Vietnam. Indeed, the core of the ‘Vietnamisation’ strategy entailed the involvement of few American personnel, while the burden of military operations fell on the South-Vietnamese army.

Thus, it was possible to avoid the stigma of direct CIA involvement in covert operations worldwide, dodging as well the possible backfire of failed actions. As Stansfield Turner recalled: “the question here was whether it was morally acceptable that, in order to keep the Soviets off balance, which for the reason for the operation, it was permissible to use

³⁸ Stansfield Turner, cited in John K. Cooley, *op. cit.*, p. 24

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 22

other lives for our geopolitical interests”, to which President Carter answered: “I decided I could live with that”⁴⁰.

Therefore, while openly declaring the principle of non-intervention in Afghanistan and the right of self-determination of Afghan people, the U.S. started coordinating what would become the largest covert operation in history.

Operation Cyclone implied the dispatching of money, arms and equipment to Pakistan, where the Inter-Services Intelligence funnelled those generous gifts to the various mujahedeen leaders. The mechanism adopted in the covert operation is adequately described in the pages of George Crile’s *Charlie Wilson’s War*:

“The CIA’s time-honoured practice was never to introduce into a conflict weapons that could be traced back to the United States. And so the spy agency’s first shipment to the scattered Afghan rebels – enough small arms and ammunition to equip a thousand men – consisted of weapons made by the Soviets themselves that had been stockpiled by the CIA for just such a moment. Within days of the invasion containers from a secretive San Antonio facility were flown to Islamabad, Pakistan, where they were turned over to President Muhammad Zia ul-Haq’s intelligence service for distribution to the Afghan rebels...America’s spies would have to cooperate exclusively through Zia’s men”⁴¹.

Therefore, the Central Intelligence Agency started to collect Soviet-made weapons from wherever possible in order to plausibly deny any U.S. involvement. According to classified State Department documents from the Teheran embassy:

“The CIA became the grand coordinator: purchasing or arranging the manufacture of Soviet-style weapons from Egypt, China,

⁴⁰ William Blum. *Killing Hope: US Military & CIA Interventions since World War II*, Zed Books, London, 2003, p. 345

⁴¹ George Crile. *Charlie Wilson’s War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History*, Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 2003, p. 15

Poland, Israel and elsewhere, or supplying their own; arranging for military training Americans, Egyptians, Chinese, and Iranians; hitting up Middle-Eastern countries for donations, notably Saudi Arabia which gave many hundreds of millions of dollars in aid each year, totalling probably more than a billion; pressuring and bribing Pakistan – with whom recent American relations have been very poor – to rent out its country as a military staging area and sanctuary; putting the Pakistani Director of Military Operations, Brigadier Mian Mohammad Ofzal, onto the CIA payroll to ensure Pakistani cooperation⁴².

The Central Intelligence Agency began to develop a top-secret programme, codenamed SOVMAT, to ‘buy, borrow or steal’ brand new Soviet war material from East European governments or governmental organisations. Indeed, those governments had access to Soviet arsenal, being members of the Warsaw Pact, and were as well susceptible to material incentives. The acquisition of Soviet weapons allowed the U.S. military to test those new devices, thus facilitating the development of counter-measures. A likely example of the functioning of this programme could be testified by U.S. development of the Stingers, surface-to-air missiles which, given to the Afghan mujahedeen, marked a turning point in the progress of the war. In addition, low morale and growing corruption among Soviet troops eased the CIA’s task, as the same Red Army started to sell a limited amount of weapons to the Americans or to the same Afghan rebels.

Washington’s most attentive ally in the supply of Soviet-style weapons surely was Egypt, which up to 1973 constituted a major Moscow’s ally in the Middle East. Thanks to the so-called ‘Shuttle Diplomacy’ engaged by President Nixon’s right-hand man Henry Kissinger, the then Egyptian President Anwar Sadat persuaded himself to abandon the close alliance with the Soviet Union, opting for establishing deeper relations with the United States. Obviously, as the Kremlin

⁴² William Blum, *op. cit.*, p. 345, citing classified State Department documents from the Teheran embassy

decided to invade militarily Afghanistan, Washington immediately turned to Egypt to obtain the weapons it needed. According to Anwar Sadat, Zbigniew Brzezinski proposed: “Please open your stores for us so that we can give the Afghans the armament they need to fight, and I gave them the armaments.”⁴³ Shortly after Egyptian arms began arriving to the Pakistani port of Karachi. “There, the CIA turned them over the Pakistani military, which, with a good deal of waste, corruption and loss passed them on to the seven main groups of Muslim zealots training in the arts of guerrilla war and urban terrorism”⁴⁴.

However, the truth was that during the first years of the war, the vast majority of arms were old and unsophisticated weapons, such as the Lee-Enfield rifles which were commonly used during World War I, handed over to farmers and tribesmen. The reality of facts was that:

“Along with the first U.S. shipment, the Afghans soon began receiving arms and money from the Egyptians, the Chinese, the Saudis, and other Muslim nations. That response might have sounded impressive in a news dispatch, but the reality on the ground was that a bizarre mix of unsophisticated weapons was being handed over to tribesmen in sandals with no formal military training.”⁴⁵

The logical consequence of the implementation of such a method was reflected in the general disillusionment with the rebels’ likelihood of winning the war. “No one in the CIA during those early months had any illusions about the mujahedeen’s impotence in the face of the Soviet 40th Army”⁴⁶. The Agency seemed to begin accepting the idea of the irreversibility of the situation in Afghanistan.

During the first months of the war, the television coverage of the events in that country provoked an unexpected result. The American journalist Dan Rather crossed the border between Pakistan and

⁴³ John K. Cooley, *op. cit.*, p. 35

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*

⁴⁵ George Crile, *op. cit.*, p. 15

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*

Afghanistan at a time when the world's attention had already shifted away from that wrecked country. Rather's report concluded that the American actual support to the mujahedeen was virtually meaningless. The war report had a particular effect on a Texas Democrat, who would soon become one of the most important personalities within the American establishment with regard to the Afghan war: Charlie Wilson. At that time, he had just been named to the Defence Appropriations subcommittee. Therefore, he was part of a restricted coterie who had the power to decide the sum of money destined to the funding of CIA operations. At the very moment in which world's attention seemed to be drifting away from what was happening in Afghanistan, Charlie Wilson picked up the phone and called a staffer responsible for 'black appropriations' in the Appropriations Committee.

"How much are we giving the Afghans?" he asked the staffer. "Five million" was the reply. After few moments of silence, the Texan politician asserted: "Double it"⁴⁷.

As described earlier, the mechanism the CIA was somehow forced to adopt entailed the intermediation of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Arms, money and equipment were usually shipped to the port of Karachi. Thereafter, the Pakistani secret services chose the Afghan leaders whom they thought could better meet their political interests as well. Therefore, the question was: to which Afghan leader the majority of international aid was funnelled? The ISI had free rein on the decision. The Afghan mujahedeen consisted of seven major factions which took shelter in the region of Pakistan along the border with Afghanistan. Those groups crystallised into seven Sunni parties, known as the 'Peshawar Seven', and they often gave rise to violent infightings over territorial control and opium trade smuggling. Those groups only very rarely were able to put aside ethnic and tribal barriers in order to cooperate and coordinate their efforts to fight the common communist enemy.

⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p.20

However, among those leaders, the ISI preferred to funnel a disproportionate share of inflow of arms, money and equipment to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the head of the Hizb-i-Islami. Hekmatyar, a particularly fanatical fundamentalist, was deemed the most effective among the other Afghan leaders by Zia ul-Haq's men, with the tacit agreement of the CIA. This Afghan leader, however, had an ominous record, being described as 'scary', 'vicious', 'fascist', 'definite dictatorship material', aside from being accused of spending "more time fighting other Mujahedeen than killing Soviets"⁴⁸ and of wantonly killing civilians. Moreover, Hekmatyar kept his contacts with the Americans to a minimum, going even as far as publicly refusing meeting President Ronald Reagan during a visit the Afghan leader paid to New York in 1985 in occasion of a UN gathering.

However, there was an underlying consideration in the choice of the ruthless and fundamentalist Hekmatyar as the leader whom the vast majority of international war aid was channelled to. The CIA operation entailed the co-optation of a limited number of American military personnel who, with the support of the Pakistani military, would train an army of Muslim zealots. Consequently, the Cold Warriors in Langley, Virginia, found a fertile ground in the fundamentalism and zealotry of the Hizb-i-Islami. Those enthusiastic fighters "would fervently believe that God had commanded them to fight His enemies, the Godless Communists and foreign Russian invaders. Their earthly rewards would be glory and generous pay. For those who died as martyrs, rewards would be in heaven"⁴⁹.

The aim Zbigniew Brzezinski hoped to achieve consisted not just in driving the Red Army out of Afghanistan, but to foment unrest within the Soviet Union itself. In fact, the National Security Advisor aimed at exporting to the Soviet Republics and the Muslim-majority Central Asian states a composite mixture of nationalism and Islam concocted to bring about the destruction of the Soviet order.

⁴⁸ Peter L. Bergen. Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama Bin Laden, Touchstone, New York, 2002, pp. 69-70

⁴⁹ John K. Cooley, *op. cit.*, p.23

Ultimately, the mechanism by which fervent fighters were recruited from all over the Muslim world and trained in terrorist actions cannot be underestimated or undervalued, as it left indelible marks on the destinies of several nations, influencing as well the future relations between the United States and Europe with the Muslim world.

2.3.2 The Actual War

Immediately after the Soviet invasion, a general tactical pattern seemed to stand out. As the war widened and intensified, the Soviets became firmly entrenched in the cities and held control of military bases and outposts, while the Afghan mujahedeen virtually controlled the countryside. The early piecemeal developments in Afghanistan ominously recalled the patterns of the Vietnam War, when the Americans were able to hold sway in the large cities, while the countryside was de facto under the firm influence of the Vietcong and North Vietnam. Moreover, exactly as in Vietnam, guerrilla warfare was the most widespread method to fight the enemy.

During the first period of war, the resistance was politically fragmented and generally militarily weak. Guerrilla tactics was the only feasible option, as the mujahedeen warriors were poorly trained and equipped. On the contrary, the Red Army massive firepower and complete air superiority resulted in a degree of destruction of the country never seen before in Afghanistan. The Soviets implemented a tactical 'rubbleisation', targeting civilian villages and basic infrastructure. The logical consequence was the creation of a huge number of refugees. Since 1978, some Afghan refugees began arriving in Pakistan, but the unabated destruction provoked by Moscow's army gave a drastic boost to this phenomenon. The implementation of such a tactics forced people to flee, mainly to Pakistan and Iran. Indeed, since 1981 the Afghan refugee population has been the largest in the world⁵⁰. Within the first two years

⁵⁰ Larry P. Goodson, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-61

following the Soviet invasion of the country, over four million refugees sought a safe haven in Iran and Pakistan, while hundreds of thousands more became internally displaced. The refugee crisis caused political as well as economic issues, since the U.S. Congress, the White House and the international community all agreed that they needed massive assistance. Dozens of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were willing to help the refugees, while other organisations contributed to support the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The mass exodus of Afghans into Pakistani territory posed as well serious problems to Islamabad, as the CIA estimated that their presence in Pakistan would help “generate political unrest and retard economic development until the end of the century”⁵¹. An intensive cross-border humanitarian aid programme became soon effective, providing some kind of relief to the Afghan people. However, this wave of refugees resulted in an unpredicted collateral effect for the Soviet Union. In fact, the Pakistani General Zia ul-Haq began recruiting and training those Afghans, who became zealous and highly-motivated fighters.

Generally, during the first part of the war, the fledgling resistance parties were still characterised by widespread factionalism, while western support was slow to develop because of the widespread scepticism regarding the rebels’ real possibilities to win the war.

Meanwhile, the Soviets increasingly ran the Afghan government, which was by that moment led by Babrak Karmal. Moreover, Moscow provided vital economic aid to the country, creating a protected market for Afghan’s goods, while starting planning to integrate Afghanistan into the union. This process took the name of ‘Sovietisation’ of Afghanistan. During this first phase of the conflict, the predominance of the Red Army was evident and unquestionable, while the weak resistance obtained very limited and circumscribed successes, mainly by part of the Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud in the Panjshir Valley.

⁵¹ The National Security Archive. . Steve Galster, [Afghanistan: lessons from the last war. Afghanistan: the making of US policies, 1973-1990](#). The September 11th Sourcebook, October 9, 2001. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

Meanwhile, an important change was about to occur in the United States. Indeed, in 1981 a new president took office in the White House. The Republican Ronald Reagan became President of the United States, promising to solve the on-going Iran hostage crisis. Effectively, in a dramatic turn of events, while the new president was giving his inaugural speech, the American hostages were set free. During his first term in office, the U.S. foreign policy was dictated by a strategy aiming at achieving ‘peace through strength’, re-launching a more direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. Reagan inherited the CIA involvement in Afghanistan and, with the important support of the new director of the Agency William Casey, he decided to increase the spending on the war. If in 1981 the Democratic-controlled Congress was not exactly compliant with CIA operations in Central and Latin America, it conversely was eager to allocate resources to support the Afghan rebels. As a congressional staffer told a reporter: “It was a windfall [for the new administration]. They’d faced so much opposition to covert actions in Central America and here comes the Congress helping and throwing money at them, putting money their way and they say, ‘Who are we to say no?’”⁵²

President Reagan’s aggressive foreign policy was based on the renewal of John Foster Dulles ‘Roll-Back’ strategy from the 1950s, by which the United States would work to push back the influence of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Reagan’s strategy entailed an overt support to all those parties involved in fighting the Soviets. The scope of the new strategy was perfectly encapsulated in the 1983 NSC National Security Council Directive 75. The directive asserted that the U.S. paramount priority dealing with the USSR would be “to contain and over time reverse Soviet expansionism”, posing a particular focus on the developing world. The directive continued stating:

“The U.S. must rebuild the credibility of its commitment to resist Soviet encroachment on U.S. interests and those of its allies and

⁵² Cited in Phil Gasper, *op. cit.*

friends, and to support effectively those Third World states that are willing to resist Soviet pressures or oppose Soviet initiatives hostile to the United States, or are special targets of Soviet policy”⁵³.

Consequently, the Reagan administration particularly focused on supporting proxy allies to curtail Soviet influence, offering financial and logistic support to anti-communist opposition worldwide.

Generally speaking, the ‘Reagan Doctrine’ became the backbone of the U.S. foreign policy from the early 1980s to the actual end of the Cold War. Furthermore, the conservative think tank ‘The Heritage Foundation’ is commonly deemed responsible for the ‘Reagan Doctrine’ to translate into concrete foreign policy, choosing nine Soviet-supported communist countries Washington should focus on: Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Iran, Laos, Libya, Nicaragua, and Vietnam. The Heritage Foundation then pushed the administration to allocate resources and provide military and financial aid to those countries.

On March 21, 1983, in occasion of a Message on the Observance of Afghanistan Day, Ronald Reagan gave a speech which would become a milestone in the definition of U.S. foreign policy in Central Asia. Indeed, drawing a parallel with the Nicaraguan Contras, the president praised the mujahedeen as ‘freedom fighters’, thus making them the symbol of the struggle between good and evil, liberty and oppression. Reagan asserted:

“while we condemn what has happened in Afghanistan, we are not without hope. To watch the courageous Afghan freedom fighters battle modern arsenals with simple hand-held weapons is an inspiration to those who love freedom. Their courage teaches us a great lesson—that there are things in this world worth defending.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Federation of American Scientists. NSC National Security Council Directive 75, 1983. <http://www.fas.org/>

⁵⁴ The American Presidency Project. Ronald Reagan, Message on the Observance of Afghanistan Day, March 21, 1983. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>

Still, notwithstanding the administration's will to provide financial and material aid to the Afghan rebels and Charlie Wilson's solicitations to establish resources for the mujahedeen, initially Afghanistan was not a top priority:

"In the first years after the Reagan administration inherited the Carter programme, the covert Afghan war 'tended to be handled out of [CIA director William] Casey's back pocket,' recalled Ronald Spiers, a former U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, the base of the CIA rebels. Mainly from China's government, the CIA purchased assault rifles, grenade launchers, mines and SA-7 anti-aircraft weapons, and then arranged for shipment to Pakistan...The amounts were significant – 10,000 tons of arms and ammunition in 1983, according to [Pakistani General Mohammed] Yousaf – but a fraction of what they would be in just a few years."⁵⁵

During the first years of the Afghan war, the political situation in the United States was quite particular. On the one side, the Texan Democratic congressman Charlie Wilson was able to exploit his position in the Appropriations committees and to encourage other Democratic congressmen to vote in favour of the allocation of money for the CIA operation, with the tacit approval of the Democratic Party. Wilson teamed with the CIA operative Gust Avrakotos, giving life to a restricted group of agents who championed and enhanced the support for the Afghan mujahedeen, funnelling it through the Pakistani ISI. On the other side, the Reagan administration was constantly hammered by the same democratic politicians regarding the CIA secret war in Central America. In particular, Reagan's support for the Nicaraguan Contras drew harsh criticism.

Meanwhile, in the Afghan war theatre, the conflict evolved and the Soviets made significant changes in their military strategy. Once securing

⁵⁵ Steve Coll, Anatomy of a victory: CIA's covert Afghan war, cited in Phil Gasper, *op. cit.*

the control of cities, roads and pipelines, the Red Army in 1983 stepped up their counter-insurgency campaign. Since by that year the Soviets were firmly entrenched in the cities, and roads were as secure as would ever get, Moscow decided to intensify and widen the war, further weakening the already inconsistent opposition. In order to achieve that goal, the red Army started implementing a dreadful air war, while urban warfare became particularly fierce. The air campaign aimed at bombing countryside villages in order to depopulate those rural areas that provided vital support to the mujahedeen. The air war strategy implied an increased use of artillery and rocket launchers in order to achieve ‘depopulation through firepower’. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the intensifying of the war and the deployment of new and more powerful weapons by part of the Soviet army, the Afghan resistance was gradually improving from a strategic point of view, mainly thanks to the new arms they were by then receiving. As the mujahedeen eventually began to jell into an effective fighting force improving combat operations, reports describing low morale and poor discipline within the Red Army started to appear in the Soviet press.

A CIA assessment of the development of the war after the first five years from the Soviet invasion constitutes a valuable account of the U.S. standpoint. It stated:

“More than five years after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, they are bogged down in a guerrilla war of increasing intensity. The Soviets have had little success in reducing the insurgency or winning acceptance by the Afghan people, and the Afghan resistance continues to grow stronger and to command widespread popular support...The Soviets control less territory than they did in 1980, and their airfields, garrisons, and lines of communication are increasingly subject to insurgent attack.

Although Soviet military tactics are clearly designed to minimize losses of personnel and equipment, we estimate they have suffered roughly 25,000 casualties, including about 8,000 killed, and lost over 600 helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft and thousands

of armoured vehicles and trucks. We estimate casualties in the Afghan Army at about 67,000 and insurgent casualties at some 40,000, excluding civilian sympathizers.

The insurgents have problems of their own. They have few local leaders of quality; rivalries among insurgent leaders and factions inhibit cooperation and often result in bloody fighting; and inadequate training and supply shortages are common.

Soviet losses, together with the strains of counterinsurgency campaign, have worsened morale and discipline problems in the Army and produced some grumbling at home.”⁵⁶

The paper, produced jointly by the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis and the Office of Soviet Analysis, includes as well a scheme presenting the factors which mainly influenced military effectiveness of the parts at war.

⁵⁶ The National Security Archive. The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Five Years Later. CIA Historical Review Program Release as Sanitized, 1999. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

**Factors Influencing
Military Effectiveness**

	Weaknesses	Strengths
Insurgents	<p>Many disorganized groups Political/religious differences Shortages and unequal distribution of weapons Many poorly trained groups Fighting among groups</p>	<p>High morale Broad civilian support Increasing military expertise Increasing manpower</p>
Soviets	<p>Weapons and tactics unsuited to terrain and counter-insurgency warfare Poor intelligence and command and control Unreliable, incompetent ally</p>	<p>Unlimited manpower and equipment High mobility in open areas Superior firepower Reliable, well-trained troops Air superiority</p>
Afghan Government Units	<p>Desertions Seriously under strength Lack of equipment Political factionalism</p>	<p>No major strengths</p>

2.4 The Afghan War: 1985-1989

1985 was the Afghan war's pivotal year. It effectively marked a watershed not only in the development of the on-going conflict in Central Asia, but also regarding the same relations between the world superpowers.

Indeed, after some years filled by the succession of USSR leaders, Mikhail Gorbachev eventually rose to power, becoming General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In roughly the space of three years, four Soviet leaders followed one another into power. Leonid Brezhnev, Jury Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko died while reigning. Eventually, in March 1985 Gorbachev took office in the

Kremlin, launching a policy aiming at a reorientation of Soviet strategic purposes in order to seek cooperation in spite of confrontation with the United States. In fact, the head of the Soviet government tried to reform the withered Party and revitalise the state economy by introducing *glasnost* (transparency) and *perestroika* (restructuring). In order to achieve those domestic goals, Gorbachev sought to improve relations and trade with the Western world, reducing Cold War tensions with the United States. By 1985 the Soviet Union was experiencing a sharp fall in hard currency earnings, mainly as a result of a downward decline of oil prices (the USSR was a great oil producer, and its exportation accounted for more than half of Soviet 's total export earnings). Therefore, the new General Secretary identified the reduction of defence military expenditure as a feasible momentum to boost the suffering economy.

On the other side, the President of the United States, entering in his second term in office, decided to change his policy and hi rhetoric toward the Soviet Union. If Reagan's first term was characterised by harsh tones of direct confrontation with the USSR, President Reagan partially relaxed his hard-line attitude after Gorbachev became the Soviet Premier. The two leaders took part in a series of meetings aiming at winding down the arms race, which eventually led to the START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) agreement.

Nevertheless, while Washington and Moscow agreed on the need to reduce tensions, the Afghan war was still continuing and, paradoxically enough, the United States decided to dramatically escalate covert action. In March 1985, the Reagan administration issued National Security Division Directive 166, a secret plan meant to expand CIA support to the mujahedeen:

“Abandoning a policy of simple harassment of Soviet occupiers, the Reagan team decided secretly to let loose on the Afghan battlefield an array of U.S. high technology and military expertise in an effort to hit and demoralise Soviet commanders and soldiers....

Beginning in 1985, the CIA supplied mujahedeen rebels with extensive satellite reconnaissance data of Soviet targets on the Afghan battlefield, plans for military operations based on the satellite intelligence, intercepts of Soviet communications, secret communications networks for the rebels, delayed timing devices for tons of C-4 plastic explosives for urban sabotage, and sophisticated guerrilla attacks, long-range sniper rifles, a targeting device for mortars that was linked to a U.S. Navy satellite, wire-guided anti-tank missiles, and other equipment.”⁵⁷

Therefore, in 1985, the course of the war changed drastically. In May, the seven principal mujahedeen organisations joined to form the Seven Party Mujahedeen Alliance in an effort to coordinate their military operations against the Red Army. Meanwhile, the American escalation providing arms and money to the Afghan rebels took the shape of abandoning the secretive provision of Soviet-made weapons collected from other countries. The U.S. façade of pretending of not being directly involved in the war was about to end. Washington was by that time ready to give the mujahedeen sophisticated U.S.-made weapons. Between 1986 and 1989, certain resistance groups received hundreds of shoulder-fired Stinger antiaircraft missiles through the CIA-ISI arms pipeline. Certainly, the introduction of those highly-sophisticated missiles constituted the most important war development during the conflict. This major quality improvement in the military equipment provided the mujahedeen with a credible and significant air defence for the first time. The easy handiness and the incredible accuracy of those weapons induced the Red Army to change their hitherto destructive air war strategy. The Soviets, dismayed at the new firepower shown by the resistance, began reducing the number of their air missions, while pilots were unwilling to fly at low altitudes. Once again, the Democratic congressman Charlie Wilson, together with the CIA manager Gust Avrakotos and the then Director of Intelligence Programs for the United States National Security Council Vincent

⁵⁷ Federation of American Scientists. National Security Decision Directive 166, 1985
<http://www.fas.org/>

Cannistraro, had a leading role in delivering the Stingers to Pakistani General Zia ul-Haq. The Texan, who had hitherto gained notoriety mostly because of his flamboyant lifestyle, accrued much power to his hands in the early 1980s. as George Crile tells:

“He was, in effect, running a tunnel into the most powerful places in Washington. If there was such a thing as an underground ladder in Congress, then Wilson was climbing it speedily...

Wilson was a genius at the inside game of manoeuvring in the Balkanised world where power is distributed in blocks and where deals are made when you have something to trade. And ironically, because Wilson was such a political pro, his outrageous lifestyle seemed to actually enhance his position...

He...maneuvered his way onto the all-powerful Appropriations Committee... The committee’s power is so great that its twelve subcommittee chairmen are known collectively as the ‘College of Cardinals’.”⁵⁸

Therefore, Charlie Wilson’s incredible influence in the allocation of resources and his unabated anti-communism and interest for the destiny of the mujahedeen, led to the approval of the dispatch of those powerful anti-aircraft weapons. In support of his choices, Wilson also asserted:

“The U.S. had nothing whatsoever to do with these people's decision to fight. The Afghans made this decision on Christmas and they’re going to fight to the last, even if they have to fight with stones. But we’ll be damned by history if we let them fight with stones.”⁵⁹

Anyway, eventually the power of the Stinger missiles will prove problematic for the same United States, since as soon as the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, the CIA attempted to buy back the missiles.

⁵⁸ George Crile, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, p. 262

Washington managed to collect most of the Stingers it had delivered, but some of them had already reached the black market, where countries such as Iran, North Korea, Qatar and others purchased some of them.

