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Afghanistan, Part II: Pakistan, India, and Iran

Afghanistan is a landlocked nation that sits at the crossroads of central Asia. As our history noted last week, it was part of the “Great Game” in the 18th and 19th centuries when imperial powers Russia and Britain vied for control of the region. It continued to hold that role as the Soviets and now the U.S. have left the country after trying, but eventually failing, to install and support friendly governments. The resurgence of the Taliban marks the return of the historical pattern where outside powers find it impossible to maintain control of the country. At the same time, Afghanistan’s history shows that local control is contentious as well. Although the Taliban is in control for now, there is no guarantee it can govern the country over time.

For regional powers, the potential for instability in this critical area of Asia raises concerns. However, each nation has its own set of worries relative to its individual geopolitical constraints. Over the next three weeks, we will examine the nations around Afghanistan to analyze how they will deal with the new Afghan government. This week, we will cover Pakistan, India, and Iran. In Part III, Patrick Fearon-Hernandez will cover the impact on Russia and the central Asian nations. Thomas Wash will close the report in Part IV with the effects on China and beyond. Part IV will conclude with market ramifications.

The Geopolitics of Pakistan and India

Although India and Pakistan are separate countries, their geopolitics are closely linked. The key point is geography, especially the control of two rivers, the Ganges and the Indus.



(Source: University of Texas)

As the map shows, this area of the subcontinent is isolated by the Himalayas; to the east, dense jungles further contain the area. The “natural” boundaries of a state would be outlined by the mountain ranges which contain the two river systems. Although colonial India had numerous ethnic and religious differences, the lack of natural geographic boundaries meant that there was significant intermingling. But concerns from Muslims over their minority status in India led to the separation of India from Pakistan shortly after Britain granted Pakistan independence in August 1947. India became a dominant Hindu state, while Pakistan was Muslim. East Pakistan, which

is present-day Bangladesh, was also a Muslim entity.¹

The division of India and Pakistan unfortunately created unresolved geopolitical problems. As the above map shows, control of the two river systems is key to geopolitical stability.² After the partition, Pakistan controlled much of the Indus River and Bangladesh controlled the Ganges River delta. But none of the three nations dictated the entirety of both river systems. Since the “natural” geopolitical goal is to control these rivers, there have been persistent tensions between Pakistan, Bangladesh,³ and India.

Once divided, India did not have the wherewithal to deal with Pakistan alone. It was a poor nation and needed outside support to replace the British. It could have allied with the U.S., but given America’s global reach, it worried that close relations with Washington would end up with the U.S. replacing Britain in some sort of neo-colonial relationship. Instead, India was an early member of the “non-aligned movement,” which tried to avoid close relations with either of the Cold War powers. However, it leaned toward the Soviets, in part, because the Russian Navy was mostly bottled up by the U.S. Navy and so the Soviets were less likely to dominate India.

¹ Bangladesh became independent from Pakistan in 1971.

² As a comparison, if the Confederacy had won independence in the Civil War, control of the Mississippi River system would have been shared between two nations, which would have likely been a source of constant tension.

³ Because this report is more concerned about the impact of a change of government in Afghanistan, the issues with Bangladesh are not going to be analyzed further.

Meanwhile, Pakistan also attempted to be part of the non-aligned movement. However, with India mostly siding with the Soviets, Pakistan found it easier to align with the U.S. Over time, relations deepened.

India’s geopolitical problem is that it doesn’t control the entirety of the Indus and Ganges River systems. Pakistan doesn’t either. Although it does control much of the Indus River, a significant portion runs through Jammu and Kashmir, both under Indian rule.

Nevertheless, Pakistan’s larger problem is the lack of strategic depth. The vast majority of Pakistan’s population lives in the Indus River valley. Almost literally, Pakistan’s “back is against the wall” of the Himalayas. Thus, Pakistani governments feel the need for strategic depth and the best candidate for that depth is Afghanistan. Islamabad needs at least a neutral power in Kabul as one aligned with India would leave it encircled.

This is why the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was so troubling to Pakistan. In 1978, a coup led by left-wing military officers overthrew the existing government Afghanistan. The coup leaders struggled to maintain control, leading to the Soviet incursion in 1979. With the Soviets aligned with India, a government in Afghanistan also aligned with the Soviets put Pakistan in a precarious position. And so, following the Soviet invasion, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan joined forces to fund, train, and otherwise support mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan. The Soviets initially sent a small force to secure the capital and relied on the Afghan army to quell the mujahideen. That effort failed as the Afghan army generally refused to fight the Islamist insurgents. At its peak, there were 115,000 Red Army troops in the country, but at no

time did the Soviets and their allies control more than 20% of the territory. Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province became a base of operations for the Islamist resistance. By the late 1980s, the Soviet Union began the process of leaving and exited the country in February 1989. In less than two years, the Soviet Union no longer existed. By March 1992, the government in Kabul had also collapsed.

