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Proxy Powers, Artificial Wars, and Geopolitical Competition in Afghanistan

Introduction

Recent developments in the Middle East, Ukraine, and Afghanistan indicate that the post-Cold War global order can no longer sustain its unipolar structure. The world is on the brink of a fundamental transformation, where major and regional powers are redefining their positions, interests, and spheres of influence. Afghanistan, along with the Middle East and South Asia, has become a key arena for overlapping competitions, where proxy wars, arms rivalries, and covert alliances are reshaping international political dynamics (Waltz, 1979; Nye, 2004).

From a theoretical perspective, the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity is a natural outcome of China's growing economic and military power, Russia's reemergence on the global stage, and the rise of new actors such as India, Turkey, and Iran. Structural realism scholars, including John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz, assert that in such environments, power competition aimed at maintaining balance and preventing dominance by a single pole is inevitable (Mearsheimer, 2019). Conversely, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power emphasizes that contemporary influence is not solely

derived from military capability but also from technology, information, media, and ideological networks (Nye, 2004).

U.S. foreign policy has sought to maintain global primacy; a position solidified after the Soviet Union's collapse but now increasingly challenged by China and Russia. Washington has engaged on multiple fronts: in Europe via the Ukraine war, in the Middle East through unconditional support to Israel, and in South Asia via its linkages with Pakistan and indirect involvement in Afghanistan. These policies encompass both military and geoeconomic dimensions, as control over energy resources, transit routes, and information networks forms the backbone of global competition (Haass, 2024).

Afghanistan's geostrategic location at the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East has historically made it a hotspot for power rivalries. Past interventions by Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States have consistently failed to establish lasting presence without incurring heavy costs. These failures are attributed not only to the resilience of Afghan communities but also to the region's difficult terrain and the persistent desire for autonomy. Modern analysts contend that Washington employs a "controlled destabilization" strategy, keeping internal conflicts active to engage China, Russia, and Iran in its periphery while pursuing strategic objectives (Jones, 2021).

Proxy Powers and the Engineering of Afghanistan's Crisis

Afghanistan's crisis has been significantly shaped by proxy actors. Following the Doha negotiations, Zalmay Khalilzad appeared as the U.S. representative; however, historical, and political analyses indicate that his actions primarily advanced Pakistan's interests rather than serving the Afghan people. Acting as a mediator, Khalilzad facilitated the rise of the Taliban—products of Pakistan's madrasa network and ISI training—through organized support from ethnic and political elites. This manoeuvre not only failed to confer political legitimacy on the Taliban but also revealed

their brutal, ethnocentric, and misogynistic nature to the global audience (Mearsheimer, 2019; Haass, 2024).

Khalilzad's media efforts and superficial reporting aimed at minimizing the impact of this failure do not absolve him of direct responsibility. For Afghanistan people, he is not a neutral mediator but a recurrence of historical foreign domination and proxy intervention, disregarding the nation's real interests and consolidating Pakistan's influence over domestic politics (Waltz, 1979). Such patterns are long-standing in Afghan history, with intermediaries like Shah Shujah, Amir Dost Mohammad Khan, Abdur Rahman Khan, and Nader Khan historically documented as agents of foreign powers.

The conflicts involving the Taliban and affiliated groups such as ISIS-K (Daesh Khorasan) and TTP exemplify proxy warfare and strategic deception. These groups lack electoral legitimacy and national roots; they were born and nurtured in Pakistan within Deobandi networks linked to the ISI, serving Islamabad's strategic objectives. While ISIS-K and TTP occasionally act independently, all such groups are effectively designed to advance Pakistan's interests and those of regional and extra-regional powers, undermining Afghanistan's sovereignty (Bennett, 2023).

Behind-the-scenes arrangements like the Doha Agreement and Taliban media staging go beyond superficial legitimization. They aim to present the Taliban as a counter-terrorism force internationally, whereas in reality, the group remains a primary source of instability, extremism, and dependency on Pakistan. This divergence between appearance and reality has profound consequences for Afghanistan people and analyses or media portrayals that ignore these underlying causes are inherently misleading.

The Artificial War of the Taliban with Pakistan and the Strategy of Deception in South Asia

The conflict portrayed between the Taliban and affiliated groups such as ISIS-K and TTP is largely a staged performance, intended to manipulate global and local perceptions. These groups have no political legitimacy, popular mandate, or authentic national roots; they are instruments nurtured within Pakistan's Deobandi networks linked to the ISI to further Islamabad's strategic objectives in Afghanistan and the broader region (Bennett, 2023).

Although ISIS-K and TTP sometimes act independently, structurally, and operationally they are integral parts of Pakistan's regional destabilization apparatus. By generating continuous insecurity, these groups have undermined Afghanistan's sovereignty, exploiting Pakistan's support networks to operate with near impunity. This situation not only threatens Afghan citizens and national security but also facilitates foreign intervention and external control.

Key Elements of the Deception Strategy:

- 1. Constructing and reinforcing the Taliban's façade of legitimacy to gain international support.**
- 2. Promoting internal conflict and local tensions to prevent the emergence of an independent central authority.**
- 3. Utilizing extremist groups as instruments of regional leverage for Pakistan and its allies.**
- 4. Orchestrating a media spectacle portraying counter-terrorism efforts to reshape global perceptions of the Taliban's role.**

In essence, Taliban, ISIS-K, and TTP operations serve more as instruments of control and leverage in geopolitical competition than as genuine governance actors. This process not only undermines Afghan governance and security but also highlights the complexity of South Asian geopolitics, emphasizing the need for rigorous, evidence-based analysis (Haass, 2024).

Regional and International Implications of Geopolitical Competition in the Afghan Crisis

Due to its strategic location, Afghanistan has consistently been a stage for major and regional power competition. Proxy policies, staged conflicts, and the instrumentalization of extremist groups have destroyed Afghanistan's independence and genuine sovereignty. The Taliban, ISIS-K, and TTP function primarily as instruments of Pakistan and regional allies, rather than as representatives of Afghan citizens (Bennett, 2023).

The consequences of this crisis are profound and multifaceted:

- 1. Persistent internal instability, leading to ongoing conflict, poverty, and infrastructure destruction.**
- 2. Increased influence of foreign powers over Afghanistan politics and economy via proxies and extremist groups.**
- 3. Intensified regional competition among Pakistan, India, China, and global powers, particularly over transit, security, and natural resources.**
- 4. Limited prospects for establishing an independent and legitimate government capable of defending national interests and citizens' rights.**

References

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