Generally speaking, the dispatch of the highly-sophisticated Stinger missiles represented the peak of U.S. military aid to the rebels. This military and economic aid reached the amount of several millions of dollars during the mid-80s. The overall expenditure for the Afghan operation made it the largest covert action programme in history, at odds with Carter’s initial offer to Pakistan of \$400 million dollars, derisively rejected by General Zia as ‘peanuts’. Indeed, as Thomas Hammond noted: “it simply was not worth it to Zia to line up with the United States against the Soviet Union unless Washington gave evidence that it would be a generous and dependable ally”⁶⁰. Eventually Reagan gave such evidence dramatically escalating the support provided to the mujahedeen.

U.S. Covert Military Aid to Afghan Rebels during the 80s⁶¹

Year	Amount of aid
1980	\$30 million
1981	\$35 million
1982	\$35-50 million
1983	\$80 million
1984	\$122 million
1985	\$280 million
1986	\$470-550 million
1987	\$600 million
1988	\$400 million
1989	\$400-550 million

⁶⁰ Thomas Hammond. Red Flag Over Afghanistan, cited in Larry P. Goodson, *op. cit.*, p. 146

⁶¹ Source: Larry P. Goodson, *op. cit.*, p. 146

Meanwhile, the war continued to intensify and the Soviets deliberately decided to widen their attacks in order to put pressure on the Pakistani government and to sow disgruntlement in the local population.

Still, the length of the conflict started to profoundly affect Soviet morale and the political will to continue. The resistance showed an unabated will to fight the invaders, while appearing to be winning the political competition for Afghanistan. The local people overwhelmingly supported the rebels, and the international community was still firmly on their side.

On a political move to broaden the base of the Afghan government, in May 1986 the Soviet Union replaced the discredited Karmal with Mohammad Najibullah. The USSR effectively counted on broadening the support to the government by installing a Pashtun as head of the country, hoping on the appeal he might have to the traditionally dominant group in Afghanistan. Still, Moscow's move did not bear the hoped fruit and opposition to the regime remained firm. On the other side, the unified front of the Peshawar Seven revealed to be a failure, since bickering and internecine fighting among the parties curtailed their military effectiveness. As a result, the mujahedeen leaders proved unable to take advantage of the erosion of power of the government in Kabul.

Meanwhile, in 1987 the gradual rapprochement between the United States and the Soviet Union led to the increasing of pressures to find a settlement on Afghanistan. Under the auspices of the UN representative Diego Cordovez, talks became more intense. Cordovez's shuttle diplomacy, which had been underway ever since 1982, took him back and forth from New York to South Asia, to the Soviet Union, and to Geneva. He tried to mediate for a political settlement, convincing the numerous parties to the conflict to narrow their differences in order to agree on a set of principles and conditions under which the Red Army would finally withdraw from Afghanistan. Basically, the difficulty in finding an agreement stemmed from initial mistrust between the superpowers entailing face-saving and stability concerns, coupled with the convictions, shared both in Washington and Islamabad, that a Soviet Union bogged down in the Afghan quagmire would mean minimising the

potential threat to Pakistan's security. However, important rounds of the Geneva talks took place in 1986 and 1987. In a conscious display of goodwill, on February 8, 1988, Mikhail Gorbachev announced the decision to withdraw 100,000 troops from Afghanistan. Consequently, the decisive round of talks occurred in Geneva the following March, resulting in the signing of an agreement implying the withdrawal of Red Army within the following nine months. The final withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan was completed on February 15, 1989.

Nevertheless, Soviet documents show that the end of the war in Afghanistan, which the General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev addressed as 'the bleeding wound', was one of his highest priorities ever since he assumed power in 1985. Moreover, his concerns about the excessive economic and political costs were communicated to the then-Afghan communist leader Babrak Karmal in their first conversation on March 14, 1985, during which Gorbachev underscored that "the Soviet troops cannot stay in Afghanistan forever"⁶². Documents emphasise that already in 1985 the Soviet Politburo was discussing about how to disengage from the Afghan morass, and according to reports a final decision in principle was reached during the Politburo session on October 17, 1985. During that session, Gorbachev reported to his fellow members of the Politburo the conversation he had with a dumbfounded Karmal:

"I had to express myself with the utmost clarity: by the summer of 1986 you will have to learn how to defend your revolution yourselves. We will help you for the time being, though not with soldiers but with aviation, artillery, equipment. If you want to survive you have to broaden the regime's social base, forget about socialism, share real power with the people who have real authority, including the leaders of bands and organizations that are now hostile towards you"⁶³.

⁶² The National Security Archive. Memorandum of Mikhail Gorbachev conversation with Babrak Karmal, March 14, 1985. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

⁶³ The National Security Archive. Anatoly Chernyaev Diary, October 17, 1985. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

Still, notwithstanding a general decision to withdraw from Afghanistan was taken already in 1985, not until the fall of 1987 the Soviet leaders came up with an actual timetable to pull out the Red Army. In addition, Gorbachev announced Soviet's intention to leave Afghanistan only in 1988, while the actual withdrawal took place the following year. According to the same Soviet leader, two main sets of considerations might help to explain the reasons why it took so long to finally withdraw the troops. First, because of the Cold War frame, Soviet leaders balked at making more timely and rational moves, since fearing that any untimely withdrawal would have been perceived as an humiliating retreat by the international community. Therefore, saving face was the first and most compelling concern. In addition to that, the Soviets genuinely attempted against all odds to lay the foundations for the existence of a stable and friendly Afghanistan along the southern flank. Indeed, before the Red Army could affectively be pulled out from the country, policymakers in Moscow counted that the Afghan internal situation had to be stabilised, and the new government should have been able to rely on its domestic power base and a trained and equipped army able to counter the rebels⁶⁴.

Nevertheless, because of the tottering policy regarding the final withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan, the Soviets were widely perceived in Washington as playing a subtle and untrustworthy game.

In his analysis on the Soviet withdrawal of Afghanistan, the scholar Artemy Kalinovsky shared the justifications provided by Gorbachev, widening however the general frame identifying four main features that characterised the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan and determined the slow pace of disengagement from the conflict.

“First, by the 1970s, aid to the Third World had become a key component of the Soviet's bloc legitimacy as a superpower...the USSR's position as a world power was justified by its defence of emerging states against encroaching neo-imperialism. The possible effects of the defeat in Afghanistan on the Soviet Union's reputation was a concern not only

⁶⁴ The National Security Archive. [Afghanistan and the Soviet Withdrawal 1989, 20 years later.](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/)
<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

for Old Thinkers like Brezhnev and Andropov, but even for many in the reformist group that took over after 1985, not least Gorbachev himself.

Second, Moscow's extended presence in Afghanistan issued from its belief of what it could do to transform the country on behalf of its client regime...leaders in Moscow...believed that they could go a long way toward stabilising its client government in Kabul through a mixture of political tutelage and modernisation programs. Thousands of Soviet advisers were sent to help the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan improve its organisational work and gain support in the countryside.

Third, despite a general consensus at the top of the Soviet hierarchy on Moscow's goals in Afghanistan, there was often little coordination among the various groups working in Kabul. The sharpest conflict was between the Soviet military and the KGB...these disagreements allowed Afghan communists to play the various sides against one another, and even to develop a lobby for their views in Moscow.

Finally, the conflict was prolonged by the high level of Soviet-US tensions in the 1980s...Soviet leaders believed that a settlement in Afghanistan would be possible only if the United States agreed to stop supporting the mujahedeen. At the same time, Moscow was cautious about opening a dialogue with the United States, feeling that doing so would be an admission that the invasion had been a mistake and that it would lose the freedom to act as it saw fit in Afghanistan...Soviet-US tensions made it more difficult for Gorbachev to seek a diplomatic solution during his first years in power."⁶⁵

As far as Soviet-US tensions are concerned, during his first years in power Gorbachev tried to ease tensions with Washington, but initially his proposals fell on deaf ears, as a hard-line attitude towards the Soviet was prevailing in the Reagan administration. Gorbachev's determination to embark on a new process of détente and wind down arms race was so evident and compelling that the scholar Vladislav Zubok refers to the Soviet leader's initiatives as 'peace offensives'.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Artemy Kalinovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13

⁶⁶ Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill (North Carolina), 2009

However, eventually by 1989 the Soviet-Afghan war ended. Not only the Soviet Union, one of the two world superpowers, had to face the shame of a bleeding retreat from a Third World country, but the defeat also played a paramount role in bringing about the end of the Cold War as well as the final demise of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics.

2.5 War Outcomes

The Soviet defeat in Afghanistan had two major consequences on an international level. First of all, it played a significant role in bringing about the end of the Cold War with the United States. The economic and political costs of the Afghan campaign resulted in further weakening a totalitarianism already on the verge of collapse. The second consequence of the defeat was the breakdown of the same Soviet Union. Very often, this breakdown is attributed to systemic and/or structural problems, but the Afghanistan war has to be emphasised as a key factor contributing to the final demise of the USSR. Indeed, in an article produced by Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, the two scholars and professors argue that the Afghanistan war impacted on Soviet politics in four reinforcing ways:

- “(1) Perception effects: it changed the perception of leaders about the efficacy of using the military to hold the empire together and to intervene in foreign countries;
- (2) Military effects: it discredited the Red Army, creating cleavage between the party and the military, and demonstrating that the Red Army was not invincible, which emboldened the non-Russian republics to push for independence;
- (3) Legitimacy effects: it provided non-Russians with a common cause to demand independence since they viewed this war as a Russian war fought by non-Russians against Afghans; and
- (4) Participation effects: it created new forms of political participation, started to transform the press/media before glasnost’, initiated the first shots of glasnost’, and created a significant mass

of war veterans (Afghansti) who formed new civil organisations weakening the political hegemony of the communist party.”⁶⁷

Therefore, those collateral effects risen from the Afghan campaign, held a pivotal role in the fall of the Soviet Union.

In the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War, an intellectual debate followed and different opinions and analyses emerged. The U.S. victory of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union constituted epochal changes and theory about the causes, consequences and general analysis attempted to give an interpretation to this epoch-making event. The scholar Francis Fukuyama asserted that the demise of the USSR was inevitable because of the inherent superiority of democracy over totalitarianism and of capitalism and free market over communism and centralised planning. Indeed, the advent of Western liberal democracy might signal the endpoint of the sociocultural evolution of humanity and the final and perfect form of government:

“What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”⁶⁸

Fukuyama’s analysis about the alleged ‘end of history’ constitutes a centrepiece regarding the study of the post-bipolar world. Nevertheless, it drew criticism from the intellectual world and many replies, among which the most significant being Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’. As opposed to Fukuyama’s analysis, Huntington states that while the age of ideological confrontation may have ended, the world will return to its normal state of affairs characterised by cultural

⁶⁷ Rafael Reveuny & Aseem Prakash. The Afghanistan war and the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Review of International Studies, 25, 693-708, 1999

⁶⁸ Francis Fukuyama. The End of History and The Last Man, Free Press, New York, 1992

conflict. Cultural and religious considerations will represent the main sources of future conflict. Huntington writes:

“It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.”⁶⁹

Huntington’s analysis was, in its turn, not void of criticism. Former Pakistani General Kamal Matinuddin challenged this conception by claiming:

“Those who are convinced of the theory that, after the collapse of communism, the Judeo-Christian world is determined to crush the Islamic resurgence wherever it is occurring, felt that the emergence of the Taliban was a conspiracy by the United States against Islam and was intended to balkanise Afghanistan. When seen in the light of the fiercely independent character of the Afghans, and given the fact that Afghan factions had been fighting against each other since the Saur revolution of April 1978, this theory does not appear to be very feasible.”⁷⁰

Still, Huntington’s view seemed to prove right vis-à-vis the turn of events in Afghanistan following the rise of the Taliban and the al-Qaeda network of terroristic attacks against the West. Clearly, the destruction of

⁶⁹ Samuel P. Huntington. The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996

⁷⁰ Kamal Matinuddin, The Taliban phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994-1997, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 161

the Twin Towers in New York and the invasion of Afghanistan in its immediate aftermath constitute the paramount example of what was effectively perceived as a 'clash of civilizations'.

To sum up, the most immediate conclusions drawn from the analysis of the Soviet retreat from the Afghan theatre lead to the observation of two major results. On the one side, the decade-long war in Afghanistan seemed to give the final straw to the Soviet regime. The outcome of an invasion, originally conceived as a defensive move, determined the ultimate collapse of the USSR. On the other side, the United States emerged victorious from the Cold War confrontation, paving the way for its leadership in what came to be known as the 'post-bipolar world', or 'unipolar world'.

Still, the retreat of the Red Army from the country did not entail the end of the conflict in Afghanistan. Indeed, what was originally presented as a holy war against the godless invader turned into a violent civil war. From 1989 until 1992 infightings and bloodsheds continued unabated. The new target took the shape of the Russian-backed government in Kabul led by Mohammad Najibullah. Therefore, another stage of the endless war in Afghanistan was underway.

Chapter 3: From the Civil War to the Rise of the Taliban

The withdrawal of the Red Army from the wretched campaign undertaken in Afghanistan had two main sets of intertwined consequences on the country.

First, the Afghan communist government was left alone to face the bellicose mujahedeen. The civil war which followed had an even more brutal character, and it widened the front of the conflict shattering areas (mainly Kabul) that had previously escaped destruction. Though the Soviet Union supported its Afghan ally with plentiful economic and military aid, still the burden of war was too heavy for the Afghan military. Najibullah made significant efforts to widen the base of the government, which even led him to declare Afghanistan an Islamic state, trying to remove all erstwhile references to communism. Still, this change did not win him any significant support, and opposition was motley and widespread.

The second consequence of the USSR withdrawal from Afghanistan consisted in its 'collateral' effect on the international scenario. Indeed, as soon as the last Soviet soldier left the country, the United States basically lost any kind of interest in the future of Afghanistan, albeit some support to the rebels was still in place. Since the mission of pulling the Red Army out of that country with as much political and economic damage for Moscow as possible was accomplished, Afghanistan simply disappeared from the political agenda in Washington.

As well as the renewal of Cold War hostilities brought Afghanistan into the limelight as the main battleground in the 1980s, the U.S. final victory led to the complete forgetfulness of that country in the 1990s. At least, until a group of Islamist students took over the country imposing a strict code of behaviour which drew broad international criticism and condemnation.

3.1 The Najibullah Regime: 1989-1992

The governmental career of Mohammad Najibullah was deeply and correspondingly linked to the fate of the Soviet Union during the invasion of Afghanistan. During Babrak Karmal's rule as head of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, Najibullah became the leader of the Khad, the intelligence agency and secret police. However, as in Moscow dissatisfaction grew with the rule of Karmal, the name of the head of the State Intelligence Agency gained prominence as a likely successor. Eventually, in 1986, the Soviet leader Gorbachev managed to convince Karmal to relinquish power and to step down from the presidency of the DRA. Mohammad Najibullah was thus installed as the new Afghan president, issuing a policy of 'national reconciliation' in order to follow through the Saur Revolution to its next phase. The major challenge the president of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan had to face throughout his entire presidency was surely building support for his government. The already difficult situation became even more complicated because of the easing of relations between the Soviet Union and the United States. Indeed, Gorbachev's drive toward a thaw of the relations with the U.S. counterpart resulted in paving the way for the withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan. Thus, Najibullah's regime was left without the vital support of its main backer. The actual Soviet retreat began in February 1988 and, by the following year, no Russian soldier was left in the country. In 1989, it was general opinion that the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan would have not survived long once the withdrawal of the Red Army was completed. In fact, a report produced by the U.S. Director of Central Intelligence in November 1989, provides a valuable account of the key judgements of the war as well as the likely near future in Afghanistan:

“The Kabul regime is weak, unpopular, and factionalised, but it will probably remain in power over the next 12 months. The war will remain at a near impasse. The regime will continue to resist mujahedeen pressure so long as the Soviet Union remains willing

and able to continue its massive military supply programme and the regime internal problems remain manageable:

- The Mujahedeen hold the military initiative to the extent that they move unhindered by the regime in most of the country side and they choose when and where to fight. The resistance, however, will be unable to prevent the supply of Soviet material to regime forces. The resistance will remain a guerrilla force and will find it difficult to seize major regime garrisons.
- The conflict is best understood as an insurgency. Political/military elements, such as regime fragility, mujahedeen disunity, and local tribal factors will be at least as important to the final outcome as strictly military considerations.
- Despite extensive popular support, the highly factionalised resistance is unlikely to form a political entity capable of uniting the mujahedeen.
- The Afghan Interim Government and most major commanders will refuse to negotiate directly with Kabul, barring the departure of Najibullah and top regime officials, but we cannot rule out the possibility of indirect talks.

Pakistan will continue to support the resistance, whether Benazir Bhutto or her political opposition is in power.

The Soviets will continue to search for a political settlement while providing massive support to Kabul over the next year. Soviets move could include a dramatic new initiative, especially if Gorbachev saw it as a way to remove the Afghan issue from the US-Soviet agenda before the summit next year.

One way to break the impasse would be to alter the pattern of foreign support:

- A unilateral US cut-off of support to the resistance would alter the military balance in favour to the regime and give it the upper hand in dictating the terms of political arrangements.
- A unilateral Soviet cut-off of support to the regime would be devastating to Kabul's prospects.
- Mutual cuts by the United States and the Soviet Union (negative symmetry) would be unpopular with the resistance but ultimately more damaging to the regime.
- Even with aid cuts, the conflict would probably continue indefinitely, though at a lower level of intensity.

To reduce its vulnerability to determined efforts by the resistance to bring it down, the regime is likely to continue to seek separate deals with local resistance commanders.”⁷¹

Therefore, the CIA report accounts for a comprehensive dispatch of the major problems and characteristics of this stage of the civil war in Afghanistan.

Many observers and pundits (and CIA's experts as well) expected the regime in Kabul to fall rapidly after the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Moreover, the war continued as an insurgency which opposed the mujahedeen to the governmental forces, and even without the presence of Soviet combat forces the war carried on in its high intensity. Some major battles attested for other features of the civil war. In fact, in 1989 a joint mujahedeen offensive was launched to capture the city of Jalalabad in order to put pressure on Kabul. The offensive, which marked the mujahedeen first attempt to pass from guerrilla to conventional warfare, ended in a resounding failure. This campaign provided evidence both of the resilience of the Najibullah government and its combat forces and the continuing disunity among mujahedeen leaders.

⁷¹ The National Security Archive. [Afghanistan: the war in perspective](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/), SNIE 37-89, November, 1989. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

Furthermore, while the Soviets continued to provide military and economic aid to the regime in Kabul, this stage of the war marked the erosion of US support to the resistance.

The mujahedeen inability to defeat the Najibullah regime until April 1992 stemmed from two main reasons. First, the USSR continued in its extensive support to the regime, and thousands of Soviet technicians and military advisers remained in the country even after the withdrawal. However, the Soviets insisted that the responsibility for continuation of the war in Afghanistan rested with the mujahedeen and, therefore, with their western backers. At this point, Moscow started calling for a 'negative symmetry', meaning the mutual cut-off of support to their Afghan clients by both the United States and the Soviet Union. Paradoxically enough, this position was initially rejected by the same Soviet Union during the negotiations for the Geneva accords, which prompted the United States to the continuation of aid channelisation to the resistance, a practice known as 'positive symmetry'. Yet, following the Red Army withdrawal from Afghanistan, western attention soon shifted away from the mujahedeen, and support for the rebels quickly dried up. In this way, negative symmetry gave a significant advantage to Kabul's governmental forces, at least until the dissolution of the USSR left Najibullah helpless. Moreover, Kabul's combat operations were increased and widened, scattering mines around the countryside in a bid to curtail mujahedeen's initiatives, while efforts were made to undermine Pakistan's support to the resistance. In addition, another change on the international scenario seemed to further reduce mujahedeen's capability to counter governmental forces. In fact, the mastermind of the CIA-ISI channel to provide military aid to the Afghan rebels, Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq, was assassinated in August 1988. The new government headed by Benazir Bhutto continued with its support to the mujahedeen, but it became more and more uncertain, as Pakistani pressures on the rebels for a final victory mounted.

The second major reason for the continuation of the hostilities was the inability to create a credible alternative. The Afghan Interim Government (AIG) formed at the beginning of 1989, soon proved to be a failure,

undermined by the constant bickering and infighting of the Peshawar party leaders. Furthermore, the major resistance commanders inside Afghanistan as well as the Shia groups were not included in the AIG. The Afghan Interim Government would not last an entire year, since internecine violence between the factions of Hekmatyar and Massoud brought about its final division. The Afghan resistance, while excelling at guerrilla warfare, lacked the necessary cohesiveness and organisation to put up a successful conventional warfare, proving therefore unable to mount the decisive attack to the Kabul regime.

Moreover, in a vicious cycle, the inability of the Afghan resistance to unite in order to effectively counter the Soviet-backed government led to growing disillusionment and impatience on the part of its western supporters.

Meanwhile, the menacing shadow of the loss of Soviet support led Najibullah to make conciliatory moves throughout 1990 and 1991. The head of the government decided to declare Afghanistan an Islamic state and changed the name of the PDPA in Hezb-i-Watan (Homeland Party) in a bid to eliminate erstwhile references to communism, thus broadening the base of his rule. Still, Najibullah's moves did not obtain the results expected, while the intertwined ethnic-linguistic-religious situation in Afghanistan became an excellent arena for the growing rivalry involving Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan in order to control the political future of the country.

Nevertheless, there was a widespread perception that only the loss of Soviet patronage could bring about the fall of Najibullah. In this respect 1991 was the breakthrough year. In September 1991, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to cut off military assistance to their respective Afghan clients. Finally, on December 25, 1991 Gorbachev announced his resignation as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, marking the dissolution of the USSR. With the demise of its backer, the fall of the communist government in Kabul became simply a question of time. To this respect, the new rising political leader of the Russian federation, Boris Yeltsin, considered

Afghanistan and its government as a relic of past, consequently waiving his support to Najibullah.

When the Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostam broke the alliance with Najibullah and joined the resistance forces in February 1992, it became evident that the regime's future was doomed. Najibullah agreed to relinquish power under a UN-sponsored plan which implied the formation of a multiparty interim government. In April 1992 the mujahedeen entered Kabul in a surprisingly bloodless victory, while Najibullah took shelter in a United Nations compound. In this way, another stage of the war in Afghanistan was over. The following phase entailed the continuation of infightings among the rival mujahedeen factions until a group of religious students took over the city of Kandahar in 1994.

3.2 Infighting and Chaos: 1992-1994

A new phase of the Afghan civil war began in 1992 immediately after Najibullah stepped aside from power. While a broad-based interim government held power in Kabul for the two following months, infighting and bickering continued mainly due to Hekmatyar's will to grab a greater share of power. In late April 1992, the leader of the Hizb-i-Islami ordered the bombardment of the capital city, which was made possible thanks to missiles and rockets coming from Pakistan. In order to soften Hekmatyar's claims of power, peace talks agreed to offer him the role of Prime Minister, which he accepted before once again putting up a fight against Dostam's forces. As a result, chaos broke out in Kabul while an unknown number of civilians was killed or injured.

In late June 1992, Burhanuddin Rabbani, the leader of the Jamiat-i-Islami, came to power. His interim government was to rule for only four months, but he refused to relinquish power and was elected president by an assembly dominated by supporters of his party in late 1992. This move alienated once more Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who rejected the new government.

In March 1993 another agreement was reached in Islamabad, Pakistan. It was produced by eight major parties and entailed that Rabbani would finish his term in office, while Hekmatyar was again named as Prime Minister. However, important leaders and commanders, such as Massoud and Dostam, were entirely excluded by this agreement. Ultimately, it had the effect of further scattering power. Indeed, at that time, the weakness of the central government in Kabul, concurred to the creation of piecemeal distribution of power in the country, with different commanders and mujahedeen controlling different cities or provinces.

Notwithstanding the Islamabad agreement, infighting continued among the different groups of mujahedeen, who never fully agreed on an acceptable power-sharing arrangement. Consequently, battles and disputes ravaged Kabul, which paradoxically enough had escaped destruction during the Soviet campaign in the country. Indeed, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar could boast himself of an odd kind of record, since his forces shelled the capital while he had shortly before sworn in as Prime Minister.

What happened during this stage of the civil war was a reversal of the characteristics of the war throughout the Soviet invasion. In fact, until 1989 major fighting and violence were spread in the countryside, while big cities were left relatively unscathed. Conversely, since the Red Army withdrawal, the countryside could enjoy a phase of relative calm and extraneousness from combat, while cities, especially Kabul, became major battlegrounds.

Competing groups fought relentlessly to win the control over various part of Kabul as well as different parts of the whole country. This stage of the civil war resulted in a sort of 'Beirutisation' of the capital city, with struggling factions transforming the city into an armed camp, while the standard of living fell dramatically⁷². The battle for the conquest of Kabul became the most evident instance of an underlying tension in Afghanistan, with the country ominously descended into ethnic violence and political fragmentation. Afghan's major cities were under the control

⁷² Larry P. Goodson, *op. cit.*

of different Afghan leaders. Kandahar was ruled by a regional council with the preponderance of Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami. Commander Ismail Khan (Jamiat-i-Islami) ruled over the western city of Herat, trying to establish friendly relations with Iran. Mazar-i-Sharif was the stronghold of the Uzbek militia headed by Dostam, while Jalalabad was under the influence of another faction of the Hizb-i-Islami headed by the commander Yunus Khalis.

Generally speaking, this phase of the civil war was characterised by political fragmentation and warlordism, with much of the fighting occurring in Kabul and in other major cities. The picture of the coalitions was never fixed and static, since betrayals and shifting alliances were constantly on the agenda. As Ahmed Rashid confirmed: "The country was divided into warlord fiefdoms and all the warlords had fought, switched sides and fought again in a bewildering array of alliances, betrayals and bloodshed"⁷³. The only long-lasting rivalry remained the one opposing Hekmatyar and Rabbani-Massoud.