Although numerous groups (including non-Islamic Maoist insurgents) united to push out the Soviets, the insurgents were far from unified in the absence of an outside threat. After the fall of the Soviet-aligned government, a civil war developed that was supported by outside powers. Ethnic Tajiks in the north were led by Ahmad Shah Massoud.⁴ Saudi Arabia supported Sunni Pashtuns.⁵ Iran gave aid to a Shia group.⁶ Uzbekistan was behind a contingent run by Abdul Rashid Dostum, who had an alliance with Massoud.⁷ Pakistan supported two groups,⁸ including the Taliban. The first phase of the civil war ran from 1992 to 1996, when the Taliban captured Kabul. The second phase pitted the Taliban against the Northern Alliance; it lasted until 2001, when the U.S. ousted the Taliban from power.

After the U.S. and allied NATO forces took control of Afghanistan, Pakistan allowed the allies to use the country for logistical purposes. However, it maintained contact with the Taliban and even housed Osama bin Laden until he was killed by U.S. Special Forces. As it became apparent that Pakistan was supporting the insurgency,

⁴ Jamiat-e Islami

⁵ Ittehad-e Islami

⁶ Hezb-i Wahdat

⁷ Junbish-i Milli

⁸ Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin

relations between Washington and Islamabad cooled. With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, it is likely that the relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan is seriously ruptured and may not be repairable. [Since 2018, the U.S. has cut off military aid to the country.](#)

India and Pakistan

At first glance, the U.S./NATO withdrawal appears to be a major win for Pakistan and something of a loss for India. The latter would prefer to see Pakistan surrounded with a government at best friendly to Delhi or at least neutral. But given Pakistan's close ties to the Taliban, Kabul would likely be a close ally of Islamabad. However, that assumes the Taliban can actually control the country. In reality, as the post-Soviet civil war showed, the mujahideen are rarely unified. [Radical groups will likely be able to move over the porous borders](#) and become difficult for Pakistan to control. [The potential for a refugee crisis to develop in Pakistan is a clear concern.](#)

In addition, some of these insurgent groups are opposed to China; we note that there was a [suicide bomber attack on a bus carrying Chinese workers in August](#). As [China increases its investment into Pakistan](#), it is imperative that it protect Chinese nationals working in the country. As the U.S. leaves and becomes increasingly jaded with Pakistan, China has moved to fill the economic void. Pakistani leaders could find themselves facing an Islamist insurgency as they move to protect China's investments.

For India, there are two issues. First, Delhi has been critical of Pakistan's support of Islamist insurgent groups that operate in the disputed region of Kashmir. A Taliban government in Afghanistan may foster even more terrorist activity in this area. Second, the prospect of China's involvement in

Pakistan is unwelcome. [India and China are engaged in a low-grade conflict in the Himalayas](#). With U.S. economic support waning, China is likely to become even more important to Pakistan, something that India will try to undermine.

Just as Afghans struggle to unify in the absence of an outside power, Pakistan will likely prefer that Islamist fighters in Afghanistan attack outsiders, such as the U.S. or the Soviets. Without outside power involvement, a return of civil war in Afghanistan is possible and that would not be in Pakistan's best interests. India, a Hindu-dominated power, doesn't welcome a radical Islamist government in Afghanistan; interestingly enough, such a government might not provide the strategic depth desired by Pakistan.

Iran

Shiites represent about 10% of Afghanistan's population. The majority of Shiites are Hazara who live in central Afghanistan. Although Iran is governed by a Shiite theocracy, in practice, Tehran is rather flexible in who it supports. For example, it actively assists Hamas, which is tied to the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni movement. In general, Iran tends to support any group it finds useful in projecting power.

Iran has been friendly to the Taliban, allowing members to use Iran as a refuge. It also permitted the Taliban to open offices in

Iranian cities. However, Iran has also encouraged the Hazaras to rise up against the Taliban to give Iran a reason to intervene in Afghanistan. Iran funded the Fatemiyoun Division, Afghan Hazaras who were trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. This division fought in Syria [but also against the Taliban](#).

Iran also fears that the Taliban, strapped for cash, will turn to poppy growing and opium production. [Iran has a serious drug addiction problem](#) and an increase in opioid supply would further weaken its economy. It has already struggled with COVID-19; adding cheap heroin to this mix would be a problem.

America's enemies preferred the U.S. to be tied down in Afghanistan. Initially, [Tehran celebrated the U.S. exit](#), seeing it as evidence of weakness. However, [Iran now has to deal with increased instability and the chances of another civil conflict in a neighboring nation](#). In addition, now that the U.S. has moved on from Afghanistan, it has more time to focus on other problems...such as Iran.

Part III

Next week's report will examine Afghanistan in relation to the central Asian nations and Russia.

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