Despite UN mediation efforts, no political agreement could be brokered that would meet all the claims of the different parts involved.

This period of intra-mujahedeen civil war had the consequence of creating chaos and wreaking havoc on the entire country, while Afghan people grew weary of the unabated power struggle. As fragmentation deepened during the course of 1994, frustration and discomfort grew irking regional power brokers. In particular, Pakistan was increasingly frustrated since the cumbersome and disappointing situation in the neighbouring country prevented Islamabad from realising its aspirations to trade and influence in Central Asia. Therefore, Hekmatyar's failure to seize power and to normalise the political scenario resulted in incensing his main backer, Pakistan, which started to turn its attention elsewhere in order to find a loophole from the Afghan quagmire.

In August 1994, the Taliban emerged from the powder keg of southern Afghanistan. A new phase of the Afghan odyssey was about to begin.

⁷³ Ahmed Rashid. *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2002, p. 21

3.3 The Taliban

In 1994, the southern part of Afghanistan and the important city of Kandahar were divided among competing warlords and bandits, who indulged themselves in constant looting and terrorised the population. The political vacuum paved the way for petty ex-mujahedeen to compete with each other in order to gain power and money. The city of Kandahar was further divided by warring groups, rendering it difficult and dangerous for international aid agencies to even work there. As Rashid describes:

“The warlords seize homes and farms, threw out their occupants and handed them over to their supporters. The commanders abused the population at will, kidnapping young girls and boys for their sexual pleasure, robbing merchants in the bazaars and fighting and brawling in the streets. Instead of refugees returning from Pakistan, a fresh wave of refugees began to leave Kandahar for Quetta.”⁷⁴

The powerful mafia of truck transporters found it particularly frustrating and detrimental to business. Indeed, the transport mafia, mostly based in Quetta and Kandahar, at the time was trying to open up new routes leading from Pakistan to Iran and the new-born state of Turkmenistan to smuggle goods. The political and authority vacuum in southern Afghanistan was therefore particularly galling, making it impossible to do business. Many Afghan mujahedeen began to engage in unsocial activities, turning in de facto armed gangsters, prompted to extract money from shopkeepers and levy taxes on passenger vehicles passing through areas under their control. In addition to personal greed, another reason for demanding money was represented by the fact that fighters were no longer receiving regular pay from the leaders who had previously recruited them. In the resulting lawless world, many of them

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*

indulged in looting, corruption, drug trafficking and rape. When a new movement aiming at bringing about stability, restoring peace and disarming the population emerged, the transport mafia was quick and eager to support it.

The Taliban's agenda included as well the enforcement of the Sharia law, coupled with the defence of the integrity and the Islamic character of Afghanistan. This new movement was almost entirely composed by Pashtuns, who were at the time studying at madrassas, religious schools which had their rise along the border with Pakistan and were substantially funded by General Zia ul-Haq. The same word '*Taliban*', plural of *Talib*, means Islamic students, someone who seeks knowledge. Conversely, the *Mullah* is someone who has completed his studies and therefore is entitled to give knowledge. By choosing the name '*Taliban*', the new movement tended to indicate its distance from the mujahedeen party, signalling at the same time the unambiguous purpose for cleansing the depraved Afghan society, while renouncing to take part in a mere power struggle.

“All those who gathered around Omar were the children of the jihad, but deeply disillusioned with the factionalism and criminal activities of the once idealised Mujahedeen leadership. They saw themselves as the cleansers and purifiers of a guerrilla war gone astray, a social system gone wrong and an Islamic way of life that had been compromised by corruption and excess. Many of them had been born in Pakistani refugee camps, educated in Pakistani madrassas and had learnt their fighting skills from Mujahedeen parties based in Pakistan. As such, the young Taliban barely knew their own country or history.”⁷⁵

When dealing with the Taliban and the dramatic turn of events in Afghanistan during the 1990s, Ahmed Rashid surely represents a major reference and a vital reading for anyone willing to understand the rise of

⁷⁵ *Ivi*, p. 23

the movement and its international relations. Rashid's description of the rise of the Taliban and their background cast pivotal light on this not fully understood organisation.

“The majority were incredibly young – between 14 and 24 years old...Many had spent their life in refugee camps (...) interspersed with hints at imbibing a Koranic education in the dozens of madrassas that had sprung up along the border, run by Afghan mullahs or Pakistan's Islamic fundamentalist parties... Many of these young warriors did not even know the history of their own country or the story of the jihad against the Soviets...

These boys were a world apart from the Mujahedeen...

These boys were from a generation who had never seen their country at peace – an Afghanistan not at war against invaders and itself. They had no memories of their tribes, their elders, their neighbours nor the complex ethnic mix of peoples that often made up their villages and their homeland. These boys were what the war had thrown up like the sea's surrender on the beach of history.

They had no memories of the past, no plans for the future, while the present was everything. They were literally the orphans of the war, the rootless and restless, the jobless and the economically deprived with little self-knowledge. They admired war because it was simply the only occupation they could possibly adapt to. Their simple belief in a messianic, puritan Islam which had been drummed into them by simple village mullahs was the only prop they could hold on to and which gave their lives some meaning. Untrained for anything...they were what Karl Marx would have termed Afghanistan's lumpen proletariat.

Moreover, they had willingly gathered under the all-male brotherhood that the Taliban leaders were set on creating, because they knew of nothing else...

This male brotherhood offered these youngsters not just a religious cause to fight for, but a whole way of life to fully embrace and make their existence meaningful.”⁷⁶

However, initially the Taliban were constituted by a restricted number of religious students and war veterans, who sick and tired of the civil war that had been raging for years, decided to take up arms and fight.

While the exact origin of the Taliban is still somehow shrouded in mystery, Mullah Wakil Ahmed, a Taliban’s spokesperson, gave an interview which would be published in the Arabic magazine Al-Majallas on October 23, 1996, explaining how and why the movement has started:

“After the mujahedeen parties came into power in 1992, Afghan people thought that peace would prevail in the country. However the leaders began to fight over power in Kabul. Some local leaders, particularly in Kandahar, formed armed gangs that fought each other. There was wide spread corruption and theft, and there were road-blocks everywhere. Women were being attacked, raped and killed. Therefore, after these incidents, a group of students from religious schools decided to rise against these leaders in order to alleviate the sufferings of the residents of the Kandahar Province. We were able to take control of several centres until we reached Kandahar and the former leaders fled from there.”⁷⁷

The key leaders of the Taliban were Kandahari Pashtuns, and many were Durranis, the tribal group which have historically been connected to Afghanistan’s royal family and national leadership. Therefore, the rise of the Taliban seemed to imply the ascendance of the Durranis once again. Beyond doubt, the real leader and key figure of the movement was Mullah Mohammed Omar. His character has always been surrounded by much secrecy and mystery, since he always refused to be photographed

⁷⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 32-33

⁷⁷ Cited in: Aneela Sultana. Taliban or Terrorists? Some Reflections on Taliban’s Ideology, Politics and Religion, N.1/2009, vol.III, pp. 7-24

or met Western journalists or diplomats. Omar used to live in Kandahar seldom if ever leaving it. He was extremely shy of outsiders, especially foreigners. Moreover, because of his shyness, he did not use to speak very much during Shura meetings and he had little charismatic appeal. Omar fought in the jihad against the Red Army during the Soviet invasion, being wounded four times. The most serious injury he suffered occurred when a shrapnel destroyed his right eye in 1987. Following the Soviet withdrawal he decided not to fight the Najibullah regime and went back to his studies. At that time, he began giving lectures at madrassas, being entitled to teach as a mullah.

There is a vast array of stories and myths to explain how and why Omar decided to rally a small group of Taliban against the greedy warlords of Kandahar. The most credible story tells of a commander who had abducted three women in the Kandahar area. The women were humiliated, gang-raped and finally killed. This episode sent a wave of vibrant indignation through the region, triggering Mullah Omar's reaction. Later, a marriage between two boys was reportedly celebrated with great jubilation in Kandahar, with the consequence of arousing bitter feelings and outrage among the traditionalist religious students. Moreover, another event illustrates how the rising trend of anarchy and banditry contributed to the final decision of religious students to intervene. A reported story tells that a few months after the abduction and murder of the three women, two commanders began fighting over a young boy whom both men wanted to sodomise, and during the skirmish that followed civilians were killed. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. Omar gathered a small group of ill-equipped Taliban, who managed to free the boy. Public appeals started requesting the intervention of the Taliban in order to help out in other local disputes. Mullah Omar's reputation rapidly grew, as he did not ask for any kind of reward from people he helped. As the prestige of the Taliban increased, correspondingly more people decided to join the ranks of these pure liberators. In the first phase of their rise, the Taliban were perceived as the 'messiahs' the ordinary Afghan was waiting for. After fifteen years of endless war, the population was extremely tired and willing to support

this new force which promised to put an end to the fratricidal war and the anarchy which was ravaging their land.

Furthermore, ethnicity was an important factor to give momentum to the rise of the movement. Indeed, the Taliban, mainly of Pashtun ethnicity, started to become active in the southern part of Afghanistan, there where a high percentage of Pashtuns lived.

Recalling those initial moments which marked the rise of the movement, Mullah Omar would later explain:

“We took up arms to achieve the aims of the Afghan jihad and save our people from further suffering at the hands of the so-called mujahedeen. We had complete faith in God Almighty. We never forgot that. He can bless us with victory or plunge us into defeat.”⁷⁸

As a mujahedeen commander of the Hizb-i-Islami decided to open up his armoury giving Omar weapons and vehicles, the Taliban movement began. The formal name of this new political faction was Tehreek-i-Islami-i-Taliban Afghanistan.

The initial goals of the organisation were:

- (1) disarming all rival militia,
- (2) fighting against those who did not accept Taliban’s request to give up weapons,
- (3) enforcing Islamic laws and Sharia in the ‘liberated’ areas, and
- (4) retaining all areas captured.

⁷⁸ Reported in: Ahmed Rashid. Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia, I.B. Tauris, London, 2002, p.23

Chapter 4: The Taliban's Afghanistan

4.1 The Taliban and the Changing Regional Scenario

Since the Soviet invasion in 1979, virtually all the new and younger elites tried to legitimate their claims to leadership through reference to Islam. The case of the Taliban in Afghanistan represented the latest and most successful turn for Islamist elites. The increasing trend toward Islamisation in Afghanistan, which has its root in the struggle among communism and Islamism, modernisers and traditionalists in the intellectual circles of the 1960s in Kabul, represented a major change for the Afghan society and for neighbouring countries. Indeed, the Taliban's essential monoethnicity, coupled with close relations with Pakistan, produced fears of further fragmentation along ethnic cleavages as well as tensions with neighbouring countries such as Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

The French political scientist and expert Olivier Roy characterised three main meanings for the process of Islamisation launched in Afghanistan: (1) the implementation of the Sharia (Islamic law), (2) the purifying of society through preaching and a return to fundamental religious practices, and (3) the establishment of an Islamic state through violence if necessary.

Essentially, the Taliban presented themselves as symbol of the resurgence of tradition, a movement which aimed at cleansing the country from the impurities produced by its contacts with modernisation. Still, it may be argued that most of the Taliban's occupations and actions have to be considered as modern. Indeed, it would have been impossible for them to indulge in such a global and profitable drugs and arms trafficking, or receiving such huge sums of money from so many different countries, or again keeping part into the New Great Game for the exploitation of mineral resources in Central Asia, if the world had not changed and transformed into a modern and globalised stage. Therefore,

one may argue that the Taliban were not really representing the resurgence of tradition, but rather they were taking advantage of an ‘invented tradition’ (using Eric Hobsbawm’s language) in order to gain legitimacy. Undoubtedly, the Taliban’s reference to Islam and to the traditional Pashtun’s code of behaviour helped them gain the initial consensus and momentum necessary to eventually control the country. The debate about the distinction between ‘invented tradition’ and ‘genuine tradition’ is vivid and open to interpretation. The paradoxes and contradictions of a movement and a war aiming at imposing a pre-modern system by using post-modern means is described by journalist Peter L. Bergen’s account of bin Laden’s jihad:

“When bin Laden declared war on Americans in 1996, he described U.S. soldiers stationed in the Middle East as ‘the Crusaders’, as if the crusades of the Middle Ages were still being fought, and signed his declaration ‘from the peaks of the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan’, a place barely touch by the modern world. That declaration of war was written on an Apple computer and then faxed or e-mailed to supporters in Pakistan and Britain, who in turn made it available to Arabic newspapers based in London, which subsequently beamed the text, via satellite, to printing centres all over the Middle East and in New York.

Thus, a pre-modern message was delivered by post-modern means.”⁷⁹

Furthermore, bin Laden’s association, Al-Qaeda, was often thought of as the ultimate NGO, an organisation with offshoots in many countries worldwide.

Ultimately, the Taliban’s move to present themselves as symbolising the resurgence of tradition was instrumental to them in order to gain such a legitimacy they would not have obtained otherwise.

⁷⁹ Peter L. Bergen, *op. cit.*, p. 30

4.2 The Taliban's Ideology

As mentioned earlier, the Taliban were students who received religious instruction in madrassas located along the Afghan-Pakistani border, in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). The educational activities of madrassas were constituted by the sole study of purely religious matters, presenting themselves as a reaction to the introduction of modern and somewhat secular concepts in the system of education. Most of these madrassas were affiliated or directly run by conservative Islamist Pakistani political parties or movement, such as the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islami (JUI). It was a purely religious movement which had its root in the Deobandi tradition and was set up in order to propagate Deobandi beliefs and mobilise the community of believers.

Throughout Muslim history, politics and religion have met and intertwined thanks to the concept of jihad – the holy war to defend or spread Islam.

“Western thought, heavily influenced by the medieval Christian Crusades, has always portrayed jihad as an Islamic war against unbelievers. But essentially jihad is the inner struggle of a Muslim to become a better human being, improve himself and help community. Jihad is also a testing ground for obedience to God and implementing His commands on earth. Jihad is the inner struggle of Moral discipline and commitment to Islam and political action. Islam also sanctions rebellion against an unjust ruler, whether Muslim or not a jihad is the mobilising mechanism to achieve change. Thus the life of the Prophet Mohammad has become the jihadi model of impeccable Muslim behaviour and political change as the Prophet himself rebelled, with deep religious and moral anger, against the corrupt Arab society he was living in. the Taliban were thus acting in the spirit of the Prophet's Jihad when they attacked the rapacious warlords around them. Yet jihad does to sanction the killing of fellow Muslims on the basis of ethnicity or sect, and it is this, the Taliban interpretation of jihad, which appals

the non-Pashtuns. While the Taliban claim they are fighting a jihad against corrupt, evil Muslims, the ethnic minorities see them as using Islam as a cover to exterminate non-Pashtuns.

The Taliban interpretation of Islam, jihad and social transformation was an anomaly in Afghanistan because the movement's rise echoed none of the leading Islamicist trends that had emerged through the anti-Soviet war...

They fitted nowhere in the Islamic spectrum of ideas and movements that had emerged in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1994...

The Taliban represented nobody but themselves and they recognised no Islam but their own.⁸⁰

The JUI established madrassas specifically for Afghan orphans in Pakistan, offering free Koranic education in the poorest areas of the country, including the Afghan refugee camps. Therefore, the madrassas run by the JUI not only provided a wellspring of manpower for the Taliban, but also the ideological cornerstone and strength in conformity. Indeed, when the Taliban were in need for combat forces during the fight for the control of Kabul, the JUI decided to suspend school examinations in the refugee camps in order to allow over 2000 students to assist the Taliban in their jihad to topple the interim Afghan government⁸¹.

The forced exile in which madrassas were set up bore significant resonance in influencing the themes of preservation and defence of Islam. Because of Afghanistan's invasion at the hands of a godless invader, jihad became the main driving force behind the educational system in madrassas. Education was conceived as a purification of the soul from, and a foundation for the resistance to the corruption of the modern world. Therefore, the education policy became a central aspect for the mujahedeen, a fundamental ideological technique capable of mobilising and recruiting fighters for the jihad.

⁸⁰ Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-88

⁸¹ Leigh Nolan. Afghanistan, Education and the Formation of the Taliban, The Fletcher School – TUFTS University (Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Thesis), Medford, 2006

Schools in refugee camps were important instruments established primarily for cultural, political, and military mobilisation for jihad.

During the Afghanistan's endless war, madrassas became the only avenue where orphans could live and receive the semblance of an education.

Traditionally, madrassas were not subsidised by the state, albeit under the rule of Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq the government encouraged the spread of this kind of educational system. Indeed, while in 1971 there were only 900 madrassas in Pakistan, by the end of the Zia era in 1988 the number of madrassas had risen to figure of 8,000, with another 25,000 unregistered ones, educating over half a million students⁸².

However, the most common way by which madrassas were financed was through the charities of the community. Usually, during the Afghan jihad many Arab international charities were deeply involved in giving their support to the resistance, while financial backers like Osama Bin Laden personally intervened in the jihad.

Madrassas were primarily a Sunni tradition and provided high level of religious education. These kind of Islamic schools, set up along the Pashtun belt, became the education of the poor and wretched, while the wealthy elites preferred attending secular schools, thus increasing the class divide between religious and secular education. Moreover, the American political scientist Peter W. Singer links the diffusion of madrassas to the failure of the educational control by the government of Pakistan:

“The reason for the madrassas new centrality stems from the weakening of the Pakistani state...the madrassas became immensely popular by targeting the lower class and refugee populations, whom the Pakistani state has failed to provide proper access to education.”⁸³

⁸² Aneela Sultana, *op. cit.*

⁸³ Peter W. Singer. Pakistan's madrassahs: Ensuring a System of Education not Jihad, Washington DC, Brooklyn Institute Analysis Papers #41, 2001, p. 2

However, Taliban's ideology stems from an odd mix between the Deobandi school of Islam thought in madrassas and the Pashtun code of conduct (*Pashtunwali*, see Chapter 1). It is important to highlight that on some points this code of conduct and Sharia's law are in conflict with each other. One of the most significant example regards the Pashtun's practice of *badal* (revenge). Vendetta killings are decidedly un-Islamic. Indeed, the same Prophet Mohammad considered this practice as abhorrent to God, especially when it was Muslim killing Muslim. Conversely, He believed that Muslims should always live in peace with each other, for allegiance to Islam was more important than loyalty to tribes⁸⁴.

As a result, there has historically been an underlying tension between Islam and *Pashtunwali*.

However, to understand the ideology of the Taliban, it is necessary to outline as well the tenets of the Deobandi school of thought, which had such a huge influence on the leaders of the movement.

The Deobandis challenge many sects within Sunni Islam, mainly because of their fundamentalist and anti-Shia views. Anti-western emphasis is another defining aspect of this school. Endowed with a particularly puritanical and orthodox attitude, the Deobandi school of thought might be placed on the extreme end of conservative Islam. Disciples of Deobandis conceive the modern practices, which divert the attention from a proper knowledge of Islam, as corruptive influence. In efforts to strictly regulate individual and societal behaviour, a particular emphasis is placed on conformity in order to make external behaviour and appearance to reflect inward faith. Consequently, individual actions and dress represent the visible demonstration of one own's religious compliance. This strict and severe code of conduct acts as a factor which strengthens the community's identity as well as keeping discipline within the student militias. Moreover, such a solid and consolidated identity has the result of allowing little room for deviation or factionalisation increasing at the same time the cohesion of the group.

⁸⁴ Aneela Sultana, *op. cit.*

The influence of Deobandi madrassas grew proportionally to the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan and the consequent wave of refugees headed to the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. The Pakistani government provided these madrassas with massive amount of aid, assisted in this task by the economic largesse of the United States. Saudi funders and charitable organisations were another major source of financial backing. Therefore, foreign influence was a pivotal factor in the increasing of power of those fundamentalist Islamic schools on the Afghan society:

“Prior to the war the Islamicists barely had a base in Afghan society, but with money and arms from the CIA pipeline and support from Pakistan, they built one and wielded tremendous clout.”⁸⁵

Ultimately, the odd mix of foreign direct (Soviet invasion) and indirect (CIA-ISI pipeline) intervention, intertwined with the struggle between traditionalism and modernism, and the particular situation of educational networks run by fundamentalist Islam scholars, resulted in the spread of radicalism and the rise of the Taliban movement.

When the Taliban began to gain control of Afghanistan, they established as many madrassas as possible, while actively requesting funding from Saudi Arabian charities in order to support this effort. Thus, it is safe to say that the installation of an educational system supportive of their religious rigorousness became the bedrock in the creation of a ‘pure’ Islamist state. However, since the Taliban’s ideology was the result of the mixture of Deobandism and the Pashtun tribal code, other ethnic and religious groups in Afghanistan reacted with consternation and condemnation to the Taliban control of government and schools.⁸⁶ Probably, the most significant example illustrating the cultural divide between the Taliban and the Afghan society is represented by the Taliban’s decision to prohibit female education. An estimated

⁸⁵ Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, p. 19

⁸⁶ Leigh Nolan, *op. cit.*

106,256 girls, 148,223 boys and 7,793 women teachers were affected by the Taliban's prohibitions on the participation of females in education.⁸⁷ Eventually, in 1998 the Taliban decided to close down all girls' schools.

Clearly, the Taliban's cultural background and adamant code of conduct would then be reflected in the implementation of controversial policies in the country.

Overall, the Taliban seemed to reflect the expression of a cultural background somehow alien to the main Afghan cultural framework. Then, one might wonder how it was possible that this movement asserted itself in the Afghan scenario. Larry P. Goodson identifies five major factors that could explain the Taliban's success⁸⁸.

First and most telling has been the shared Pashtun ethnicity of the Taliban and the majority of the non-combatant population in most of the area they have come to control. Indeed, until the Taliban moved to control central and northern regions of the country, the area they controlled was overwhelmingly Pashtun. Throughout the country, they were mainly perceived as a movement expressing a clear ethnic orientation. This kind of perception brought to the rise of clashes and scuffles by part of the other ethnic group present in Afghanistan.

The second and third factor in explaining the rise of the Taliban are interrelated and intertwined. These are represented by the emphasis on religious devotion and the war-weariness of the Afghan civilian population. From the very beginning of their existence, the Taliban presented themselves as a fundamentalist Islamist movement, thus becoming appealing to many Afghans. Particularly during the first phase of the advance in the country, when the movement began spreading in the Pashtun area, the Taliban were able to avoid fight by simply carrying the Koran in front of their advancing troops. Moreover, differently from previous mujahedeen groups which had also presented themselves as Islamist, within the Taliban's ranks the relative lack of corruption was an important factor contributing to their appeal. The Afghan public also had

⁸⁷ Michael Griffin. Reaping the Whirlwind: Afghanistan, Al Qa'ida and the Holy war, Pluto Press, London, 2003, p.132

⁸⁸ Larry P. Goodson, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-111

the perception that the leaders of the movement, mostly considered pious and devoted, were truthfully attempting to create an Islamic society and state. In addition, another driving force was certainly represented by the frustration and the weariness of the civilian population for war and infighting among mujahedeen groups for personal gain. A new and purer movement was generally deemed necessary to thwart that eerie trend.

The fourth factor that explains the rise of the Taliban is money. It was widely reported that the Taliban used money to induce opposing commanders to switch sides or surrender. The Taliban success was made possible largely because of their practice of bribing or buying the loyalty of opposing commanders. Very few battles were fought by the Taliban until their defeat outside Kabul in 1995 mainly because their religious piety and their wise use of financial incentives proved to be a persuasive combination. Yet, a question arises spontaneously: where did money come from? Reportedly, money came from Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states, the truck transport smuggling mafia, opium smugglers, Osama bin Laden, and the Pakistani government. Moreover, other sources of revenues were represented by customs duties, including taxes on heroin.

The fifth factor, fundamental in explaining the Taliban's success is Pakistan support. The Pakistani government's support to the Taliban was a vital factor and it mainly stemmed from Islamabad's desire to have a stable and friendly Afghanistan on its western border. Support for the Taliban within Pakistan's government, army, and society was so deep and multifaceted that it was not incorrect to say that they were Pakistan's proxy army in Afghanistan. Islamabad grew increasingly frustrated with instability and the state of anarchy in the neighbouring country. The situation in Afghanistan posed serious threats to the same stability of Pakistan. Indeed, a growing impact of drugs and arms traffic was underway along the border. Moreover, Kabul's instability resulted in the slow and incomplete repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistani camps, and in Afghanistan's inability to develop trade routes to the emerging market of Central Asia. To sum up:

“Pakistan’s objectives ever since the power struggle between the rival Afghan militia began have been: durable peace in the war-ravaged land; a friendly government across its western border; repatriation of Afghan refugees; access to Central Asian markets; and a safe route for the oil and gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to the Arabian Sea.”⁸⁹

Pakistan’s meddling in Afghanistan’s internal affairs implied a significant change, switching from supporting its traditional client (Hekmatyar) toward a new one (the Taliban). This move entailed also backing a movement which had its origin in Pakistan and could boast a shared Islamist ideology, aside from a more acceptable ethnic connection. Nevertheless, the Pakistani government has on several occasions denied supporting the Taliban, albeit overwhelming evidence indicates the contrary. The Taliban were helped and backed from the very beginning by Naserullah Babar, Pakistan’s interior ministry under the Benazir Bhutto government of 1994. The Taliban were clearly another recipient of Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), so that speculations arise about an alleged co-partnership by part of the United States. Indeed, the expert on U.S. relations with Asia Selig Harrison claimed that the Washington chose to back the Taliban’s rise to power even though it was well aware of their reactionary programme. The expert claimed that ultimately the creation of the Taliban was “actively encouraged by the ISI and the CIA”⁹⁰, while Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid added that “The United States encouraged Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to support the Taliban, certainly right up to their advance on Kabul”⁹¹.

The Taliban-Pakistan connection became evident as the nature of Taliban’s military operations in Afghanistan, their marked anti-Iranian posture, and their replacement of Hekmatyar as the main aid recipient seemed to imply a Pakistani oversight behind the scenes.

⁸⁹ Kamal Matinuddin, *op. cit.*, p. 141

⁹⁰ Selig Harrison, cited in Phil Gasper, *op. cit.*

⁹¹ Ahmed Rashid, cited in Phillip Knightley, US Gave Silent Backing To Taliban Rise To Power, The Guardian, 10-8-1

As Kamal Matinuddin attested:

“Pakistan was supporting the Taliban in the hope that they would prove to have the military strength and the determination to control the major part of Afghanistan. Pakistan’s policy of assisting the Taliban, however, was based more on the anger they felt against Rabbani than a genuine love for the Taliban, whose interpretation of the Sharia Islamabad did not share.

However, by supporting the Taliban, Pakistan highlighted its policy of giving preference to the Pashtuns over other ethnic minorities.

This was a negation of the declared statements of the Pakistan leadership that they had no favourites in Afghanistan...

...[When] the Taliban had become a reality, and controlled two-thirds of Afghanistan, Pakistan wanted to strengthen them further.”⁹²

Therefore, as the Taliban went on to conquer Afghanistan, Pakistan’s involvement grew to such an extent and became so comprehensive and multifaceted that it literally drew Islamabad policy toward Afghanistan. Pakistan progressively backed the religious movement’s campaign with direct and indirect military coordination, logistical support, financial aid, recruitment, and even diplomatic recognition.

The efficiency and the tactical sophistication shown by the Taliban’s military operations, coupled with huge sums of money and brand new equipment, was particularly at odds with the picture they presented to the outside world of their being simple religious students. The kind of coordination and military preparation was unseen even among mujahedeen. It was therefore evident that not only the Taliban were receiving direct and indirect support from Islamabad and the ISI, but also that a good number of Taliban personnel had been trained by Pakistani military instructors. Since the type of war the Taliban were conducting

⁹² Kamal Matinuddin, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-135

was different from the guerrilla warfare tactics used by mujahedeen, a logical deduction seemed to entail some kind of involvement by part of the CIA.

Moreover, Islamabad has been the Taliban's most important recruiter to the extent that the close link between the government and the JUI party entailed that the JUI encouraged students in its madrassas to suspend their studies and join the Taliban in their campaign by declaring the Afghan struggle a jihad. Indeed, when the Taliban faced defeats or manpower shortages, Pakistani madrassas demonstrated their deep compliance with Mullah Omar's appeals for more recruits by closing their schools altogether in order to allow their students to fill Taliban's ranks. A Human Rights Watch report tried to evaluate Islamabad's involvement in Afghanistan's internal affairs:

“The Pakistan government has repeatedly denied that it provides any military support to the Taliban in its diplomacy regarding its extensive operations in Afghanistan. Of all the foreign powers involved in efforts to sustain and manipulate the on-going fighting [in Afghanistan], Pakistan is distinguished both by the sweep of its objectives and the scale of its efforts, which include soliciting funding for the Taliban, bankrolling Taliban operations, providing diplomatic support as the Taliban's virtual emissaries abroad, arranging training for Taliban fighters, recruiting skilled and unskilled manpower to serve in Taliban armies, planning and directing offensives, providing and facilitating shipments of ammunition and fuel, and ... directly providing combat support.”⁹³

Overall, Pakistan has supported the rise to power of the Taliban militia ever since 1994. Still, notwithstanding Islamabad's pivotal role in fostering the creation of the movement, the Taliban strength and independence has prevented them from being Pakistan's puppets. On the

⁹³ Human Rights Watch, Crisis of Impunity: Pakistan's Support of the Taliban, <http://www.hrw.org>

contrary, their existence and success pose serious implications for the same Pakistan. To this respect, Rashid commented:

“The Taliban’s close links with Pakistani society, their uncompromising stance on their version of Islamic values and the fact that they represent a new form of Islamic fundamentalism which is admired by a younger generation of Pakistani madrassas students, give them far more clout inside Pakistan than other Afghan mujahedeen groups.

For many Pakistanis, the Taliban are an inspiration.”⁹⁴

Those concerns about the possible ‘Talibanisation’ of Pakistan’s society were recognised also by pundits in the United States. Indeed, an official document maintains:

“Consistent reporting indicate Pakistan provides both military and financial assistance to the Taliban. Islamabad’s primary goals are to achieve strategic depth with regard to India, and securing access to Central Asian trade routes.

Cultural ties also exist between the Taliban leadership and Pakistan, where several Taliban leaders lived for many years following the 1979 Soviet invasion. Pakistan fears a complete Taliban victory may incite irredentist aspirations within its own Pashtun population, and will likely attempt to pressure the Taliban into moderating some of its policies.”⁹⁵

Pakistan’s involvement in supporting the Taliban changed through the years as different governments succeeded one another.

Likewise, from the withdrawal of the Soviet army from Afghanistan, the regional geopolitical Central Asian scenario has changed through the years. As the dissolution of the Soviet Union brought about the birth of

⁹⁴ Ahmed Rashid, cited in Larry P. Goodson, *op. cit.*, p. 114

⁹⁵ The National Security Archive. Pakistan: “The Taliban’s Godfather?”
<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

new countries at the northern border with Afghanistan, a new set of relations with these new-born states had to be taken into account.

4.3 The Changing Regional Scenario

Afghanistan's geographical position has given the country a renewed importance both on the regional and international stage. From a geopolitical standpoint, it is a linchpin country connecting Central Asia with South and West Asia. In the new geopolitical and geo-economic framework resulting from the end of the bipolar confrontation, Afghanistan has once again become the 'crossroads of Asia'. Notwithstanding the havoc that more than a decade of war wreaked to the country, devastating its infrastructure and economy, Afghanistan plays a central role in trade between Central Asia, South Asia and Southwest Asia. The country's location and the cross-border ethnic ties with its neighbours render Afghanistan a pivotal actor in the region.

The most significant change in the Central Asia stage occurred at the beginning of the 1990s. As a consequence of the defeat in the Cold War confrontation with the United States, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics disintegrated as a political entity in 1991-1992. A loose confederation of states, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), replaced the Soviet Union. Still, the CIS never fully developed as a single entity and its constituent countries began acting with great independence. The new Central Asian Republics were Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the first three of which border directly with Afghanistan. Clearly, the very existence of new independent countries in Central Asia changed the region in which Afghanistan exists. One of the first consequences of the new independence gained by those countries was the resurgence of religious practices which during the Soviet rule were forbidden. The revival of these Muslim practices which for so long had been curbed and repressed seems likely to pose serious threats not only to internal stability of those new countries, but also to the stability of the same Russian Federation. A widespread fear of the rapid

diffusion of Islamist fundamentalism in Central Asian states led former communist rulers to even outright repression. However, the situation in these new republics was extremely complicated because of a vast array of factors intertwined one another. Undoubtedly, the most important characteristic consists in the sharing of not only a common religion, but ethnicity too. As a result, turmoil and instability in one country could entail backlashes and reverberations on the neighbouring region.

Therefore, after more than seventy years of Soviet domination, those Central Asian republics were now opened to a new set of interactions with neighbouring countries on the basis of shared ethnicity, religion, and language.

Ethnic Distribution of Population of Central Asian Republics⁹⁶

<i>Country</i>	<i>Population (1998 estimate)</i>	<i>Major Ethnic Groups as Percentage of Population</i>
Kazakhstan	16,848,808	Kazakh, 46%; Russian, 35%; German, 5%; Ukrainian, 5%; Uzbek, 2%; Tatar, 2%; Other, 5%
Kyrgyzstan	4,522,281	Kyrgyz, 52%; Russian, 22%; Uzbek, 13%; other, 13%
Tajikistan	6,020,095	Tajik, 65%; Uzbek, 25%; Russian, 2%; other, 8%

⁹⁶ Source: Larry P. Goodson, *op. cit.*, p. 136, taken from: Mehrdad Haghayeghi, Islam and Politics in Central Asia, 1995, World Almanac, 1998, 1999

Turkmenistan	4,297,629	Turkmen, 77%; Uzbek, 9%; Russian, 7%; other, 7%
Uzbekistan	23,784,321	Uzbek, 80%; Russian, 6%; Tajik, 5%; Kazak, 3%; other, 6%

Thus, religion, culture, language, and trade opportunities represent the factors which coalesced to make Afghanistan the ‘crossroads of Asia’. Afghanistan’s centrality in the Central Asian stage also stems from its standing on the fault line of three civilisations: Islamic, Russian Orthodox, and Chinese, while the Hindu civilisation is also very near. Larry P. Goodson identifies five issues which are most critical to changing way in which Afghanistan’s centrality is crucial⁹⁷.

First, ethnic conflicts are made possible because of the overlapping of ethno-linguistic and religious groups, permeable national borders, and weak state governments. Pakistan’s deep involvement in Afghan internal affairs clearly stemmed from this kind of frame, while Red Army’s incapacity to eliminate the Afghan resistance derived from the safe sanctuary the latter could find crossing the Pakistani border. The existence of those ethno-linguistic ties across international borders was a central factor that permitted the war to continue ceaselessly.

Second, the revival of political Islam as a driving force for political legitimation and foundation for political organisation seemed to assume different regional connotations, demonstrating a varying degree of success and aggressiveness in different countries in the region. As mentioned before, the growing degree of political Islamisation of Afghanistan has deeply affected its Pakistani neighbour. ‘Talibanisation’ seemed to constitute the most far-reaching consequence of Pakistan’s long-lasting involvement in Afghanistan. In particular, in the Pakistani

⁹⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 159-166

North West Frontier Province several movements drawing inspiration from the Taliban have sprung up. This kind of Islamist aspirations put significant pressure on the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, leading him to declare in 1998 that Taliban justice was needed in Pakistan. Collateral effects of the use of fundamentalist tones entailed the spread of extremist religious practices until then alien to the Pakistani society, such as the narrowing access to public space for women, honour killings, forced veiling, and others. Another type of 'blowback' stemming from the growing 'Talibanisation' of Pakistan was the demonization of the West, especially the United States, portrayed as the enemy of Islam. As a result, Osama bin Laden could easily find shelter in Pakistan whenever the U.S. decided to attack him.

Third, Afghanistan's centrality is crucial because of the growing interconnections of regional actors with regard to trade. Basically, two kinds of trades were of utmost importance for Afghanistan: the legitimate source regarding oil and natural gas, and the illegitimate source concerning the smuggling of weapons and narcotics.

Forth, if permeable borders facilitated the flow of people and goods, equally they could entail the possible spill-over of conflict from one country to another. Once again, a clear example is represented by the spill-over of fights from Afghanistan to Pakistan during the 1980s. Afghanistan also prompted the reaction of Iran in 1998, when the Shia country mobilised its troops along the border following the killing of Iranian diplomats at the hands of the Taliban after they conquered Mazar-i-Sharif. In addition, the Taliban's willingness to host fundamentalist militants from other countries, such as Chechnya, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan posed serious threats to the stability of the region.

Finally, the other crucial factor consists in the way in which the developments derived from the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union gave rise to geopolitical aspirations of regional actors. Afghanistan has always been subjected to meddling by foreign actors. During the 1980s, the geopolitical interests at stake in the region induced countries like the USSR, the US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and supranational organisation like the United Nations to intervene more

or less directly in Afghanistan. In the 1990s, the ending of the bipolar confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States, and the dissolution of the former, brought about the alteration of the regional environment and the motivations of various actors toward Afghanistan. Russia was still concerned about the diffusion of Islamist fundamentalism within its southern flank and openly accused Pakistan of backing the Taliban. Iran's aspirations in Central Asia were influenced by the Taliban's anti-Iranian position, and the support they received from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Albeit its inflamed rhetoric Iran did not invade Afghanistan, though supporting the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and the Shia factions. Iran's role in the region seemed to be further complicated by the more accommodating and friendly approach toward the United States by the moderate government led by Mohammad Khatami in 1997. Saudi Arabia has always supported the most fundamentalist groups during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and it was one of the main backer of the Taliban movement to the point of being one of the only three countries worldwide (the other were Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates) to assure them diplomatic recognition. Still, tensions over the Taliban's decision to provide a safe sanctuary to Osama bin Laden led the Saudi Arabian establishment in the late 1990s to downgrade its diplomatic ties with Omar's regime. The new Central Asian republics tended to allow loose politics toward Afghanistan with regard to their shared cultural and religious ties. Generally, the Taliban's strict fundamentalism triggered hostile reactions, since these new republics were willing to deflect the chance of domestic religious turmoil. As a US official document asserts:

“Russia is concerned about the spill-over of Islamic militancy into Central Asia and views the Taliban as a significant threat. Moscow defines its near-abroad borders as those of its former Central Asian republics, and has pledged to use military force should the Taliban push into northern Afghanistan.

Turkmenistan is too poor to support any Afghan faction with more than electricity and fuel.

Uzbekistan provides assistance to its fellow ethnic Uzbeks under the command of Jumbesh [Party] leader General Dostam.

The Tajik government recently began sending supplies and ammunition to the Jamiat militia.

Reports indicate India is supplying weapons and other unspecified aid to anti-Taliban forces.”⁹⁸

Among the Central Asia republics, Turkmenistan has had the most cordial relations with the Taliban, mainly because of the hope of the Turkmen leader Niyazov to export gas through the Taliban-controlled western Afghanistan.

Pakistan has always been involved in Afghanistan. New types of motivations urged Pakistani involvement to continue meddling, mainly due to the willingness to compete with Iran and Turkey for a share of the riches of Central Asian trade as well as to play down problems with the ethnic groups that overlap the shared border.

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States soon lost interest in the country. Nevertheless, the new independence of the Central Asian states opened up new economic opportunities, with the possibility of exploiting the rich oil and gas fields. American oil companies were immediately interested in this new prospect for huge revenues. When an Argentine oil company (Bridas) joined in the race to secure an agreement for the construction of oil and gas pipeline, the ‘New Great Game’ for Central Asian mineral resources fully developed. Still, the U.S. private companies’ initiatives were curtailed by the hard domestic opposition to the movement when its policies became clear. In particular, four major issues caused concerns for the Washington establishment: the Taliban’s support for terrorism, particularly with the request of delivering Osama bin Laden to American authorities, the Afghan heroin traffic, the Taliban’s policies on women, and their denial to agree on a broad-based government that included northern opposition figures.

⁹⁸ The National Security Archive. Pakistan: “The Taliban’s Godfather?”
<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

Therefore, Afghanistan is a central country in the Central Asian scenario and, while being significantly affected by its neighbour's meddling into its internal affairs, it equally affects them. During the decade marked by the Soviet invasion, geopolitical and geostrategic considerations drew the U.S. attention. As soon as the Red Army withdrew from Afghanistan, Washington had no more interests in the country and basically forgot it. Nevertheless, the 1990s marked a renewed, albeit much more limited, interest of the United States in Afghanistan and Central Asia. To this respect, the geopolitical and strategic considerations typical of a Cold War mind-set have been replaced by much more material geo-economic speculations. Interestingly enough, exactly this new type of geo-economic interests at stake in Central Asia seemed to exercise pressure on the Taliban and on outside actors as well in order to put an end to the endless Afghan conflict.

4.4 The Taliban's Military Campaign in Afghanistan

As described earlier, the origin of the Taliban's involvement in Afghanistan can be traced back to August-September 1994, when they initiated actions to thwart the rampant warlordism and widespread anarchy which marked the post-Soviet invasion period.

The military tactics used by the Taliban were extremely simple, and some observers noted that they could not even be considered an organised army, since usually no fire plans were made. Moreover, during the first phase of their military campaign, the Taliban tried to avoid fighting as much as possible. Usually, the tactics consisted in trusted mullahs approaching the opponents carrying the Taliban flag (pure white, with the *kalmia* written in green) and the Holy Koran. At that point, they asked opposing fighters to lay down their arms, as the Taliban had come to restore peace and put an end to the on-going infighting. In most cases the tactics worked, as the Taliban were perceived as a sincere and neutral

force. In other cases, another method often used was simply to bribe and buy opposing commanders' loyalty.

The first skirmish occurred in May 1994 when the Taliban tried to capture an arms depot belonging to Hekmatyar located north of Spin Boldak. The successful raid was due to deception and surprise, and it allowed them to seize a large amount of weapons and hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition. The group of Taliban was initially composed of about forty men, but after their capture of the arms depot they sent word to Pakistani madrassas and other students willingly joined their ranks.

The Taliban's successive move was the removal of the incredibly numerous check-posts between the Pakistani city of Chaman and Kandahar. This move won the Taliban widespread support among the population of the Kandahar province. Perhaps more importantly, the removal of those hurdles and the consequent free movement of goods constituted a very significant gain for the transport mafia. In November 1994, the Taliban decided to overrun the southern city of Kandahar. After two days of sporadic fighting, the military commander in Kandahar defected and joined the religious students along with his troops. No one doubted that the Taliban militia had received considerable support from Pakistan, and the leader of the Kabul government, Rabbani, directly blamed the ISI for the defeat he had suffered at the hands of those alleged students. Still, Mullah Omar immediately declared they were nobody's puppets, and he accepted to formally assume the leadership of the 'young bloods'. From then on Kandahar became the Taliban headquarter, while their militias cleared the roads from check-posts and patrolled the highway from Pakistan. As a result, the transport mafia was overwhelmingly enthusiastic about this new religious fighters.

In a matter of few weeks, this unknown force of religious students captured and consolidated its position in and around the second largest city in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, pressures mounted on the Pakistani government to make its position clear about the rise of the Taliban. In early 1995, Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto formally denied any involvement with

Omar's forces stating: "We have no favourites in Afghanistan and we do not interfere in Afghanistan"⁹⁹.

As soon as the Taliban captured Kandahar, they imposed the strictest interpretation of Sharia law ever seen in Afghanistan and, perhaps, the entire Muslim world. The implementation of such a severe religious law included practices such as the closedown of girls' schools, the prohibition for women to work outside the home, the ban of TV, music, any kind of sports and recreational activities, while men were ordered to grow long beards.

The victory over Kandahar had the result of giving considerable momentum to the movement. In the next three months, they marched north toward Kabul, while during their advance local warlords and commanders either fled or surrendered to them. By then, the Taliban already controlled 12 of the 31 Afghan provinces, and they captured city after city virtually without a fight. Moreover, as their victorious campaign continued, proportionally more and more adherents joined their cause. In particular, many Pashtun brethren living in the tribal areas of Pakistan moved across the border to fight in the jihad against the common enemy. Equally important, the conquest of numerous cities and the surrender of opposing commanders entailed the gain of a large amount of military hardware.

In March 1995, the Taliban, breaking the stalemate of the civil war, controlled about one-third of Afghanistan and were now at the outskirts of Kabul to the north and Herat in the west. As Ahmed Rashid analysed:

"In the first few months the sweeping victories of the Taliban created an entire mythology of invincibility that only God's own soldiers could attain. In those heady early days, every victory only reinforced the perceived truth of their mission, that God was on their side and that their interpretation of Islam was the only interpretation."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Benazir Bhutto speech in Manila, cited in Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, p. 29

¹⁰⁰ *Ivi*, p.33

Hekmatyar tried to halt the Taliban's advance while at the same time launched massive rockets attacks against Kabul. Nevertheless, the Hizb-i-Islami leader then decided to evacuate his position south of Kabul and fled east. Thus, Omar's militia captures Hekmatyar's stronghold at Charasyab. However, the commander of Kabul's forces, Massoud, was not going to allow the Taliban to hold sway in southern Kabul. He launched an offensive that, after bloody street fighting, drove the Taliban back from the capital. The battle of Kabul in early 1995 marked two important events. For the first time since early 1992 the city of Kabul was no longer under siege, while in the first real major battle the Taliban suffered a defeat.

“The Taliban had won over the unruly Pashtun south because the exhausted, war-weary population saw them as saviours and peacemakers, if not as potential force to revive Pashtun power which had been humiliated by the Tajiks and Uzbeks. Many surrenders had been facilitated by pure cash, bribing commanders to switch sides – a tactic that the Taliban were to turn into a fine art form in later years and which was sustained by the growth in their income from the drugs trade, the transport business and external aid from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia...

In the areas under their rule they disarmed the population, enforced law and order, imposed strict Sharia law and opened the roads to traffic which resulted in an immediate drop in food prices. The measures were all extremely welcome to the long-suffering population. The defeat in Kabul came as a major blow to the Taliban's prestige, but not to their determination.”¹⁰¹

After the defeat suffered at the hands of Massoud, the Taliban turned their attention to Herat, a city which lies at the north-western border of Afghanistan, close to the Iranian border. The local mujahedeen commander, Mohammad Ismail Khan, was allied to Rabbani and asked

¹⁰¹ *Ivi*, p.35

Massoud support against the advancing militia. Once again the Taliban were pushed back by governmental forces. Still, Omar's forces managed to re-arrange and received further support from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. As Ismail Khan made serious military miscalculations, the Taliban launched another offensive and the commander's army simply melted away against the oncoming tide of the religious militia. In early September 1995 Herat was under Taliban control, while General Ismail Khan fled to Iran. By that time, the Taliban controlled roughly half of the country, while the Rabbani government in Kabul found itself increasingly isolated. The capture of Herat also implied that for the first time the Taliban were ruling an area which was not predominantly Pashtun. Herat was treated as an occupied city, imposing their strict interpretation of Sharia law on the sophisticated population of the city. Still, their success in bringing about peace and stability in Kandahar kept the Heratis from overtly rebelling against the religious students.

The fall of the province of Herat had the effect of further increasing the Taliban's sources of income, as they were able to levy duties on all goods passing the border with Turkmenistan. Moreover, the control of the city of Herat resulted in lifting the militia's morale and determination to take over the country. Yet, the advance toward the Iranian border brought the Taliban into direct conflict against Teheran. In Iran the Taliban were widely perceived as Pakistan's puppets. Consequently, Teheran was increasingly strengthened in the resolve to back the Rabbani government and the Shia factions against the Taliban.

The Taliban were again headed to Kabul. However, before laying siege to the capital, the Islamist militia managed to take over the city of Khost on the Pakistani border. The Taliban came to a grinding halt in front of Kabul. Once again the well-organised forces led by commander Massoud proved extremely difficult to beat. A ten-month siege of Kabul started. The length of the combat resulted in mounting casualties among the Taliban and among civilians as well, which eventually had the unpleasant consequence of placing them in the same category as the other Afghan militia.

However, as part of the Taliban militia was besieging Kabul, other units were moving on taking over other cities and strongholds around Afghanistan. Thus, the militia managed to capture the strategic city of Jalalabad in the east and Sarobi in the Kabul province. The fall of Sarobi in particular had the effect of demoralising Kabul's troops, ultimately leading to their decision to abandon the city without fighting, as they did not want the civilians to suffer any more casualties. It was a great psychological victory for the Taliban, who finally entered Kabul triumphantly in late September 1996, while Massoud's governmental forces retreated leaving behind them many arms and ammunition.

Meanwhile, as the long siege of Kabul was growing unrest in the Taliban's ranks, movement leaders gathered around Omar and nominated him to become the '*Amir-ul Momineen*', the Commander of the Faithful, an Islamic title which rendered him the undisputed leader of the Afghan jihad. Indeed, on April 4, 1996 Omar appeared standing atop a building in the city and donned the Cloak of the Prophet Mohammed which was held in Kandahar. The Cloak was traditionally brought out only in times of great crisis, and when Omar wrapped and unwrapped the Cloak around his body, the crowd of his followers rapturously applauded and shouted '*Amir-ul Momineen*'. The rite of donning the Cloak was a political masterstroke. The title gave Omar the needed legitimacy and a new mystique among the Pashtuns, at the same time making him not simply the leader of all Afghans, but all Muslims. The first move of the newly nominated Amir-ul Momineen was to declare jihad against the Rabbani regime, and therefore against his own people.

As the Taliban were engaged in trying to launch a decisive offensive against Kabul, foreign actors stepped up military aid. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia supported the Taliban with arms supplies, while Iran, Russia and India backed the regime forces as they deemed that the fall of Kabul could increase political instability and the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia. The U.S. decided to take a different measure by proposing an international arms embargo on Afghanistan during a debate in the UN Security Council. Washington hoped to persuade all the countries involved in the region to agree to non-

interference in Afghanistan. Actually, the position of the United States was ambiguous and not clearly defined. While to some extent ‘romancing the Taliban’, because of important geo-economic interests were at stake in the region, 1996 was an American election year and there was little enthusiasm for renewed involvement in the Afghan quagmire. Moreover, Pakistan’s failure in creating a broad anti-Rabbani alliance further influenced some kind of U.S. reluctance to openly support the Taliban.

Thanks to Pakistani and Saudi Arabian support, the Taliban finally entered Kabul on September 26, 1996, while Massoud decided to abandon the city without a fight. Since Kabul was a divided city, the Taliban militia found it easier to occupy it without much resistance.

After years of widespread anarchy and power vacuum, the victory of the Taliban seemed complete. Indeed, by then they controlled almost two-thirds of the country and the capital city. The role of the Taliban as the new rulers in Afghanistan began to be taken into serious account by the international community. Pakistan in particular hoped that the Taliban would soon control the whole country, thus complying with Islamabad’s expectation of a recognised and friendly government along its border. Pakistan’s primary objective of establishing commercial contacts with Central Asian countries seemed close to be accomplished.

After fifteen years of wars and bloodshed, peace hopes seemed to renew. The Taliban did not show any kind of hostility toward the United States, which ultimately believed that the religious militia would counterbalance Iranian influence in the region. When Kabul fell, the White House showed no adverse reaction, as the Taliban did not give the impression of wanting to export their fundamentalist zeal to other countries. On the contrary, Teheran was deeply concerned about the rise of Taliban, which Iran had opposed ever since the very beginning.

Still, the Taliban’s first act in Kabul, the premeditated killing of the former President Najibullah, aroused widespread international condemnation, particularly from the Muslim world. Najibullah had decided to relinquish power in 1992 and had been staying in a UN diplomatic compound since then.

“The Taliban walked up to Najibullah’s room, beat him and his brother senseless and then bundled them into a pick-up and drove them to the darkened Presidential Palace. There they castrated Najibullah, dragged his body behind a jeep for several rounds of the Palace and then shot him dead. His brother was similarly tortured and then throttled to death. The Taliban hanged the two dead men from a concrete traffic control post just outside the Palace, only a few blocks from the UN compound.”¹⁰²

The savagery of the bloody murder humiliated the United Nations and the international community, while embarrassing the Taliban’s allies. That heinous act was designed to terrorise Kabul’s population, and within 24 hours of the capture of the city, the strictest interpretation of an Islamic system in place anywhere in the world was implemented.

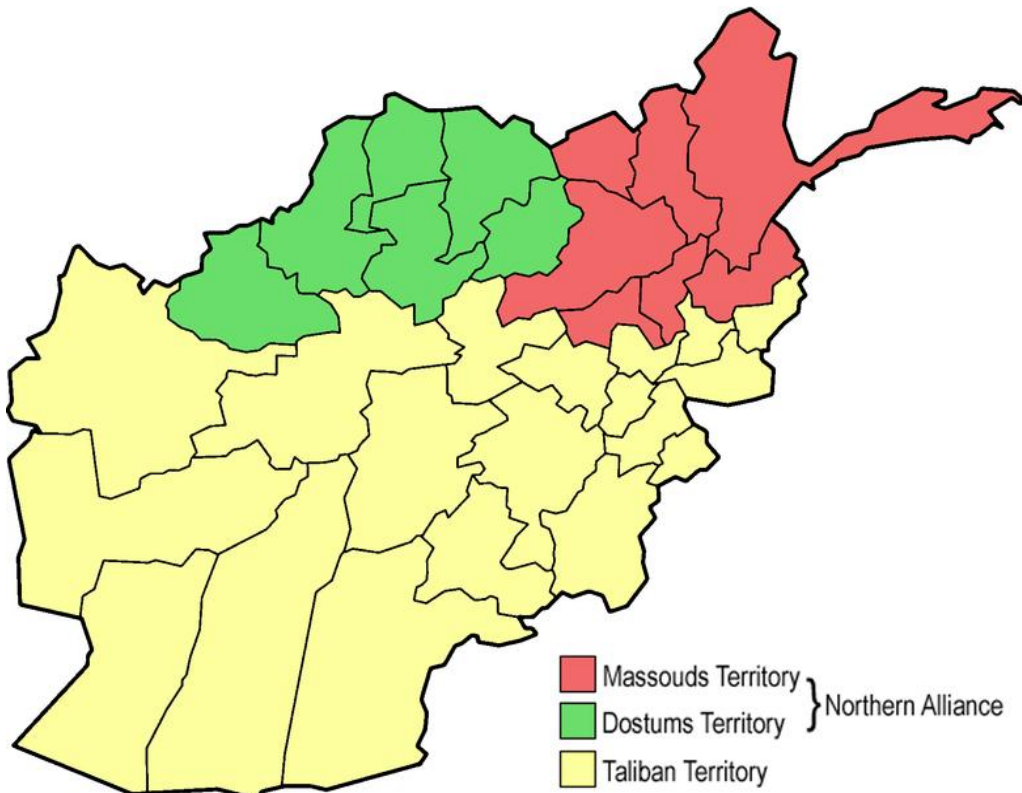
After the capture of Kabul, commander Massoud seemed to represent the only real hindrance for the Taliban to take over the country. Ahmed Massoud, dubbed the ‘Lion of Panjshir’, was a brilliant military commander and a charismatic personality. During the jihad against the Soviet invaders, Red Army’s officials termed him unbeatable and a master of guerrilla warfare. Still, his popularity as a military commander was in inverse proportion to his rating as a political leader. Consequently, many Kabulis at first welcomed the Taliban as liberators when they entered the city. However, the Tajik commander launched a counteroffensive on Kabul which provoked a high number of casualties among the Taliban, who began to suffer from lack of manpower. Thus, Pakistani madrassas came to the rescue and suspended schools in order for religious students to join the Taliban’s ranks in the jihad. By January 1997, the Taliban had pushed Massoud’s forces back from the outskirts of Kabul.

Anyway, the fall of Kabul and the subsequent harsh fighting, created serious apprehension throughout the entire region. Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian republics publicly declared that they would support the

¹⁰² Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, p. 49

anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in the event that the Taliban moved further north. Conversely, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia continued offering aid to Omar's forces. Meanwhile, appeals from the international community to cut a deal and impose a ceasefire fell on deaf ears. As a result, the entire region was extremely polarised, with Islamabad and Riyadh supporting the Taliban, while the other regional states were backing the anti-Taliban forces. Indeed, in late 1996 anti-Taliban resistance formed the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, commonly known with the name of Northern Alliance. Commanders Massoud and Dostam were the military leaders and Rabbani the most prominent political figure of an alliance which represented all the ethnic groups opposed to the Taliban. Following the fall of Kabul the forces led by Massoud and Dostam represented the only hurdles in the north preventing the Taliban to take over the whole country.

Map of the situation in Afghanistan in late 1996



Even though the Taliban did not receive the international recognition they so desperately wanted, they continued with the military campaign for the conquest of Afghanistan. As Omar asserted:

“Inshallah [God willing] the whole of Afghanistan will fall into our hands. We feel a military solution has better prospects now after numerous failed attempts to reach a peaceful, negotiated settlement.”¹⁰³

Thus, the Taliban were on the move toward Northern Afghanistan. In May, they were ready to launch an offensive on the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, then controlled by the Uzbek General Dostam. The military leader used to wield power ruthlessly in the area he controlled. His communist convictions did not prevent him from frequently switching sides. Still, his fierce opposition to any kind of religious fundamentalism and skills as military commander made him an indispensable figure to the neighbouring states aiming at holding back the Taliban’s advance. Moreover, Dostam enjoyed widespread popularity among the citizens of Mazar-i-Sharif, since the city had never been touched by the war in the previous 18 years.

Yet, Dostam was deemed guilty of the killing of his second-in-command’s stepbrother. Being *badal* (revenge) a strong trait of the Afghan character, General Malik called on the Taliban to help him oust Dostam. The betrayal was made easier by the fact that the Uzbek general had not paid his troops for months and there was spread unrest in the ranks. Therefore, nearly all of Dostam’s commanders decided to desert him and joined Malik. At the beginning of May, troops loyal to Malik entered Mazar-i-Sharif. Dostam was forced to flee Afghanistan first to Uzbekistan and then to Turkey, while the Taliban entered in Mazar-i-Sharif with no resistance. Still, the religious militia had learnt little from the conquest of other cities. They began disarming the fierce Uzbek and

¹⁰³ Mullah Mohammad Omar interview, cited in Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, p. 54

Hazara troops and declared the imposition of Sharia law. The capture of the northern city meant that the Taliban were by then controlling twenty-seven out of thirty one provinces. Therefore, they were extremely close to claim the control of whole of the country. The capture of Mazar-i-Sharif triggered the reaction of Pakistan, which immediately officially recognised the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Islamabad even managed to persuade Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to concede diplomatic recognition to the Taliban. Still, this move proved to be unduly premature.

Mazar-i-Sharif was probably the most open and liberal city in the country, where a complex mix of ethnic and religious groups lived. In late May 1997 a group of Hazara resisted being disarmed. Then, all the population raged in revolt against the Taliban, who were furiously massacred. General Malik betrayed the Taliban and attacked them from the city, while Massoud seized the opportunity to launch his own counteroffensive from the south, thus trapping the Taliban. It was the worst defeat the Taliban had hitherto suffered. Once again Omar summoned help to Pakistani madrassas, which closed down thus providing the Taliban with new recruits.

The spectre of a war spilling over neighbouring borders gave rise to serious concerns among neighbouring countries, thus reinforcing the alliance polarisation in the region. While Pakistan clearly supported the Taliban, Omar's force publicly condemned Iran and Russia for the interference and their support provided to the opposition. The major setback the Taliban suffered in Mazar-i-Sharif had the consequence of reinforcing the Northern Alliance. Nevertheless, the Taliban remained confident that the opposition was too divided to pose a threat to Kabul, since inner differences and diffidence doomed the alliance to failure.

The massacres and heavy fighting in the north resulted in further widening the ethnic divide between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns, laying the foundation for massive ethnic and religious cleansing persecution.

“The Taliban had massacred Shia Hazara villagers and forced out Tajik farmer from the Shomali valley. The Uzbeks and Hazaras had

massacred hundreds of Taliban prisoners and killed Pashtun villagers in the north and around Kabul. The Shia Hazaras had also forced out Pashtuns on the basis of their Sunni beliefs. More than three-quarters of a million people had been displaced by internal fighting – in the north around Mazar, on the Herat front and around Kabul – creating a new refugee crisis at a time when UN agencies were trying to persuade refugees still living in Pakistan to return home. Moreover, the divisions inside Afghanistan were manipulated and exacerbated by its neighbours, as all countries stepped up aid to their various Afghan proxies. This only worsened the ethnic and sectarian divide.”¹⁰⁴

The never-ending conflict in Afghanistan, which entailed massacres, ethnic cleansing and the heavy restriction of women rights, increasingly alienated the international opinion. In mid-November 1997, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan produced a blistering report about the situation in Afghanistan, for the first time using tough language accusing regional countries of the responsibility to actively foment the Afghan conflict.

“Foreign military and financial support continues unabated, fuelling this conflict and depriving the warring factions of a genuine interest in making peace.

The continued support by these outside forces, combined with the apathy of others not directly involved, is rendering diplomatic initiatives almost irrelevant.

The Afghan leaders refuse to rise above their factional interests and start working together for national reconciliation. Too many groups in Afghanistan, warlords, terrorists, drug dealers and others, appear to have too much to gain from war and too much to lose from peace.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ *Ivi*, p.64

¹⁰⁵ Report of the Secretary General, The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Complications for International Peace and Security, 14 November 1997

However, the Taliban rearranged and moved toward the city Bamiyan, strenuously defended by Hazara groups. The enmity between the Shia Hazaras and the Sunni Pashtuns was tightly rooted in history. Still, never before this ethnic and religious conflict was so harsh and intense. The Taliban went even as far as treating them as hypocrites and beyond the pale of true Islam.

The Taliban besieged Bamiyan, while the Hazaras were receiving support from Iran.

The Taliban eventually captured Bamiyan and threatened to blow up the two magnificent statues representing two Buddha. The two second-century AD colossi, carved into a sandstone cliff face, were considered one of the wonders of the ancient world. The caves and grottos carved alongside the statues became home to thousands of Hazara refugees who fled Kabul, and they were as well used as arms depot. The Taliban defaced the statues, which were eventually torn down in 2001 after Omar declared that they were idols. The destruction of the statues was strongly condemned by the international opinion, which viewed the act as an example of the intolerance of the Taliban.

Meanwhile, Omar persuaded Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to back them in launching another offensive to overrun the north. Bribing opposing commanders and exploiting the opposition's internal division, they swept north in mid-July 1998. On August 8, 1998, the Taliban entered Mazar-i-Sharif again.

Mindful of the mistakes made the previous year, the Taliban took revenge on their losses. A brutal massacre, genocidal in its ferocity, took place. The Taliban went on a murderous rampage. After the first day of indiscriminate killing of the Mazar-i-Sharif population, the Taliban shifted their attention targeting the Hazaras, thus carrying out an outright ethnic cleansing. Mullah Niazi was appointed Governor of Mazar, and soon he went as far as claiming referring to the Hazaras:

“Last year you rebelled against us and killed us. From all your homes you shot at us. Now we are here to deal with you. The

Hazaras are not Muslims and now we have to kill Hazaras. You either accept to be Muslims or leave Afghanistan.”¹⁰⁶

The Taliban militia’s savagery significantly concurred to the implementation of a policy which actually ‘created a desolation and called it peace’.

The death toll of the Mazar-i-Sharif massacre also included 11 Iranian diplomats, intelligence officers and journalists, triggering an annoyed reaction by Teheran. Iran replied with inflamed rhetoric and deployed its troops along the border with Afghanistan. The region was on the verge of a war between Iran and the Taliban, with the possibility of Pakistan’s involvement backing its Afghan proxy.

In the meanwhile, UN peace-making efforts once more fell on deaf ears, as northern Afghanistan was again swept by fighting and bloodshed. In late July 1998, the Taliban made headway toward the north-eastern city of Taloqan, the political headquarter of the Northern Alliance. In early September, the city fell, after Commander Massoud ordered a strategic withdrawal in order to prevent other civilian casualties. With the latest conquest the Taliban were holding sway over 90 per cent of the country. Never before the Afghan War seemed to be drawing to a close. Later, the Taliban gradually continued to gain territory and up to 2001 they controlled 97 per cent of Afghanistan.

For long time, while being the de facto rulers of Afghanistan, the Taliban had virtually no positive presence in the wider world. Only three countries recognised their rule, while the rest of the world continued to consider the regime of Rabbani as the legitimate government. Surely, their massacres and the implementation of strict Sharia law did not help the Taliban’s cause worldwide. Still, toward the end of the millennium, the Taliban tried to slightly moderate their position, laying the foundation for more friendly relations with Iran and Pakistan.

After the harsh tensions with Iran following the killing of Iranian officers in Mazar-i-Sharif, the relations between Teheran and the Taliban

¹⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch Report, Afghanistan: the Massacre in Mazar-i-Sharif, November 1998, <http://www.hrw.org>

thawed, and in late 1999 the Afghan-Iranian border was reopened to trade.

In Pakistan, in October 1999 the military headed by General Pervez Musharraf ousted the government led by Nawaz Sharif. The new Pakistani establishment immediately tried to tighten border controls with Afghanistan in an effort to crack down on smuggling. As the Taliban attempted to improve their international image, they took several steps to comply with Pakistan's request, in particular regarding opium traffic.

April 2000 marked the official end of the Afghan conflict. After twenty-two of unabated war, the country was somehow unified, albeit persisting and profound divisions especially along ethnic lines.

4.5 The Taliban as a Governing Body

During the 1990s Afghanistan had to face enormous struggles. Over a decade of unabated war totally destroyed progresses toward nation building. The rage of the war destroyed Afghanistan not only from a physical perspective, but also economically and politically.

Millions of mines had been sowed on Afghanistan, making it the most mined country in the world. Equally, Kabul was the most mined city worldwide. The impact of mines was double-faceted. Besides the obvious material damage, the exorbitant quantity of mines rendered impossible for farmers to cultivate land, thus causing an additional economic damage.

Generally, as the publication *Refugees* put it: "In Afghanistan virtually everyone is a victim"¹⁰⁷.

The war destroyed as well pre-war elites and the social system that supported them, paving the way for the development of new political elites (mujahedeen and Taliban).

However, as far as the Taliban are concerned, a fundamental characteristic came to the fore: it was a social movement and tribal

¹⁰⁷ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *Refugees 2*, no.108, 1997, 7

militia trying to run a country. Actually, there was little sense of the policy to implement in the country in order to confront Afghanistan's myriad development problems.

Initially, the Taliban governed through a collective political leadership, as their government was headed by a Supreme Shura of thirty to forty members¹⁰⁸. The Shura was itself headed by Mullah Mohammad Omar, named Amir-ul Momineen. Omar had little influence on the day-to-day operations of the Taliban, albeit key Taliban leaders claimed that he used to make the final decision whenever it was needed.

The Shura model was heavily based on the Pashtun tribal council, in which all clan chiefs took part in order to make decisions on important issues. Still, this decision-making model changed through the first couple of years, becoming highly-centralised, secretive, and inaccessible.

As a US cable noted:

“Leadership structure are opaque. Nonetheless, it is clear that Mullah Mohammad Omar plays the prominent role in Taliban decision-making. In general, influence in the movement can basically be judged by one's closeness to Omar, a factor which explains the importance of Kandahar-based officials...

There was further evidence in 1998 that the Taliban's institutional framework, i.e. the 'inner' and 'outer' Shuras, were weakening from disuse due to the highly-personalised leadership style of Mullah Omar.”¹⁰⁹

In addition, as the Taliban progressively took control of the country, they made clear their desire to become the sole rulers of Afghanistan, excluding any other group from power. The Taliban openly expressed their outright refusal of broad-based governments, as they considered themselves only worth of the Islamic legitimacy needed to run the country.

¹⁰⁸ Larry P. Goodson, *op. cit.*, p. 116

¹⁰⁹ The National Security Archive, [Afghanistan: the Taliban Decision-Making Process and Leadership Structure](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/), cable from the Islamabad's embassy, 30 December 1997, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

Taliban policy-making was generally piecemeal and reactionary. Even though they demonstrated a clear lack in the conception of a policy framework, major policies were undertaken in three general areas: social life, economics, and criminal justice.

As far as social life is concerned, the Taliban's policy had since the very beginning attracted negative attention. The imposition of their strict interpretation of Sharia law drew criticism not only from international beholders, but also from the domestic public. Indeed, their complex mixture of conservative Deobandism and traditional Pashtunwali conceptions was not easily to be accepted in the non-Pashtun areas of the country. In particular, major cities such as Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif had always enjoyed liberal customs, at odds with the pronounced conservatism imposed by the Taliban.

Among the measures taken by the Taliban in the social life area, certainly no other issue drew such negative attention as their policy toward women. Still, the Taliban made the issue of women's role in society a cornerstone of their Islamisation programme.

Women were virtually eliminated from public spaces by being banned from work outside of the home. This measure had serious consequences with regard to the educational system, since it was largely run by women teachers. As a result, many schools were shut down, while girls' education was banned. As a result, the rate of illiteracy hiked. Moreover, women were forbidden to appear in public unless covered from head to toe with the *burqa*. Forbidding women to work outside of the home had deep social consequences, in particular regarding urban families headed by a war widow. Being deprived from their livelihoods, many women were driven by desperate begging and prostitution. The prevention of female employment had profound consequences also on the health care system, since women were required to be seen only by women workers, while thousands of female doctors, nurses, and pharmacists were banned from work. As Physicians for Human Rights noted:

“Afghan women are caught in the paradoxical bind of being compelled to seek care only from female providers at the same time

that governmental decrees ensure a dwindling supply of such providers.”¹¹⁰

Immediately after the capture of Kabul in 1996, the Taliban imposed their strict religious decrees targeting not only women, but also men and virtually any kind of entertainment. Their interpretation of Sharia law would later be expanded to all the other cities they captured. As a decree announced by the General Presidency of the Religious Police stated:

“Women, you should not step outside your residence. If you go outside the house you should not be like women who used to go with fashionable clothes wearing much cosmetics and appearing in front of every man before the coming of Islam.... In case women are required to go outside the residence...they should cover themselves in accordance with Islamic Sharia regulation.”

Other measures were taken in order

- “To prevent sedition and female uncovers. No drivers are allowed to pick up women who are using Iranian *burqa*.
- To prevent music to be broadcasted by the public information resources. In shops, hotels, vehicles, and rickshaws cassettes and music are prohibited.
- To prevent beard shaving and its cutting. Anyone observed who has shaved and/or cut its beard should be arrested and imprisoned until their beard gets bushy.
- To prevent keeping pigeons and playing with birds.
- To prevent kite-flying.
- To prevent idolatry ... pictures/portraits should be abolished.
- To prevent gambling.

¹¹⁰ Physicians for Human Rights, The Taliban War on Women, <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/>

- To eradicate the use of addiction.
- To prevent the British and American hairstyle.
- To prevent interest on loans.
- To prevent washing clothes by young ladies along the water streams in the city.
- To prevent music and dances in wedding parties.
- To prevent the playing of music drum.
- To prevent sorcery.
- To prevent not praying and order gathering praying at the bazaar.”¹¹¹

Soon, other measures followed prohibiting women from wearing high heels and making noise with their shoes while walking.

A Pashtun proverb clearly summed up their conception of the role of women: “Women belong in the house or the grave”.

The Taliban justified their policy of women’s oppression with a legitimacy excuse. As Rashid documented:

“Taliban leaders repeatedly told me that if they gave women greater freedom or a chance to go to school, they would lose the support of their rank and file, who would be disillusioned by a leadership that had compromised principle under pressure. They also claimed their recruits would be weakened and subverted by the possibility of sexual opportunities and thus not fight with the same zeal. So the oppression of women became a benchmark for the Taliban’s Islamic radicalism, their aim to ‘cleanse’ society and to keep the morale of their troops high. The gender issue became the main platform of the Taliban’s resistance to UN and Western governments’ attempts to make them compromise and moderate

¹¹¹A sample of Taliban decrees relating to women and other cultural issues, after the capture of Kabul, 1996. Appendix 1, Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*

their policies. Compromising with the West would signal a defeat that they were wrong all along, defiance would signal victory.”¹¹²

For the Taliban those edicts were unquestionable, and anyone who did question them was tantamount to an unbeliever, since those decrees were based on the Koran.

A special department was responsible for supervising the enforcement of those decrees, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which patrolled the streets looking for malefactors to beat.

The Taliban’s banning of every conceivable form of entertainment was commented by the Governor of Kandahar Mullah Mohammad Hassan in an interview given to Ahmed Rashid in this way: “Of course we realise that people need some entertainment but they can go to the parks and see the flowers, and from this they will learn about Islam”¹¹³.

The Taliban’s treatment of women, which was already suffering from widespread negative opinion, drew additional criticism on September 28, 1997. That day, the European Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs, Emma Bonino, and 19 Western journalists and aid workers were arrested and held for three hours by the Taliban religious police in Kabul. The delegation was found guilty of taking photographs of women patients (all photography was banned) during their tour of an hospital ward funded by the European Union. Emma Bonino commented the event with scorn: “This is an example of how people live here in a state of terror.”¹¹⁴

Consequently, another blow was dealt to the already suffering international image of the Taliban.

Women’s rights were becoming a major hurdle for the Taliban, preventing them from winning greater international sympathy. In the United States, powerful feminist groups lobbied Washington on behalf of Afghan women. During a visit to Islamabad on November 18, 1997, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright issued an extremely harsh criticism by stating: “We are opposed to the Taliban because of their

¹¹² Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, p. 111

¹¹³ *Ivi*, p. 115

¹¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 65

opposition to human rights and their despicable treatment of women and children and great lack of respect for human dignity”¹¹⁵.

Thus, the US was perceived as distancing itself from the Taliban as well as their main backer, Pakistan.

As far as other traditional areas of social policy are concerned, the Taliban had virtually no programme regarding health care, education, and infrastructure reconstruction. Since the Taliban were primarily a military movement, they tended to rely almost completely on outside organisations for assistance. Since the beginning of the Afghan war, NGOs played a significant role, providing humanitarian aid and assisting refugees and indigents. Still, the NGOs were increasingly facing a dilemma. Paradoxically enough, the help given by the NGOs was deemed valuable and sufficient, thus diverting the Taliban attention from taking their responsibilities as governing body.

“...a continuing dilemma for the UN as to whether its humanitarian aid is only sustaining the war, because it gives the warlords the excuse to absolve themselves of taking responsibility for the civilian population. The Taliban continuously insisted that they were not responsible for the population and that Allah would provide. However, the suffering of ordinary Afghans would only increase if the UN and NGOs were to cease their relief operations altogether and in particular stop feeding vulnerable groups such as widows and orphans.”¹¹⁶

Nonetheless, NGOs’ growing frustration with the Taliban’s restrictions in particular on women, led many international relief and reconstruction organisations to take into consideration the closedown of their Afghan operations. The tensions between the Taliban and foreign aid organisations reached a point of no return in July 1997, when the Taliban ordered all foreign NGOs to close their operations and leave, following their alleged refusal to move to a dilapidated dormitory in

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*

¹¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 127

Kabul. All foreign relief personnel was then evacuated in August 1998, after American cruise missile strikes against Afghanistan. UN and NGO activities would resume only in March 1999, after several months of interruption and following 'strong assurance' from the Taliban regarding the guarantee of the personnel's safety.

However, as far as rebuilding Afghanistan's infrastructures is concerned, the Taliban argued that they could do little so long as fighting continued in the country and outside states failed to recognise them as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Economically, the Taliban did have some sources of revenues, mainly coming from Saudi Arabian and Pakistani largesse and from duties and taxes levied on transit and smuggling trade, but they were almost completely spent on military operations. The impossibility to ask the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund for loans (as they were not recognised from the international community) proved to represent a stumbling block for the development of Afghanistan's economy, which was primarily based on subsistence agriculture (as an alternative to opium cultivation).

The Taliban ultimately attempted to moderate their policies in an effort to receive the so badly needed international recognition, as Afghanistan found itself at the crossroads of the 'New Great Game' in Central Asia. Yet, the economic sanctions imposed on Afghanistan by the United States and the United Nations in 1999 drastically undermined what little foreign investment the Taliban had been able to attract.

The other area of intervention of the Taliban concerned criminal justice. The Taliban's policy in that area was deeply related to the imposition of their interpretation of Sharia law.

The Taliban's initial success stemmed from their early establishment of law and order obtained thanks to the confiscation of weapons and the imposition of a curfew at night. Violators of certain laws suffered punishments traditionally prescribed in the Koran and modified by Pashtun customs. Some of these practices included having the victim's family members execute murderers, hanging rapists, amputating the hands of thieves, stoning adulterers, burying homosexuals alive, flogging

fornicators, and publicly humiliating those convicted of lesser sentences¹¹⁷.

Generally, the Taliban were recognised as being unable to effectively govern a country. Indeed, political leaders were too inexperienced and uneducated in government and politics to run the country, and too committed ideologically to compromise.

4.6 The Taliban, Drugs and Terrorism

As John K. Cooley observed:

“The international trade in illicit drugs, at the end of the twentieth century, has multiplied in volume and in its devastating effects on the world’s people, even faster than the international arms trade. It has become the most profitable of all world trades. ...

Global profits of the international world drug business and its criminal management are numbered in hundreds of billions of dollars each year...

The evidence is overwhelming that the Afghanistan war, in which all sides used drugs as an actual weapon and as a source of finance, gave this monstrous and lucrative international business a decisive push forward.”¹¹⁸

A fundamental characteristic of the Afghan war was its thrust toward a gigantic increase in drugs production. The CIA involvement was somehow pivotal in stoking the region’s heroin trade.

Evidence showed the planning of an operation to use the drugs confiscated by the DEA (the US Drug Enforcement Administration), the Coast Guard and the FBI against the Red Army. The joint Franco-American project, named Operation Mosquito, involved the provision on the sly of drugs to Soviet soldiers in order to demoralise the troops and

¹¹⁷ Larry P. Goodson, *op. cit.*, p. 123

¹¹⁸ John K. Cooley, *op. cit.*, p. 127

curb their fighting ability. Even though the project was dropped, large quantity of opium, hashish, heroin, and even cocaine were made easy for the Soviet personnel to buy. Suspicions arose of the existence of a larger plan conceived by the United States in order to spread drug addiction not only into the Soviet army, but also into Soviet and post-Soviet Russian society.

However, if Operation Mosquito remained only a hypothetical project, Washington's awareness about mujahedeen involvement in drug production was documented. According to Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair:

“The DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency] was well aware that the mujahedeen rebels were deeply involved in the opium trade. The drug agency's reports in the 1980s showed that Afghan rebels incursions from their Pakistan bases into Soviet-held positions were ‘determined in part by opium planting and harvest seasons’. The numbers were stark and forbidding. Afghan opium production tripled between 1979 and 1982. There was evidence that by 1981 the Afghan heroin producers had captured 60 per cent of the heroin market in Western Europe and the United States.”¹¹⁹

The mules and trucks provided by the CIA to the Afghan mujahedeen used to transport arms from Pakistan to Afghanistan, while carrying opium to heroin laboratories along the border on the way back. Nonetheless, CIA officials decided to turn a blind eye toward drug traffic so as to compensate local tribes who were helping fighting the communists.

In his analysis about drugs and the Taliban's economy, Ahmed Rashid argued:

“The heroin pipeline in the 1980s could not have operated without the knowledge, if not connivance, of officials at the highest level of

¹¹⁹ Alexander Cockburn & Jeffrey St. Clair, *Whiteout: the CIA, Drugs and the Press*, Verso, New York, 1998, pp. 259-260

the army, the government and the CIA. Everyone chose to ignore it for the largest task was to defeat the Soviet Union. Drugs control was on nobody's agenda."¹²⁰

By 1994, Afghanistan had surpassed Burma as the world's number one supplier of raw opium, and by February 2000, new UN figures estimated that Afghanistan accounted for 70 per cent of the world's opium crops¹²¹.

A practice spread among Afghan fighters to regularly take time off from fighting in order to cultivate their poppy and hashish crops, being them seasonal enterprises. Very often, survival of families depended on it.

A paradox developed within the US administration as both President Bush and President Clinton declared 'war on drugs'. While the DEA and other agencies were spending billions of dollars to curtail the wave of narcotics from South Asia, the CIA and its allies were not only turning a blind eye, but even encouraging it in order to help finance the proxy war against the Soviets.

Notwithstanding the withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan, the practice of growing poppies and smuggling narcotics did not end.

In 1995, the Pakistani Premier Benazir Bhutto launched an anti-drugs crusade in order to stem the growing drug addiction which was tormenting the population. As Pakistan and Iran implemented policies to crack down on drug consumption, a greater share of narcotics flowed to other parts of the world, especially the West.

As the Taliban rose to power, the U.S. initially indulged in excessive wishful thinking that the new religious militia would curtail or even end the plague of Afghan drugs. Still, the Taliban's policy toward drug cultivation, production and trafficking was always partly based on religious tenets and generally very ambiguous. In mid-1996, the Taliban banned the production, the consumption and the trafficking of drugs, but nothing was said against the actual cultivation of opium poppies, the

¹²⁰ Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, p. 121

¹²¹ John K. Cooley, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-139

main earner of revenues in the Pashtun area. Abdul Rashid, the head of the Taliban's anti-drugs control force in Kandahar, stated with a hint of sarcasm: "Opium is permissible because it is consumed by *kafirs* [unbelievers] in the West and not by Muslims or Afghans."¹²²

The Taliban's tentative pronouncements actually concealed their unwillingness to declare and enforce a genuine ban. A *zakat*, an Islamic tax Muslims usually donate to the poor, began to be collected on opium, which represented one of the main revenues for the Taliban, aside from a practice deeply rooted in the tribal Afghan society.

The Afghan drugs trafficking also represented one of the key reasons for Iran's extreme hostility toward the Taliban. Indeed, Iran was a major destination for drugs produced in Afghanistan, at least until the clerical regime in Teheran decided to enforce a crackdown on the transit of drugs from Afghanistan. In 1989, Iran passed a tough anti-drug legislation, which went as far as including obligatory death penalty for anyone caught with at least 30 grams of heroin or five kilograms of opium¹²³.

However, the Taliban were able to use drugs as a negotiating lever. On the one side, they played on the illusory prospect of a real crackdown on drugs in order to win recognition and favours from the West. On the other side, they used drugs as a weapon to weaken Iran in the hope that such a policy would please Washington and thus win its favours.

Besides drugs, international terrorism represented another key point deeply related to Afghanistan.

The Taliban were often harshly condemned by the international community for their support for international terrorism, still the CIA had a primary role in laying the foundation for the gathering of terrorists in Afghanistan.

Indeed, during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, CIA chief William Casey committed the agency to a long-standing ISI initiative aimed at recruiting radical Muslims from around the world to come to Pakistan and fight in the jihad along the Afghan mujahedeen.

¹²² Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, p. 118

¹²³ John K. Cooley, *op. cit.*, p. 153

Pakistani President Zia was determined to make Pakistan the leading country in the Muslim world, while sharing Brzezinski's purpose to foster Islamist opposition in Central Asia and within the same Soviet Union. The Saudi Arabian government was in its turn eager to get rid of its troublesome radical figures, while attempting to spread its vision of Sunni Islam in an effort to counterbalance Iranian influence in Central Asia. The United States actively encouraged this initiative in order to demonstrate that the entire Muslim world was firmly united in the fight against the Soviet Union and alongside the Afghans and their American benefactor.

The operation was masterminded by the ISI and effectively funded by the Saudi Intelligence, with the result that over 100,000 radicals gathered in Pakistan and Afghanistan and were deeply influenced by the jihad.

During the 1980s, the Central Asian stage virtually became a factory for international radicals, creating the framework for the future 'clash of civilisations', as Samuel Huntington analysed:

“The war left behind an uneasy coalition of Islamist organisations intent on promoting Islam against all non-Muslim forces. It also left a legacy of expert and experienced fighters, training camps and logistical facilities, elaborate trans-Islam networks of personal and organisation relationships, a substantial amount of military equipment including 300 to 500 unaccounted-for Stinger missiles, and, most important, a heady sense of power and self-confidence over what had been achieved and a driving desire to move on to other victories.”¹²⁴

Ultimately, the collapse of the Soviet Union was perceived in the Muslim world as a victory for Islam. Speculations arose about the consideration that the Afghan jihad had managed to defeat a world superpower. Therefore, the scope of the Islamist jihad immediately

¹²⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *op. cit.*

widened: could it be possible to defeat the other superpower as well as other corrupt Muslim governments?

Certainly, among the so-called Arab-Afghans the tycoon Osama bin Laden stood out. He was the son of a Yemeni construction magnate who befriended the Arab King Faisal, becoming fabulously wealthy.

In 1982, Osama bin Laden decided to move to Peshawar and began leading the construction of roads, depots and training camps for the mujahedeen.

“In 1988, with U.S. knowledge, bin Laden created Al-Qaeda (The Base): a conglomerate of quasi-independent Islamic terrorist cells spread across at least 26 countries.

Washington turned a blind eye to Al-Qaeda, confident that it would not directly impinge on the U.S.”¹²⁵

Al-Qaeda was actually a military base, a service centre for Arab-Afghans and their families which also aimed at forging a broad-based alliance among them.

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, thousands of these volunteers returned to their own countries:

“Their heightened political consciousness made them realise that countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt were just as much client regimes of the United States as the Najibullah regime [in Afghanistan] has been of Moscow.

In their home countries they built a formidable constituency – popularly known as ‘Afghanis’ – who combined strong ideological convictions with the guerrilla skills they had acquired in Pakistan and Afghanistan under CIA supervision.”¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Jane’s Information Group, Rahul Behdi, Why? An attempt to explain the unexplainable, 14 September 2001, www.janes.com

¹²⁶ Hiro, The Cost of an Afghan Victory, cited in Phil Gasper, *op. cit.*

Bin Laden, disillusioned by the constant internecine fighting of the mujahedeen, returned to Saudi Arabia.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait marked a watershed for the Arab tycoon. Indeed, he lobbied the Royal Family to fight Iraq by deploying the veterans of the Afghan war. Instead, King Fahd called on the United States. It was a shock for bin Laden, who reacted with rage. His harsh criticism reached such a dimension that in 1992 King Fahd first declared him *persona non grata*, and then in 1994 revoked his citizenship.

In particular bin Laden was disgusted by the Arab ruling elites, who allowed the US military to remain in the country even after their victory over Saddam Hussein.

After some years spent in Sudan, Osama bin Laden moved back to Afghanistan in 1996, where he befriended Mullah Omar.

By 1997, the CIA had set up a special cell, the Bin Laden Issue Station, which staff members nicknamed the unit ‘the Manson family’, responsible for monitoring his activities and his ties with other Islamist militants. Indeed, the US State Department had already recognised him a ‘one of the most significant financial sponsors of Islamic extremist activities in the world’.

Already in 1996 bin Laden had issued his own self-styled fatwa calling on Muslims to drive American soldiers out of Saudi Arabia. On February 23, 1998, he and the fugitive Egyptian physician Ayman al-Zawahiri issued the Al-Qaeda manifesto, renamed ‘The International Islamic Front for jihad against Jews and Crusaders’. Moreover, the meeting gathering all the groups associated with Al-Qaeda ended issuing a fatwa (a fatwa is normally an interpretation of Islamic law by a respected Islamic authority, but neither bin Laden nor Zawahiri were scholars of Islamic law): “The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies – civilian and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to.”¹²⁷

Yet, the Taliban leader Mullah Omar was outraged by bin Laden’s press conference. As the journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai recalled:

¹²⁷ The National Security Archive, The Foundation of New Terrorism, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

“The next day, bin Laden was called to Kandahar and severely reprimanded. Omar shouted, ‘There can be only one ruler in Afghanistan, and that is me. You are our guest, but do not get us into trouble with the Americans’.

In the West people do not realise this. Bin Laden was a refugee who had few fighters by his side, that was it. The Taliban always made fun of all of his talk about jihad.”¹²⁸

Therefore, in Yusufzai view, the speculation according to which Al-Qaeda had free rein in Afghanistan was simply untrue, and the Arab sheik was heavily dependent on Omar’s protection and even permission to make any major move.

However, thanks to the fatwa, Bin Laden became a leading figure in the Muslim radical world, but it actually was the bombings of the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 that drew worldwide attention on the Arab tycoon. On August 7, 1998, terroristic attacks hit the U.S. embassies in Dar El Salam (Tanzania) and Nairobi (Kenya). The two truck bomb explosions were highly coordinated, happening within few minutes from one another. The date itself was no coincidence, as it actually marked the eighth anniversary from the arrival of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia. The responsibility of the terroristic attacks was immediately attributed to bin Laden and his organisation Al-Qaeda.

Thirteen days later, after accusing him of masterminding the terrorist attacks that killed a total of 224 people, Washington decided to retaliate by firing 70 cruise missiles against bin Laden’s camps around Khost and Jalalabad in Afghanistan. Another target of the U.S. retaliation was a farm in Sudan, allegedly involved in the production of chemical weapons (there was never plain evidence in support for U.S. accusations).

Yet, Clinton’s decision to strike those objectives in Afghanistan and Sudan was met with negative responses. On the one hand, such a

¹²⁸ Rahimullah Yusufzai, cited in Lutz Klevevan, The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia, Grove Press, New York, 2003, p. 238

decision was widely perceived simply as a move to divert public attention from the Monica Lewinski scandal. On the other hand, a training camp and a farm did not constitute appropriate strategic targets and, what is more, bin Laden survived such an attack and his reputation grew out of all proportion. The most powerful country in the world was running after, and could not hit, a millionaire, who humbly decided to abandon the comfort of richness in order to fight in a jihad. For the radical Islamists he became the symbol of resistance against Western presumptuous hegemony, while in the West he was generally regarded as the symbol of fundamentalist terrorism.

After the terroristic attacks against the US embassies in Africa, Washington launched a global operation that resulted in the arrest of more than 80 Islamist militants worldwide. Yet, there were inconsistencies and contradictions in the U.S. management of terroristic threats, especially with regard to relations with its allies. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, though having close relations with Washington, implemented independent policies on terrorism, often with disregard for U.S. priorities.

As far as Pakistan is concerned, the U.S. represented Islamabad's closest ally and deep links existed connecting CIA and ISI. Still, Pakistan's Afghan policy was heavily influenced by the favour expressed by the Taliban and by bin Laden to provide sanctuary and training facilities for Kashmiri militants. Islamabad had strong interest in backing these militants in an effort to curb Indian claims on Kashmir; thus, Pakistan decided to subtly ignore Washington's irresolute requests to counter the Taliban and the Arab sheik.

Regarding Saudi Arabia, the situation was even more puzzling. The Saudis fervently backed and bankrolled the Taliban regime, despite U.S. pressure to end their support. Bin Laden represented another problematic situation, as Riyadh actually preferred him to be dead or held by the Taliban, rather than captured by the Americans. In fact, should the U.S. capture bin Laden, the Saudi Arabian establishment would be extremely embarrassed, as sympathetic relations were still in place between the tycoon and some members of the Royal Family and the Saudi

intelligence. Consequently, the Saudis did not take concrete action to help their American ally.

Yet, the bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998, changed the situation. Washington was more resolute and determined to seize bin Laden, and pressure mounted on Saudi Arabia. Therefore, Prince Turki visited Kandahar in a bid to convince Mullah Omar to hand bin Laden over to the United States. Omar not only refused surrender his guest, but he even insulted Prince Turki and the Saudi Royal Family. As a result, the Saudis suspended diplomatic relations with the Taliban and ceased altogether their aid to the Afghan movement.

Clearly, since bin Laden took shelter in Afghanistan, his destiny was deeply intertwined to the Taliban's capacity to control the country, as the Arab profusely bankrolled his protectors. Certainly, Taliban's decision to host the Arab tycoon, who will even go as far as marrying one of Omar's daughters, drew negative attention from the international community to the regime. In particular, the United States started mounting pressure on Omar to deliver bin Laden. Yet, being *melmastia* (hospitality to guests) and *nanawati* (the right of asylum) central principles of the Pashtun cultural background, Washington's requests were never fulfilled. Moreover, the emphasis placed on bin Laden as public enemy number one after the bombings in Africa, made it even harder for the Taliban to hand him over to the United States. As Omar's itinerant ambassador and personal adviser Rahmatullah Hashimi admitted: "For us, it's not easy. This man has become a hero. He has become world famous because of these cruise missiles. He was nothing before."¹²⁹

Furthermore, the Taliban were drawing criticism also for their willingness to provide safe sanctuary to other terrorists, coming from Chechnya, Kashmir, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan.

Thus, terrorism was a key issue for Afghanistan, and the Taliban chose to deal with it by using welcoming tones. Eventually, this policy

¹²⁹ Jean-Charles Brisard & Guillaume Dasquié, Forbidden Truth: US-Taliban Secret Oil Diplomacy and the Failed Hunt for Bin Laden, Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, New York, 2002, p. 8

will trigger the United States reaction following bin Laden's 9/11 terroristic attacks and bring about the defeat of the Taliban.

Chapter 5: Clinton and the Taliban

5.1 Clinton's World

When William J. Clinton took office in 1993, he faced an international situation and global problems very different from those other president had to cope with.

William G. Hyland analysed the legacy left to President Clinton:

“No other modern American president inherited a stronger, safer international position than Bill Clinton. The Cold War was over. The nation was at peace. Its principal enemy had collapsed. The United States was the only genuine world superpower. The major threats that had haunted American policy for nearly fifty years had either disappeared or were rapidly receding.”¹³⁰

The era of confrontation between the world's superpowers had ended, and many scholars speculated that the world of international relations could be by then represented as a 'unipolar' arena.

Yet, very soon another definition seemed to be more appropriate to describe the post-Cold War scenario: a 'multi-polar' world of international relations. Paradoxically enough, the demise of its nemesis entailed that the United States had to deal with a more uncertain world, where foes and friends were not clearly defined:

“The United States was free to act without much fear of confrontation, and it did so in the Gulf War. On balance, however, it turned out that the United States now had less genuine freedom of action than it had enjoyed in the Cold War. In the Cold War the lines had usually been sharply drawn, especially in a crisis, and much of the world had deferred to Washington's judgement; after

¹³⁰ William G. Hyland, *Clinton's World: Remaking American Foreign Policy*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, Connecticut, 1999, p.1

the Cold War, the political lines became far less distinct, both at home and abroad.¹³¹

Thus, the unexpected end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the creation of considerable confusion regarding the new international political arena. Washington reacted to the new ‘unipolar’ world, by stressing the need for a multilateral effort to grant collective security. President George H. W. Bush, in his speech on the ‘new world order’, expressed his vision of the post-Cold War order by focusing primarily on the United Nations:

“Now, we can see a new world coming into view. A world in which there is the very real prospect of a new world order. In the words of Winston Churchill, a world order in which ‘the principles of justice and fair play protect the weak against the strong. . . .’ A world where the United Nations, freed from cold war stalemate, is poised to fulfil the historic vision of its founders. A world in which freedom and respect for human rights find a home among all nations.”¹³²

However, the heralded shared responsibility for collective security entailed a downgrade in direct U.S. involvement worldwide as well as the emergence of a new system, no more based on the balance of power. As such, this new policy was rejected by some pundits, most notably former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

However, the victory in the Cold War confrontation resulted in another important change. Foreign policy was now perceived as a much less urgent issue to deal with. Economy and other domestic concerns gained prominence in the presidential agenda. A new general wisdom emerged: the end of the Cold War somehow entailed a downsize of geopolitical considerations in foreign policy, while economic power and

¹³¹ *Ivi*, p. 6

¹³² Millercenter, George H. W. Bush, Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the End of the Gulf War (March 6, 1991), <http://millercenter.org/>

geo-economic considerations became a pivotal factor in the international arena.

Bush had also another major concern to face: the seemingly endless budget deficit. Decades of Cold War and huge military expenditure (in particular during Reagan administrations) burdened the country with massive debt and a gigantic double deficit. The end of the confrontation with the Soviet Union was met with new considerations about the need for reducing the deficit and possibly balancing the budget. Still, this proved to be a controversial point for President Bush, since balancing the budget entailed reducing military expenditure and national defence, which traditionally represented a strong point for the Republican Party.

Consequently, during the electoral campaign opposing George H. W. Bush and William Clinton domestic concerns and economy were at the centre of the debate. The Democrat's underlying consideration was that if the country was not strong at home, it could not be strong abroad. Usually, when Clinton referred to international affairs, he focused his attention criticising Bush's policies. In particular, his favourite target was Bush's decision not to take any type of measure following the Chinese government's repression of the protest in Tiananmen Square in 1989. From Clinton's standpoint, Washington should not back or support dictators who infringe upon human rights. Still, as far as foreign policy was concerned, there was actually little room for criticising the conduct of Bush and his Secretary of State James Baker. Indeed, they drove the nation through the epoch-making event of the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, they managed to set up the alliance which drove Iraq out of Kuwait, and they paved the way for negotiations that would lead to agreement on the Middle East.

Once in office, Clinton's position on foreign policy issues was not very different from Bush's attitude, especially with regard to the need for resisting isolationist temptations. Clinton openly expressed his position on the matter in his inaugural address:

“Today, a generation raised in the shadows of the cold war assumes new responsibilities in a world warmed by the sunshine of freedom...

To renew America, we must meet challenges abroad as well as at home. There is no longer a clear division between what is foreign and what is domestic...

While America rebuilds at home, we will not shrink from the challenges nor fail to seize the opportunities of this new world...

When our vital interests are challenged or the will and conscience of the international community is defied, we will act, with peaceful diplomacy whenever possible, with force when necessary...

Our hopes, our hearts, our hands are with those on every continent who are building democracy and freedom. Their cause is America's cause.”¹³³

Nonetheless, domestic concerns always overshadowed foreign policy issues, and immediately after the election, President Clinton decided to turn over foreign policy to subordinates. As William Hyland described: “The job of his foreign policy aides was to keep the issues away from the president so he could concentrate on domestic matters. Keep the president informed, his aides were warned, but ‘don’t take too much of his time’.”¹³⁴

Therefore, the responsibility for foreign policy laid on his team. Warren Christopher was chosen as Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright was awarded the post of ambassador to the United Nations, Strobe Talbott was named special ambassador, Colin Powell remained Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Anthony Lake was chosen as National Security Advisor, while the new Director of the CIA was James Woolsey.

¹³³ The American Presidency Project, William J. Clinton, Inaugural Speech, January 20, 1993, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>

¹³⁴ William G. Hyland, *op. cit.*, p. 18

The new team shared some convictions, such as a general aversion for traditional geopolitics, the focus on human rights, the belief that the use of force should be extended to humanitarian interventions, and the conviction that the world had entered a new era of multilateralism and collective security.

Generally, the new Clinton's team operating in foreign policy agreed on the new and central role of the United Nations, in particular in conferring legitimacy to the U.S. international actions.

However, the centre of the U.S. new security strategy should have been the so-called 'commercial diplomacy', using trade as a political leverage. Connected to this commercial policy was the strategy of 'enlargement' of democracies, which would replace the containment of communism. The underlying argument, the promotion of democracy and market economy, was obviously taken from Fukuyama's and Kant's views. Democracy represented the perfect form of government and, since democracies allegedly do not fight each other, democratic peace would follow.

The new administration demonstrated a strong cultural and intellectual standpoint from which to operate. Nonetheless, President Clinton always gave priority to domestic issues and was not inclined to run political risks for foreign policy considerations. The logical result was the implementation of a tentative and piecemeal foreign policy by part of the 'world's indispensable nation'.

A general evaluation of Clinton's first term in office was produced by William Hyland. The author pointed out that President's Clinton was willing to follow in presidents Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt's footsteps. If Clinton's concept for 'enlargement of democracies' somehow recalled Wilson's 'empire for liberty', critics doubted his similarity of views with Roosevelt. Indeed, Clinton demonstrated his unwillingness to take political risks, quite the opposite of Roosevelt's actions.

“During his first term, Clinton had damaged the idea of realistic foreign policy that Theodore Roosevelt had symbolised. Too often

the first Clinton administration had glorified internationalism and multilateralism, the UN and collective security, and the necessity of achieving moral consensus while scoffing at such crude concepts as the balance of power. Too often had Clinton tailored his foreign policy to popular opinion, which he mistakenly believed was the foundation of a legitimate foreign policy.”¹³⁵

Interestingly enough, the goals, objectives, and threats identified by the Clinton administration were substantially similar to those identified by the previous Bush administration:

- “1. Ensure the security and survival of the United States as an independent nation.
2. Encourage economic growth, market access, and security of scarce resources.
3. Promote the spread of democratic institutions and values abroad.
4. Strengthen alliances to promote regional stability to counter the spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction, terrorism, arms, and drug trafficking.

The two administration adopted similar foreign policy goals with respect to the Middle East and Central Asian regions:

1. Promote regional stability and security of Middle East alliances.
2. Securing and stabilising resources, including the free flow of oil.
3. Curb proliferation of WMD, discouraging destabilising conventional arms sales and countering terrorism.
4. Encourage the Arab-Israeli peace process.

¹³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 211

5. Promote democracy and prevent the oppression of the Iraqi people.”¹³⁶

Yet, notwithstanding the identification of these points for action, the Clinton administration has often been criticised for the lack of an overarching and comprehensive strategy in foreign policy. Since the administration chose to act on a case-by-case basis, pundits speculated on the lack of a clear strategic vision when dealing with international affairs.

“...the heart of the foreign policy conundrum that had lasted through Clinton’s entire presidency: the inability or reluctance to relate specific events in the international arena to America’s core interests and values. Within the overall framework of supporting democracy and markets, specific issues have been pursued on a case-by-case basis, exposing the administration to charges of inconsistency, lack of principle, and failure of will.

In fact, Albright herself proclaimed, during the speechmaking week of September 1993, that the administration would follow a case-by-case approach in deciding whether and where to intervene in conflicts abroad.”¹³⁷

Still, a more accurate analysis seemed to highlight how the actual problem was not really the lack of a theoretical design, which was indeed present, but the administration’s inconsistency in translating theory into concrete action.

A clear example of the inconsistency of the Clinton administration regarding foreign policy issues was given by the events in two African countries.

Clinton decided to commit the United States to the restoration of peace in the Somali failed state. ‘Operation Restore Hope’, led by the

¹³⁶ Captain Abigail T. Linnington, Unconventional Warfare as a Strategic Foreign Policy Tool: the Clinton Administration in Iraq and Afghanistan, The Fletcher School – TUFTS University (Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Thesis), Medford, 2004

¹³⁷ Thomas W. Lippman, Madeleine Albright and the New American Diplomacy, Westview, Boulder (Colorado), 2004, p.317

United States with the participation of the UN, ended in a complete failure when, during the battle of Mogadishu in 1993, 18 American soldiers were killed. As a result of this bloody mission, the UN and the U.S. withdrew from Somalia, drawing widespread international criticism. The Clinton administration presented the intervention in Somalia as a humanitarian mission, but at the same time the President failed to commit the United States to intervene in Rwanda, where in 1994 an outright genocide was underway.

Therefore, the contradictions in the different decisions over Somalia and Rwanda, but also the war in Bosnia, the crisis in Haiti, and the Russian bombardment of Chechnya exposed the Clinton administration to allegations about the lack of a comprehensive political framework and inconsistencies in international affairs.

The policy Washington wanted to implement in foreign matters was dubbed 'assertive multilateralism'. The basic concept of this policy entailed major responsibilities for allies to lead and sustain the costs of collective intervention in the world's crisis spot, while the U.S. retained the right to act unilaterally whenever and wherever national interests were perceived as being at stake. Yet, following the failures in Somalia and Bosnia, 'assertive multilateralism' was removed from the diplomatic lexicon in Washington. In replacement of that policy, a new doctrine supported by Madeleine Albright emerged, asserting the need for greater U.S. activism. From Albright's standpoint, Washington's leadership was fundamental to counter the challenges of a world that she viewed like 'a viper's nest of terrors'. Madeleine Albright, who was awarded the post of Secretary of State during Clinton's second term in office, had a clear view of the challenges to face and the role of the U.S. in the international arena:

“We know that small wars and unresolved issues can erupt into violence that endangers allies, wreaks economic havoc, generates refugees, and embroils our own forces in combat. American

diplomacy, backed by military power, is the single most effective force for peace in the world today.”¹³⁸

The main targets she identified were Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, the Taliban in Afghanistan, but also the situations in Kosovo, Angola, Somalia, and Burma caused serious concerns. In order to curtail possible menaces from these countries, Albright was eager and inclined to use unconventional methods, including unconventional warfare, albeit Clinton’s aptitude for limiting taking risks in international affairs always resulted in the implementation of a lame-duck foreign policy.

However, late 1994 marked a major watershed for the Clinton administration. Indeed, in the congressional elections held in November, the Democrats lost the control of both houses of the Congress. For the first time since 1952 the Republicans controlled the two houses of the parliament. The midterm electoral setback somehow forced Clinton to moderate his position and he even began to adopt programs and rhetoric proper of the Republicans.

Even though foreign policy was not the main target of criticism, Clinton was never free from attacks on that field. Generally, the public opinion perceived the stopping of the illegal flow of drugs into the United States as the most urgent issue in foreign policy.¹³⁹

The Republican majority in the Congress based its program on Newt Gingrich’s ‘Contract with America’, which focused mainly on domestic policy. Notable references to foreign policy included a program for the expansion of the NATO alliance and the criticism to the subordination of American troops to UN command. Eventually, Clinton changed his foreign policy moving closer to Republican’s recommendations. The expansion of NATO and a more independent management of international actions became major objectives to pursue for the U.S. foreign policy.

¹³⁸ Madeleine Albright, Address at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, cited in Thomas W. Lippman, *op. cit.*, p. 91

¹³⁹ William G. Hyland, *op. cit.*, p. 140

Yet, foreign policy continued to remain a marginal issue on the political agenda, and Clinton demonstrated his unwillingness to run risks in the global arena that could affect domestic consensus.

Thus, during the 1996 electoral campaign, the political struggle between the incumbent president and the Republican Bob Dole did not revolve around foreign policy issues, and domestic concerns still grabbed the spotlight. Clinton's shift toward the centre seemed to make him a 'Neo-Republican'. The President's journey from idealism to a new pragmatism allowed him to broaden his electoral base, thus winning the elections. As a result, Clinton became the first Democrat president to be re-elected ever since Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Immediately after the electoral victory, Clinton decided to renew his foreign policy and national security team. Warren Christopher resigned, allowing Madeleine Albright to become the first woman to hold the position of Secretary of State. Clearly, besides Albright's cleverness and efficacy, the move to appoint her to that important position was also designed to attract the votes and the approval of U.S. feminist groups, which represented a fundamental electoral constituency.

Sandy Berger replaced Anthony Lake as National Security Adviser, while George Tenet was appointed Director of the CIA.

Particularly Albright seemed to attract positive criticism, as pundits were impressed by her determination in both trying to build bipartisan support for the administration's foreign policy and proclaiming her intention to reconnect the American people with international issues¹⁴⁰. Indeed, in Albright's opinion, Americans were losing the sense of the importance and the position of the United States in the world arena; new global issues emerged in a globalised world, and the strong leadership of the U.S. should have been a driving force in facing those problems.

Moreover, during her mandate, Albright would have to face other burning issues in the Middle East; in particular, a new phase of more relaxed relations with Iran, the nuclear issue with Pakistan, and the question about women's rights with the Taliban.

¹⁴⁰ Thomas W. Lippman, *op. cit.*, p.57

Albright's probably most challenging diplomatic initiative was the rapprochement with Iran. The United States cut diplomatic relations with Iran following the revolution that toppled the U.S.-backed Shah Reza Pahlavi and brought to power a theocratic regime strongly convinced that the United States represented the 'Great Satan'. Moreover, the constant support Ayatollah Khomeini provided to Shia organisations such as Hezbollah, protagonist of terroristic attacks against Israel, rendered Iran target of the U.S. anti-terroristic rhetoric campaign. Still, Iran's location in Central Asia made of it a sort of forced passage for any pipeline route carrying oil and gas from the former Soviet republics. The presidential election in 1997 saw the triumphant victory of the moderate Mohammad Khatami. His triumph seemed to lay the foundations for a rapprochement between Washington and Teheran. The thaw in relations between the two countries represented an important phase in the so-called 'New Great Game' for the mineral resources of Central Asia. Indeed, Clinton had previously banned all American firms from doing business with Iran. What is more, the president supported the imposition of a law implying stiff economic sanctions even for international companies that invested in Iran, thus provoking tensions with some European companies. Yet, after the election of Khatami, Clinton assumed a less hard-line position on Iran, and eventually decided to ease some economic sanctions.

Regarding Pakistan, the United States strongly condemned Islamabad's attempts to build a nuclear bomb. Eventually, when Pakistani President Sharif announced the successful testing of nuclear devices, the world faced the unparalleled danger of two nuclear-armed countries facing each other along a common border and historically locked in hostility since their very independence. The Clinton administration, by means of putting pressure on its Pakistani ally, had the difficult task of curtailing the possibilities of the outbreak of a nuclear war.

The other issue in the Middle East regarded the Taliban and their unabated abuse of women's rights. The Taliban, whose regime the United States did not officially recognise, were not a force known for accepting compromises, and their human rights abuses always

represented a stumbling block for the establishment of official relations. As Clinton strongly counted on the vote of feminist groups, the Taliban's treatment of women was an obstacle difficult to bypass.

Since the Clinton administration did not officially recognise the government in Afghanistan led by the Taliban militia, official relations between the two countries did not exist in public.

Since the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989 and its disintegration in 1991-1992, the Afghanistan simply disappeared from the foreign policy radar in Washington. The end of the Cold War brought about a significant transformation: geopolitical and geo-strategic considerations dwindled in importance, replaced by more material geo-economic concerns. The same President Clinton perceived economy as the driving force in international relations. Still, when officials in Washington addressed turmoil and civil war in Central Asia, they always expressed a vague and inconclusive desire for peace and stability. Actually, an official policy for Afghanistan simply did not exist. Nonetheless, the vacuum in official relations was filled by the entrance on the scene of oil companies interested in the construction of pipelines through the Afghan territory controlled by the Taliban. Notwithstanding the lack of a clear political framework, the U.S. State Department, realising the huge economic interests at stake in the country, was supportive towards the oil companies which tried to established relations with the Taliban. UNOCAL, the Union Oil Company of California, virtually acted as a spearhead in the country, promoting the need for a strong and uncontested government capable of running Afghanistan, so that Central Asian's energy reserves could be safely exploited.

Thus, the 'New Great Game' had begun.

5.2 The New Great Game and the U.S.-Taliban Relations

The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought about the creation of new Central Asian republics. At the dawn of the 1990s, these new landlocked states badly needed communication links to the outside world. Indeed, their communication links were headed only toward Russia, but after the demise of the Soviet Union, a new desire emerged for ending their isolation and their economic dependence on Moscow. The new Central Asian republics aimed at the construction of pipelines and trade routes in order to build links with the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean and China.¹⁴¹

Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan obtained formal independence and immediately aimed at establishing new political and economic relations in order to smooth their transition from communism to capitalism, albeit most of them were still ruled by former communists or KGB generals. The New Great Game saw the involvement of many other actors, such as the United States, Russia, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, China, Pakistan, and big transnational corporations.

The Caspian probably represented the largest unexplored and unexploited region with huge oil reserves. The opportunity to exploit these reserves resulted in great excitement among oil companies worldwide. Between 1994 and 1998, twenty-four companies coming from thirteen different countries declared their interests and signed contracts in the Caspian region.¹⁴² The new centrality of the Caspian basin, which estimates ranged from 50 to 110 billion barrels of oil and from 170 to 463 trillion cubic feet of natural gas¹⁴³, proved to be a blessing not only for oil companies and regional governments, but also to other countries desperately willing to find alternatives to the Persian Gulf.

The interest of American oil companies in the region was publicly expressed in a speech to oil industrialists in 1998 by the then CEO (later

¹⁴¹ Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, p. 144

¹⁴² *Ibidem*

¹⁴³ Estimates from the International Energy Agency, reported in Lutz Kleveman, The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia, Grove Press, New York, 2003, p. 3

Vice-President during the administration of George W. Bush) of the Halliburton corporation Dick Cheney: “I cannot think of a time when we have had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian.”¹⁴⁴

In addition, in a speech called ‘A Farewell to Flashman’, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott sketched out the goal of stable economic and political development in that critical crossroads of the world, at the same time warning against the alternative, namely that “ the region could become a breeding ground of terrorism, a hotbed of religious and political extremism, and a battleground for outright war. It has been fashionable to proclaim...a replay of the ‘Great Game’ in the Caucasus and Central Asia...fuelled and lubricated by oil...Our goal is to actively discourage that atavistic outcome.”¹⁴⁵

Geostrategic and geo-economic interests seemed to be extremely intertwined in the New Great Game, as oil companies’ and states’ financial objectives in the region overlapped. The United States deemed important to diversify its energy supplies, securing the flow of resources from a region not as unstable and puzzling as the Persian Gulf. The secretary of energy during the Clinton administration, Bill Richardson, explained the importance of the Caspian in the implementation of the policy of ‘diversifying energy supplies’:

“This is about America’s energy security, which depends on diversifying our sources of oil and gas worldwide. It’s also about preventing strategic inroads by those who don’t share our values. We’re trying to move those newly independent countries toward the West. We would like to see them reliant on Western commercial and political interests rather than going another way. We’ve made a substantial political investment in the Caspian, and

¹⁴⁴ Dick Cheney, quoted in Lutz Kleveman, *op. cit.*, p. 4

¹⁴⁵ Strobe Talbott, A Farewell to Flashman: American Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia, speech, 21 July 1997

it's very important to us that both the pipeline map and the politics come out right.”¹⁴⁶

Richardson's reference to pipelines was critical, as the New Great Game saw the implementation of a so-called 'pipeline politics'¹⁴⁷. Indeed, the Caspian sea is completely landlocked and pipelines needed to be built in order for oil to arrive to sea ports where it would be shipped to world markets. The key question concerned the route pipelines should take. All the pipelines already in place in those countries were headed and passed across Russia, the former ruler. Russia was interested in the continuation of the use of those old pipelines in order to hold those countries in its grasp and keep their economies subordinated to Moscow's. Yet, the new independent countries actually aimed at strengthening their independence from Russia and were therefore eager to find other routes for pipelines. The U.S. State Department was particularly willing to promote the construction of a pipeline which would not pass through Russia or Iran. Two gigantic projects were planned in the United States. On the one hand, it supported the Unocal corporation in its bid to build a pipeline from Turkmenistan through the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. On the other hand, the U.S. supported the project for a pipeline going from Azerbaijan's capital Baku to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan.

Particularly supportive of the development of the pipeline's route from Baku to Ceyhan was former Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski:

“Azerbaijan's vulnerability has wider regional implications because the country's location makes it a geopolitical pivot. It can be described as the vitally important 'cork' controlling access to the 'bottle' that contains the riches of the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia. An independent, Turkic-speaking Azerbaijan, with

¹⁴⁶ Bill Richardson, cited in in Lutz Klevevan, *op. cit.*, p. 7

¹⁴⁷ Daniel Yergin, *The Quest: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World*, Penguin Press, London, 2011, p. 46

pipelines running from it to the ethnically related and politically supportive Turkey, would prevent Russia from exercising a monopoly on access to the region and would thus also deprive Russia of decisive political leverage over the policies of the new Central Asian states.”¹⁴⁸

Interestingly enough, the interests at stake in the ‘pipeline politics’ were deemed so important that Russia would have even accepted to align itself with its old rival Iran in order to curb American initiatives. In addition, one of the main reasons that led Russia to bomb Chechnya, thwarting its independence aspirations, was that a major pipeline from Azerbaijan to Russia ran straight across Chechnya.

As far as Iran is concerned, the Persian route passing through Iran represented the best alternative not only from an economic standpoint, but also regarding security and technical issues. Still, the Clinton administration had passed laws prohibiting American companies to invest in the country and threatening international firms of stiff economic sanctions. Nonetheless, in 1997, the French TotalFinaElf and the Russian Gazprom struck important deals with Teheran for the exploitation of oil reserves in the Persian Gulf.

A fundamental factor had to be taken into account by most of the players in the New Great Game, being them countries as well as oil corporations: the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. These actors had to decide on how to deal with the Taliban, whether to confront or to woo them.

Among the new independent republics bordering with Afghanistan, only Turkmenistan had huge mineral reserves. The country’s president Niyazov acted along two ways, seeking the support of both Iran and the United States. At the same time, Niyazov tried to attract foreign oil companies to build pipelines that would have freed the country from the Russian pipeline network. Clearly, Washington urged Turkmenistan to develop a pipeline route which would have avoided Iran. The ideal route

¹⁴⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *op. cit.*, p. 129

for the United States government to carry Turkmen crude oil to Pakistani sea ports was through the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Yet, the United States was not alone in the planning of a route going from Turkmenistan to Pakistan passing through Taliban-held Afghanistan.

Carlos Bulgheroni, the Chairman of the Argentinean oil company Bidas, obtained formal permission to exploit Turkmen's mineral reserves in the early 1990s. In November 1994, after the Taliban captured Kandahar, Bulgheroni tried to convince President Niyazov to set up a working group in order to study the feasibility of a pipeline which from Turkmenistan went through Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Bulgheroni's view, the construction of a pipeline through these countries became a sort of peace-making business, as the huge economic interests at stake would have persuaded warring leaders to lay down their arms. In addition, at the time, the Pakistani government was particularly interested in opening trade routes through southern Afghanistan and the ISI was actively supporting the Taliban militia. Consequently, Bulgheroni's proposal was particularly appealing and warmly welcomed by the Bhutto government. The Argentinean manager started to meet with Afghan warlords in an effort to bring about the end of the hostilities in the country and assure the rights of way. Bidas' plan envisaged an open-access pipeline so that other companies or countries could feed in their own gas. Bidas signed a contract with the Afghan government headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani and started negotiations with other oil companies, including Unocal. By now, though, problems emerged with Niyazov, who had seemingly been convinced that the Argentinean company was exploiting Turkmenistan's mineral wealth. At this point, the American Unocal had expressed its desire to build a pipeline which would have taken exactly the same route as the one proposed by Bidas. Turkmen President Niyazov was interested in seizing the opportunity to engage a major American company and the same U.S. government in his country's development. In October 1995, Niyazov signed an agreement with Unocal, leaving Bidas' executives shocked and incredulous. Unocal began planning the construction of the trans-Afghanistan pipeline from Turkmenistan to

Pakistan. Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of State during Nixon's second term in office, and by then consultant for Unocal, dubbed the agreement 'the triumph of hope over experience', while angry Bidas' executives undertook legal actions against the American oil corporation. By then, support for the Taliban acquired another meaning: it was not only geostrategically important, it was an economic priority.

Unocal's proposed pipeline route



American's designs and prospects for a pipeline passing through Afghanistan had multi-faceted reasons. It allowed the U.S. to provide strategic support to Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, while snubbing and curtailing Russian and Iranian influence in the region.

As projects evolved and the 'pipeline politics' developed, it became increasingly evident that policy in the Central Asian region was not driven by diplomats and politicians, but by oil companies'

representatives. Washington's interests in the Taliban appeared to be motivated almost exclusively by economic interests. As the United States and Pakistan supported the Taliban in Afghanistan, Russia and Iran were prompted to a strategic counter-reaction. As a result, two alignment seemed to take shape on the Central Asian stage: the United States, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, with Israel, Turkey, and Pakistan as well, opposed to Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, and Tajikistan.

However, in 1996 the Clinton administration became increasingly entangled in the negotiations over pipeline's construction and it came very close to a diplomatic incident with its Pakistani ally. Indeed, the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, Tom Simmons, addressed Pakistani Premier Benazir Bhutto in behalf of Unocal, asking her to switch her support from Bidas to Unocal. The meeting turned into a row, and Benazir Bhutto was furious with the U.S. ambassador, who had to officially apologise.

U.S. pressures on Pakistan continued on mounting as in April 1996 the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Robin Raphel publicly spoke in favour of the Unocal project to build a pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan. These constant pressures on Pakistan to favour the Unocal gave rise to suspicions in Moscow and Teheran about the possibility that the CIA was really backing the Taliban.

When the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996, Unocal's projects seemed to gain momentum, and when the U.S. State Department commented with favourable tones the event, it appeared evident that the interests of the oil corporation and that of the U.S. government significantly overlapped.

Yet, the situation was difficult and complicated. Indeed, the Unocal began dealing directly with the Taliban, who started thinking that the corporation was really a branch of the U.S. government, with which they had virtually no contact. During the negotiations between the Taliban and the Unocal in 1996, the American oil corporation made use of some important Afghan consultant in order to persuade Omar to strike a deal. The Durrani Pashtun, and later President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai was a valuable consultant for the Unocal, and also Zalmay Khalilzad

engaged with the Afghan militia as Unocal consultant. In particular Khalilzad was an important figure, as he had served in the State and Defence departments in the Reagan and Bush administrations. Khalilzad, who would later hold the post of United States Ambassador to Afghanistan and United States Ambassador to the United Nations under the administration of George W. Bush, urged Washington to engage the Taliban:

“Based on recent conversation with Afghans, including the various Taliban factions, and Pakistanis, I am confident that they would welcome an American reengagement. The Taliban does not practice the anti-U.S. style of fundamentalism practiced by Iran – it is closer to the Saudi model. The group uphold a mix of traditional Pashtun values and an orthodox interpretation of Islam.”¹⁴⁹

Nevertheless, the Bidas project was preferable to the Taliban and the Pakistani government, for the Argentinean company did not need any loans from international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, whose basic requirement would have been the international recognition of the Taliban regime. Still, the Taliban leadership was well aware that making business with the American company entailed greater possibilities to gain the official recognition they were desperately anxious to secure.

In November 1996, the Pakistani President decided to sack the Bhutto government on charges of corruption. As the new government led by Nawaz Sharif immediately renounced to back the Bidas’ project and decided to support Unocal, suspicions arose about an alleged Washington’s responsibility in the government change. When Islamabad immediately allowed diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime after their temporary capture of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1997, suspicions thickened. After the diplomatic recognition granted to the Taliban, the new Pakistani government urged the United States and the Unocal to start the

¹⁴⁹ Zalmay Khalilzad, *Afghanistan: Time to Reengage*, Washington Post, October 7, 1996, cited in Jean-Charles Brisard &Guillamue Dasquié, *op. cit.*, p. 21

construction of the pipeline as quickly as possible in order to give international legitimation to the Taliban. Both Pakistan and Turkmenistan mounted their pressures on Omar to accept the Unocal deal. Nonetheless, the Taliban privately admitted their preference for the Bidas corporation, as the Unocal made demands on the Taliban implying the improvement of their human rights record. In addition, the growing influence of feminist groups in the United States appeared to represent a significant stumbling block for negotiations to continue.

During these years, Afghanistan's internal situation was anything but settled, and war and bloodshed continued unabated, thus curbing any efforts for the construction of pipelines. As Robert Ebel, a senior adviser in the Energy and National Security Program, declared in April 1997: "The players in the game of pipeline politics must remind themselves that peace can bring a pipeline, but a pipeline cannot bring peace."¹⁵⁰

In early 1997, the Taliban had still not decided which company's offer to accept, and attempts to woo the Taliban multiplied by part both of Bidas and Unocal. Yet, while Bidas actually tried to renegotiate the contract with the Taliban, the American company decided to postpone any renegotiation after the international recognition of Omar's regime in Afghanistan.

Another move made by the Unocal led to further suspicions and criticism, as the company set up a group of expert to study the Afghan situation and hired Robert Oakley. Oakley was the former U.S. ambassador to Pakistan and played a pivotal role in the CIA-ISI connection to provide U.S. support to the Afghan mujahedeen. Even though it was not unusual for American oil corporations to hire former members of the government, this move seemed studied on purpose to renew the old connection. In support of these suspicions, it should be noticed that Oakley's wife, Phyllis, was at the head of the information sector of the U.S. State Department, the BIR (Bureau of Intelligence and

¹⁵⁰ Robert Ebel, cited in Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, p. 169

Research), thus having access to virtually all the sensitive data of the American government.¹⁵¹

The main suggestions Robert Oakley put forward to the Unocal management was to approach the Taliban through their ally, Pakistan.

Yet, during 1997 the Taliban failed to lead the final offensive and take control of the whole country. Since any kind of construction was subordinated to a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, both Unocal and the U.S. government grew impatient and frustrated.

Unocal Vice-President Marty Miller expressed the company's dissatisfaction with the events in Afghanistan by publicly declaring: "It's uncertain when this project will start. It depends on peace in Afghanistan and a government we can work with. That may be the end of this year, next year or three years from now or this may be a dry hole if the fighting continues."¹⁵²

Washington as well expressed its frustration for the Taliban's failure to bring about a solid and stable government to Afghanistan in an indirect way. Indeed, in mid-1997 Clinton announced that the administration would not oppose the construction of a pipeline from Turkmenistan to Turkey passing through Iran. This move mainly stemmed from the observation that other international companies were taking advantage from the absence of American companies' competition to strike deals with Iran. U.S. companies now exploited Clinton's opening to mount pressure at least to ease Washington's sanctions on Teheran. Furthermore, Clinton's move had a collateral message, showing Pakistan and the Taliban that the administration was running out of patience as far as the Taliban's conquest of Afghanistan was concerned.

Nevertheless, negotiations continued, and a Taliban delegation travelled for the first time outside the Muslim world to meet with Unocal representatives in Houston in November 1997. As journalist Caroline Lees recounted in her article published on the Sunday Telegraph:

¹⁵¹ Steve Coll, La guerra segreta della CIA: l'America, l'Afghanistan e Bin Laden dall'invasione sovietica al 10 settembre 2001, BUR, Milano, 2004, p. 453

¹⁵² Marty Miller, cited in Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-173

“The Islamic warriors appear to have been persuaded to close the deal, not through delicate negotiation but by old-fashioned Texan hospitality...

The Taliban ministers and their advisers stayed in a five-star hotel and were chauffeured in a company minibus. Their only requests were to visit Houston's zoo, the Nasa space centre and Omaha's Super Target discount store to buy stockings, toothpaste, combs and soap. The Taliban, which controls two-thirds of Afghanistan and is still fighting for the last third, was also given an insight into how the other half lives...

The men, who are accustomed to life without heating, electricity or running water, were amazed by the luxurious homes of Texan oil barons. Invited to dinner at the palatial home of Martin Miller, a vice-president of Unocal, they marvelled at his swimming pool, views of the golf course and six bathrooms. After a meal of specially prepared halal meat, rice and Coca-Cola, the hard-line fundamentalists - who have banned women from working and girls from going to school - asked Mr Miller about his Christmas tree...

The Unocal group has one significant attraction for the Taliban - it has American government backing. At the end of their stay last week, the Afghan visitors were invited to Washington to meet government officials. The US government, which in the past has branded the Taliban's policies against women and children "despicable", appears anxious to please the fundamentalists to clinch the lucrative pipeline contract. The Taliban is likely to have been impressed by the American government's interest as it is anxious to win international recognition.¹⁵³

The Taliban visit was a success. Furthermore, the delegation met in Washington with Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Karl Inderfurth. The meeting represented the first real diplomatic contact

¹⁵³ Caroline Lees, Oil Barons Court Taliban in Texas, Sunday Telegraph, 14 December 1997

between the Taliban and the U.S. government. An official and confidential U.S. document accounts for the main points discussed:

“They [the Taliban] described their efforts to cooperate on narcotics issues and asked for U.S. assistance in funding crop substitution programs...

Inderfurth strongly stated U.S. concerns regarding gender issues. The Taliban responded that their policy was popular, reflected Afghan tradition, and that much of our information regarding their policies toward women was wrong...

[Inderfurth] said our attitude toward the Taliban would be influenced by its behaviour relating to medical care, education, and opportunities made available to women. This was not only the U.S. view alone, but was held by the entire international community. The Taliban, he argued, should respond to this in a positive way....

The Taliban also indicated willingness to negotiate with the opposition and agreed on the need for a broad-based government...

They repeated their pledge to prevent terrorists from using Afghanistan to launch attacks on others.

They stressed their eagerness to see the pipeline go ahead but were warned that financing would not be possible without peace.

The delegation reportedly was pleased with the meeting and frank discussion.”¹⁵⁴

The discussion between Inderfurth and the Taliban delegation seemed fruitful, as all the major issues were covered and discussed, albeit doubts arise whether the Taliban were simply paying lip service to U.S. requests in order not to displease the American officer.

Indeed, even though Omar moderated his policies through the years, it did not prevent him from drawing harsh criticism from the international community. Omar’s bid to obtain international recognition for the regime

¹⁵⁴ The National Security Archive, The Taliban File: Department of State, Cable, "Afghanistan: Meeting with the Taliban," December 11, 1997, Confidential, 13 pp.
<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

was always curtailed by the Taliban's policy on human rights, especially on women's rights, drug trafficking, and terrorism. The Taliban's record was not encouraging, and the year 1998 represented the final blow both to Taliban's aspiration to gain diplomatic recognition and oil corporations' bids to build a pipeline passing through Afghanistan.

In the spring of 1998 new fighting broke out in the country leading to more uncertainty and instability. In addition, Unocal began facing increasing problems at home, as feminist groups' pressure mounted on the public opinion against Unocal's support to the Taliban. Some feminist groups went even as far as asking California's Attorney General to dissolve Unocal for crimes against humanity and the environment because of Unocal's relations with the Taliban¹⁵⁵.

Besides domestic opposition, other two factors combined to render the pipeline passing through the Afghan territory impracticable. The bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which bin Laden claimed the responsibility for, triggered Clinton's decision to retaliate launching cruise missiles at bin Laden's alleged training camps in Afghanistan. "It didn't take us five minutes to know that it was all over" said Unocal's President John Imle, "we were in regular contact with the U.S. embassy in Pakistan, and no one had ever said anything about terrorism. But now we understood what bin Laden was doing in Kandahar." It suddenly became too dangerous for any U.S. businessman to promote a project in Afghanistan that was anathema for the Taliban.¹⁵⁶ The consequent Taliban's refusal to extradite the Arab tycoon led to UN sanctions imposed on the regime the following year.

This event, coupled with a general plunge in world oil prices which severely hit the world's oil industry, led to final abandonment of the pipeline construction project by part of Unocal, which eventually in December 1998 withdrew from the CENTGAS consortium, which it had struggled so hard to set up.

With the gender issue and the U.S. hunt for Osama bin Laden underway, it seemed that the New Great Game in Central Asia was

¹⁵⁵ Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, p. 174

¹⁵⁶ Daniel Yergin, *op. cit.*, p. 81

doomed to end. Even though the project was completely dumped and Bidas remained silently in the running, there was no foreign investor seriously interested in doing business with Afghanistan and Pakistan.

It is important to notice some significant characteristics highlighted during the events which took place in Afghanistan in August 1998. On the one side, Clinton's decision to use force as a retaliation to the terroristic attacks in Africa, reflected the change occurred in the implementation of foreign policy between his first and second term in office. Indeed, Republican's pressure had urged Clinton's foreign policy team to keep a more independent position and not to subordinate U.S. operations to UN initiatives. Republican's positions found support in the Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who pushed for U.S. unilateral intervention whenever U.S. national interests were at stake. The Clinton administration's decision to strike cruise missiles against training camps in Afghanistan and a farm in Sudan suspected of producing chemical weapons expressly highlighted this change. In fact, it was a measure taken unilaterally without consulting the UN. What is more, retaliation is a measure contrary to international law. Consequently, it was no surprise that considering the circumstances of the U.S. attacks, together with the Lewinski scandal underway at the time, Washington's move resulted in drawing criticism and condemnation domestically as well as internationally.

Another relevant event occurred which was related to U.S. missiles attacks on Afghanistan. Indeed, these attacks triggered the Taliban's reaction, as just two days after the American strikes the Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar called Washington in what is the only known direct conversation between him and a U.S. officer. On August 22, 1998, Mullah Omar engaged in a telephone conversation with U.S. director for Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh Affairs (SA/PAB Director) Michael E. Malinowski. As this phone call appears to be the only time Mullah Omar has spoken directly with a U.S. government official, it is valuable to account for the content of the discussion.

“Omar...said that in order to rebuild U.S. popularity in the Islamic world and because of his current domestic political difficulties, Congress should force President Clinton to resign. He said that he was aware of no evidence that bin Laden had engage in or planned terrorist acts while on Afghan soil. Parroting much of bin Laden’s usual rhetoric, Omar said that the U.S. should remove its forces from the Gulf and he warned that the U.S. was seen as a threat to Islam’s holiest sites, including the Kabbah.

He warned that the strikes would be counter-productive to the U.S. They could spark more, not less, terroristic attacks. And they would further increase Islamic solidarity against the U.S. The Islamic world would rally to Afghanistan’s side in the face of the attacks. Omar emphasised that this was his best advise concerned over the consequences of the strikes.

On bin Laden, Omar said that getting rid of one individual would not end the problems posed to the U.S. by the Islamic world. He again said that he had seen no hard evidence against bin Laden. Malinowski replied that there was considerable evidence against bin Laden and that the evidence was solid...he said that the U.S. solely had acted out of self-defence...’our strikes in no way were directed against the Afghan people or the Taliban’. Omar should know that the U.S. had been a friend to the Afghans and wanted only the best for Afghanistan...

Malinowski observed that reconstruction could not be expected to start as long as Afghanistan remained in turmoil and as long as bin Laden was posing a threat from its soil...

Malinowski urged Omar to place bin Laden and other terrorists into custody or expel them from Afghanistan.”¹⁵⁷

The comment to the document emphasises the exceptionality of the event as well as the seriousness of the U.S. position in the Islamic world.

¹⁵⁷ The National Security Archive, U.S. Department of State, Cable, "Afghanistan: Taliban's Mullah Omar's 8/22 Contact with State Department," August 23, 1998, Confidential, NODIS, 4 pp., <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

“Omar’s contact with a USG official is rather remarkable, given his reclusive nature and his past avoidance of contact with all things American. It is indicative of the seriousness of how the Taliban view the U.S. strikes and our anger over bin Laden. The Taliban, despite implying that we should initiate the contact, are interested in a dialogue with us on bin Laden and other issues. This is a long way, however, from the Taliban doing the right thing on bin Laden.”¹⁵⁸

Still, notwithstanding what was perceived in Washington as an opening by part of Mullah Omar on negotiating bin Laden’s handover, soon the Taliban supreme leader announced that his country was happily harbouring the Arab rebel.

As Omar persevered at refusing to hand bin Laden over to the United States, in July 1999 Clinton banned all commercial and financial dealings with the Taliban, at the same time freezing their U.S. assets.

At that point, U.S. policy towards Afghanistan appeared to be motivated only by the hunt for the Arab financier. As a confirmation, the United States, supported in its efforts by Russia, put such intense pressures on the UN, that on October 15, 1999, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1267 demanding the extradition of Osama bin Laden and imposing stiff economic sanctions on Afghanistan.¹⁵⁹

Moreover, one of the last diplomatic decisions made by the Clinton administration regarded urging the UN Security Council to impose new economic sanctions on the Taliban and freeze part of the financial aid provided to Afghanistan. Such measures passed and were announced on December 19, 1999.

Finally, another terroristic attack hitting an American target triggered further economic sanctions on the Taliban’s regime. Indeed, on October 12, 2000, a suicide attack was carried out against the U.S. Navy destroyer USS Cole, while it was harboured in the Yemeni port of Aden. The

¹⁵⁸ *Ibidem*

¹⁵⁹ Jean-Charles Brisard & Guillaume Dasquié, *op. cit.*, p. 32

responsibility for the attack was placed on bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. Once again, the Clinton administration urged Mullah Omar to surrender the Arab tycoon. Omar's persistent refusal inevitably brought about the imposition of further economic sanctions on Afghanistan by part of the UN, conclusively undermining the little foreign investment the Taliban had been able to attract.

The United States provided huge military and economic aid to the mujahedeen during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. When the Red Army withdrew from the Afghan quagmire, Washington lost any kind of interests in the country, which was perceived by ordinary Afghans as a resounding betrayal. What is more, after 1992 Washington completely washed its hand of Afghanistan, renouncing even to help broker a peace agreement between the warring factions and warlords.

After the end of the Cold War, the U.S. policy toward Central Asia in general and Afghanistan in particular was thwarted by lack of a clear strategic framework. The Clinton administration chose to deal with issues in the region and with the Taliban on a case-by-case basis, thus implementing an inconsistent and piecemeal strategy.

However, different phases of the U.S. policy towards the Taliban and Afghanistan could be identified. From 1994 to 1998, the United States was relatively benevolent towards the Taliban, expressing an attitude dubbed 'romancing the Taliban'.

Initially, the Clinton administration indirectly supported the Taliban politically, supporting Pakistani and Saudi efforts to back the religious militia in their military conquest of the country. Washington's establishment basically perceived Omar's forces in an anti-Iranian and pro-Western perspective. After their emergence in 1994, the Taliban expressed to U.S. diplomats their anti-Shia position, explaining their willingness to curb poppy cultivation and heroin production, opposing the transformation of the Afghan soil into a safe base for terrorists, especially the Arab-Afghans, from where to operate undisturbed. U.S. diplomats were so naïve that they believed that the new Afghan elite would meet American objectives in the region without any qualms.

Therefore, American pundits and officers decided to hypocritically ignore the Taliban's Islamic fundamentalism, exactly as the U.S. had done during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, supporting the most radicals and fundamentalists among the mujahedeen leaders. During this initial phase Washington was not interested in the Taliban's ominous record regarding women treatment, human rights' abuses, and drugs trafficking.

According to one report:

“In the months before the Taliban took power, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Robin Raphel waged an intense round of shuttle diplomacy between the powers with possible stakes in the [Unocal] project.

‘Robin Raphel was the face of the Unocal pipeline’ said an official of the former Afghan government who was present at some of the meetings with her...

In addition to tapping new sources of energy, the [project] also suited a major U.S. strategic aim in the region: isolating its nemesis Iran and stifling a frequently mooted rival pipeline project backed by Teheran, experts said.”¹⁶⁰

Between 1995 and late 1997, the U.S. interests in the Taliban were mainly ascribable to the support given by the State Department to the Unocal project. Indeed, the United States had no objections when the Taliban captured Herat and imposed a strict Sharia law that banned thousands of girls from schools. The fall of Herat was welcome in Washington as both facilitating Unocal's projects of pipeline's construction and further limiting Iranian influence in the region. As a consequence, Iran, feeling under Taliban's pressure, acted publicly blaming the CIA of backing the Taliban advance and stepping up its support to anti-Taliban forces. The Clinton administration appeared to be optimistic regarding the possible evolution of the Taliban movement,

¹⁶⁰ [US Gave Silent Blessing to Taliban Rise to Power](#)

hoping in an Afghanistan's development similar to that experience by Saudi Arabia at the beginning of the XXth Century. As a U.S. diplomat confessed in 1997: "The Taliban will probably develop like the Saudis. There will be ARAMCO [the consortium of oil companies that controlled Saudi oil], pipelines, an emir, no parliament and lots of Sharia law. We can live with that."¹⁶¹

During this period, a major concern was expressed by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Robin Raphel, namely a complete neglect of Afghanistan. Her idea of proposing an international arms embargo on Afghanistan through the UN Security Council drew little and cold support from the establishment in Washington, while Secretary of State Warren Christopher did not mention Afghanistan throughout his entire tenure in office. Robin Raphel seemed the only diplomat in Washington concerned about the evolution of the events in Afghanistan. During a Testimony to the senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East and South Asia which took place on May 11, 1996, she explained: "Afghanistan has become a conduit for drugs, crime and terrorism that can undermine Pakistan, the neighbouring Central Asian states and have an impact beyond Europe and Russia."¹⁶²

The Taliban's capture of Kabul in September 1996 further strengthened U.S. convictions that the Taliban's conquest of the country would lead to a stable and peaceful Afghanistan, thus serving the objectives of the Unocal corporation. Robin Raphel, ignoring the strict restrictions on social life imposed by the Taliban in Kabul, expressed the desire of supporting the religious militia that had demonstrated the ability of ending fighting in the areas they controlled. In a speech during a closed door UN meeting on Afghanistan occurred on November 18, 1996, Raphel exhibited for the Taliban not to be isolated in their struggle to bring about peace in Afghanistan:

¹⁶¹ Cited in Phil Gasper, *op. cit.*

¹⁶² Robin Raphel, Testimony to the senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East and South Asia, 11 May 1996

“The Taliban control more than two-thirds of the country, they are Afghans, they are indigenous, they have demonstrated staying power. The real source of their success has been the willingness of many Afghans, particularly Pashtuns, to tacitly trade unending fighting and chaos to a measure of peace and security, even with severe social restrictions.

It is not in the interests of Afghanistan or any of us here that the Taliban be isolated.”¹⁶³

Notwithstanding the lack a strategic plan on Afghanistan, experts in Washington were convinced that Central Asia energy resources could be exploited and pipelines constructed even without the resolution of the on-going conflicts which were wreaking economic and political havoc on the entire region. The political scientist and leading expert on Afghanistan Barnett Rubin expressed his concerns about the inconsistency of the U.S. policy on Afghanistan:

“The US, although vocal against the on-going human rights violations, has not spelled out a clear policy towards the country and has not taken a strong and forthright stand against the interference in Afghanistan by its friends and erstwhile allies – Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, whose aid – financial and otherwise – enabled the Taliban to capture Kabul.”¹⁶⁴

The lack of a clear framework for U.S. policy on Afghanistan, led to the conclusion that U.S. foreign policy in the Central Asian region was actually the policy Unocal was implementing. Even though Unocal never fully admitted receiving U.S. State Department support to engage with the Taliban, Unocal’s President John Imle confessed to Ahmed Rashid that: “Since Unocal was the only US company involved in the CENTGAS consortium, State Department support for that route became,

¹⁶³ Robin Raphel, text of speech at a closed door UN meeting on Afghanistan, 18 November 1996, cited in Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, p. 178

¹⁶⁴ Barnett Rubin, US Policy in Afghanistan, Muslims Policy Report, Council of Foreign Relations, New York, January, 1997

de facto, support for CENTGAS and Unocal. At the same time, Unocal's policy of political neutrality was well known to the US Government."¹⁶⁵ Starting from late 1997 - early 1998, the Clinton administration was protagonist of a policy turnaround regarding relations with the Taliban. As pressure from feminist groups mounted against Taliban's policy on women, Clinton decided to distance the administration from the Afghan militia. American female vote were decisive in his re-election as well as providing him support following the Monica Lewinski scandal. Consequently, Clinton could not afford to alienate the liberal American women electorate. Once again, domestic political considerations outweighed foreign policy concerns. The President was not willing to take risks on the international stage that could affect his internal support. Therefore, the United States could not be perceived as soft on the Taliban. The shift in U.S. policy was also due to major changes in the foreign policy team, as Secretary of State Warren Christopher was replaced by Madeleine Albright during Clinton's second term in office. Her experience ensured that human rights respect would figure as a prominent issue in her political agenda.

In 1998-1999, the U.S. policy towards Afghanistan was seriously undermined by the Taliban's support for bin Laden. Terrorism came to the fore as a burning issue particularly after the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Africa. The U.S. Afghan policy was by then focused on the capture of the Arab tycoon. Moreover, continuing tensions between the Taliban and the new moderate government in Iran further alienate the United States, which had additional reasons to get tough with the Omar's forces. In the first half of 1998, the Clinton administration went even as far as designing a plan for the abduction of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. Still, legal and feasibility concerns resulted in the abortion of the plan. Bin Laden was still considered a single individual bankrolling terrorism, but in late 1998 the CIA Director George Tenet increased the level of the 'bin Laden's threat' to 'zero', the highest level. U.S. diplomats and officers somehow made the Taliban understand that

¹⁶⁵ Ahmed Rashid interview with John Imle, 29 January 1999, cited in Ahmed Rashid, *op. cit.*, p. 179

any possibility of official recognition by part of the American government was subordinated to the handover of bin Laden.

However, during this period Washington for the first time seemed to be genuinely interested in peace talks and fully supported the United Nations in the effort to mediate the end of the conflict in the region.

The fundamental mistake made by the United States during the New Great Game in Central Asia consisted in Washington's neglect to engage in real peace-making talks in the region, delegating securing peace to the construction of a pipeline proposed by an oil corporation. Still, unless the end of conflicts and civil wars in Central Asia and the Caspian was achieved, and there was joint consensus with Iran and Russia, the construction of pipelines would neither be feasible nor safe. Indeed, Moscow and Teheran would have interests in blocking or sabotaging any development in the construction of pipelines keeping the region unstable by providing arms and support to anti-Taliban alliance, unless a broad consensus with the United States was reached.

Paradoxically enough, it was the U.S. over-confidence in Taliban's ability to military conquer Afghanistan, fostered by over-reliance on the Pakistani ISI, that led Washington to prefer Taliban's military conquest to peace talks and a broad-based government which would probably have ensured lasting stability.

However, besides sporadic initiatives, mainly undertaken to support the Unocal oil corporation, the U.S. government highlighted the lack of a policy on Afghanistan, which was basically run by its allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

A strong condemnation of the U.S. involvement and lack of a clear policy in Afghanistan came from professor Phil Gasper as he stated after the 9/11 terroristic attacks:

“Whatever the U.S. government's current rhetoric about the repressive nature of the Taliban regime, its long history of intervention in the region has been motivated not only by concern for democracy or human rights, but by the narrow economic and political interests of the U.S. ruling class. It has been prepared to

aid and support the most retrograde elements if it thought a temporary advantage would be the result. Now Washington has launched a war against its former allies based on a strategic calculation that the Taliban can no longer be relied upon to provide a stable, U.S.-friendly government that can serve its strategic interests. No matter what the outcome, the war is certain to lay the grounds for more ‘blowback’ in the future.”¹⁶⁶

To conclude with, the Central Asian stage and its just untapped mineral resources represent a pivotal ‘chessboard’ on which the American global hegemony was at stake. As Afghanistan regained importance in the Central Asian stage, the United States had interests in accommodating the Taliban as well as other critical regional actors in order to comply with its hegemonic objectives.

In 1997, former Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski plainly exposed the importance of this kind of considerations:

“America is now Eurasia’s arbiter, with no major Eurasian issue soluble without America’s participation or contrary to America’s interests. how the United States both manipulates and accommodates the principal geostrategic players on the Eurasian chessboard and how it manages Eurasia’s key geopolitical pivots will be critical to the longevity and stability of America’s global primacy.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Phil Gasper, Afghanistan, the CIA, Bin Laden, and the Taliban, International Socialist Review, November-December 2001

¹⁶⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *op. cit.*, pp. 194-195

Conclusion

The terroristic attacks promoted by Osama bin Laden at the turn of the twentieth century drew the attention of the international community to Afghanistan.

In this respect, it is important to outline the relations between the Taliban regime and the Clinton administration so as to define an understanding of the factors and the reasons which laid the foundations for the fostering of religious fundamentalism and the development of a global terroristic network.

Indeed, the Clinton administration demonstrated the lack of an overarching framework for foreign policy matters. On the contrary, the practice in dealing with international affairs was constituted on addressing every event on a case-by-case basis, thus resulting in inconsistency and exposure to criticism. In addition, President Clinton's attitude to prefer focusing his attention on domestic issues always curtailed the scope of the U.S. international actions.

The necessity to dovetail the preference of domestic concerns with the unwillingness to run risks in international affairs resulted in the implementation of a lame duck foreign policy, constantly subordinated to domestic scrutiny.

This was the case of the relations with Afghanistan.

During the 1980s, Afghanistan emerged into the spotlight because of the Soviet invasion. In the Cold War frame, bleeding the Soviets became the U.S. main purpose. In order to achieve this result, Washington and the CIA were willing and eager to allocate huge sums of money, weapons, and traineeships to the most fundamentalist among the Afghan mujahedeen. The ultimate aim was to expand religious turmoil to the southern flank of the same Soviet Union. Geopolitical and geostrategic interests were deemed so critical that both the CIA and the Washington's establishments willingly ignored or even foster the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and drugs trafficking. The respect of human rights was as well on nobody's agenda. Ultimately, these forces unleashed and

fostered by the United States would eventually come back to hunt it in an extremely dramatic turn of events.

As soon as the last Soviet soldier withdrew from Afghanistan, the United States forgot the country, abandoning it to unabated civil wars and bloodsheds.

Yet, the dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in the creation of new Central Asian republics, willing to exploit their huge and hitherto untapped mineral resources. The 'New Great Game' in Central Asia thus began.

As geopolitical concerns were replaced by geo-economic considerations, the United States expressed interests in the region. U.S. oil corporations started to negotiate with regional actors for the construction of pipelines. In this context, the U.S. State Department began dealing with the new movement governing Afghanistan, the Taliban.

The Clinton administration's main interests in Afghanistan were of economic nature. Therefore, initially no one in Washington paid too much attention to the social policies implemented in the cities the Taliban captured during their takeover of the country.

However, the inconsistency of the U.S. foreign policy would come to the fore in the late 1990s, when domestic protests rose about the human rights disregard of the Taliban. Feminist groups in particular played a significant role in changing Clinton's attitude toward Mullah Omar's militia. The U.S.-Afghanistan relations provided the paramount example of Clinton's preference for domestic over international issues.

Oil companies' projects for the construction of pipelines passing through Afghanistan were definitively blocked after Al-Qaeda's terroristic attacks against U.S. embassies in Africa in August 1998. At the point, the American policy toward Afghanistan was basically based on the hunt of Osama bin Laden. Yet, every U.S. efforts to urge the Taliban to deliver the Arab tycoon fell on deaf ears. As a result, the U.S. worked in close contact with the United Nations in order to impose stiff economic sanctions on the Taliban.

Generally, the United States' failed official recognition of the Taliban government in Afghanistan resulted in a basic lack of not only actual relations, but even direct contacts. Therefore, when a Taliban delegation travelled to the United States to negotiate with an oil corporation and met a U.S. officer, it represented a significant moment for the relations between Washington and the Afghan regime.

Furthermore, in the context of a general lack of formal relations, the telephone conversation between Mullah Omar and a U.S. officer reported by U.S. official documents assumes a special connotation. It represented indeed the first and only direct contact between the secretive Taliban leader and the Washington establishment. The conversation dealt with all the burning issues at stake, but it produced no significant changes in the attitude of both the Taliban and the Clinton administration, and this is probably the reason why such an important event has often been overlooked.

By then, bin Laden had already masterminded the attacks against the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the U.S. had recognised him as the main financier of terrorism in the world. Therefore, any type of relations between the United States and the Taliban was subordinated to the Afghan compliance with Washington's demands, including the extradition of bin Laden, the crackdown on opium and heroin production, and the easing of policies regarding the treatment of women.

Even though Mullah Omar tried to ease his social policies in an effort to gain Western favour, he was however constantly adamant in holding the position with the regard to bin Laden.

Eventually, Omar's intransigence would trigger the United States under the Bush administration to invade Afghanistan and topple the Taliban regime following the 9/11 terroristic attacks.

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is outlining the relations between the United States and Afghanistan during the years of the presidency of William J. Clinton (1993-2001). In particular, the main focus is placed on the US relations with the Taliban movement, which took power in Afghanistan in the mid-90s. Furthermore, it should be noticed that a significant change in the attitude of the Clinton administration towards the situation in Afghanistan occurred between its first and second term in office. However, this change was essentially due to a transformation in the domestic political scenario rather than a conscious and thorough reevaluation of the US foreign policy and its role in the Middle East and on the world stage. Generally speaking, the Clinton administration demonstrated the lack of a comprehensive foreign policy framework, considering instead every single issue case by case.

For a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural, political, economic and social setting in which the relations between the US and the Taliban regime took place, it is necessary to review some major historical events. Indeed, without an exhaustive analysis of the evolution of the situation in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion in 1979, it would result incomplete to outline a whole and deep description of the phenomenon of the rise of the Taliban. Certainly, the movement led by mullah Mohammed Omar has become popular and universally known worldwide after the terrible terroristic attacks on September, 11 2001 in New York and Washington. In particular, the harbouring of Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind and financial backer of Al-Qaeda, the organisation responsible for the destruction of the World Trade Center, turned the spotlight on a regime which literally rose from the ashes of a country ravaged by decades of wars and bloodsheds.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979 marked an important watershed for the destiny of both the Soviet Union and

Afghanistan. The subsequent decade of conflict was characterised by the involvement of a number of different countries, each with different and sometimes contrasting interests and needs. The governments of the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, India, and even Israel had a role in fomenting the Afghan jihadists against the infidel invaders. The Afghan Mujahedeen were described by President Ronald Reagan as 'freedom fighters', thus becoming the symbol of the struggle between good and evil, liberty and oppression. The power game played in the setting of this Middle-Eastern country fell in the classic framework of a Cold War conflict. At least, as such it was conceived by the main superpowers involved: the Soviet Union and the United States. However, the war itself and its long-lasting consequences unleashed a power, the Islamic extremism, which was never fully understood or correctly taken into account by the establishments in Washington. A power which soon came back to haunt those countries and governments that had previously flooded it with huge sums of money, traineeships, armaments, and the strategic know-how necessary to hit its new targets.

It is extremely important to analyse the whole set of interests at stake in Afghanistan during the 80s and the 90s. Indeed, besides the geopolitical concerns typical of a Cold War mind-set, it should be as well taken into account what the journalist and expert Ahmed Rashid called 'the New Great Game', namely the challenge between oil companies to exploit the huge sources of gas and oil in Central Asia. The oil companies strategies, in fact, worked as a spearhead also for governments which, after the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, were willing to find new outlets in a part of the world so particularly rich in mineral resources.

Ultimately, by taking into account U.S. official documents as well as specific literature on the subject matter, this thesis attempts to outline how the U.S. strategic geopolitical and economic interests at stake in Afghanistan contributed to the overshadowing and negligence of the social changes and turmoil that paved the way to the rise of the Taliban movement.

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