

# foreign policy *in focus*



Interhemispheric Resource Center  
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## Afghanistan

Afghanistan was the site of the most violent proxy war of the cold war endgame. It began soon after a 1978 coup by Afghan military officers. In December 1979 the Soviet Army invaded to quash a growing Islamic and nationalist resistance movement, collectively known as the mujahidin. The invasion sparked a massive response by Western and Muslim countries, as well as by China, which together provided billions of dollars in weapons to the mujahidin.

Having failed to crush the mujahidin guerrilla forces and needing to improve relations with the U.S. to pursue reform at home, Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet regime withdrew its troops in February 1989 pursuant to a

### Key Points

- Massive arms supplies continue to fuel the fighting despite the end of the proxy war.
- Pakistani aid together with support from Pashtun traders and tribesmen enabled the Taliban to capture Kabul.
- The U.S. supported efforts by the UN to bring the regional states together, but its policies suffered from a variety of internal contradictions.

UN-mediated agreement. Soviet aid enabled the communist-dominated government of President Najibullah to hold on, but when the Soviet Union dissolved in December 1991, the Afghan government soon began to unravel and collapsed in April 1992.

Despite the end of the proxy war, the massive arms supplies still held by both the Soviet-aided army and the Islamic resistance fighters (backed by the U.S., with help from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and

others) continue to fuel the fighting. The former pattern of conflict (communists versus mujahidin) was transformed into one based largely along ethnic lines.

One superpower dissolved and the other (the U.S.) disengaged; but the regional powers—Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Russia, India, and Saudi Arabia—continued to back one group or another. Groups allied and split around two opposing forces: 1) Gulbuddin Hikmatyar's mainly Pashtun Islamist party, supported by Pakistan with help from Saudi Arabia and international Islamist groups, and 2) the mainly Tajik Islamist regime led by President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud, which came to be aided by Russia, Iran, and India.

Starting in 1994 the UN belatedly reactivated a special mission, but the regional powers undermined it

through covert aid to the warring factions. Rocket attacks and street fighting pounded the capital city of Kabul into ruins. Diplomatically, the U.S. backed the UN mission. The U.S. also supplied a modest amount of humanitarian assistance (\$49 million in 1995) through multilateral organizations.

This violent stalemate changed when Pakistan seized the opportunity to arm and fund a new movement, the Taliban, or Islamic students. Formed by Afghans raised in exile and trained in ultraconservative madrasas (Islamic seminaries) in Pakistan, this movement gained strength by taking advantage of the resentment of Pashtun tribes against the corruption of the former mujahidin leaders and the domination of the government by non-Pashtuns.

For Pakistan, the Taliban might finally provide a means to reestablish Pashtun predominance in Afghanistan, thereby ensuring that Pashtuns on either side of the Pakistan-Afghan border would not focus their nationalist aspirations against Pakistan. Equally important, however, may be the Taliban's ability to provide security for trade and, potentially, oil and gas pipelines to link the newly independent states of Central Asia to the international market through Pakistan rather than Iran.

Pakistani aid (backed by Saudi money) together with support from Pashtun traders and tribesmen enabled the Taliban to capture Kabul in September 1996. Promising an end to the fighting, the Taliban, at least initially, counted on extensive popular support. However, the Taliban quickly imposed their ultraconservative Islamic rule, confining women to their homes, closing girls' schools, requiring men to grow beards and attend mosque, and outlawing soccer, chess, and music.

The result was isolation of Pakistan as Iran orchestrated a united front with the former Soviet states and India. Also, ethnic polarization in Afghanistan was renewed, as all non-Pashtun factions reunited to resist Pashtun domination and Pakistani hegemony. The U.S. supported UN efforts to bring the regional states together to seek a common approach to Afghanistan, but its policies suffered from a variety of internal contradictions.

Afghanistan ceased to be of strategic interest to the U.S. after the Soviet withdrawal and, most decisively, after the collapse of the USSR. Since then the U.S. government has mainly defined its interests in Afghanistan as “drugs and thugs.” Afghanistan ranks second (after Burma) in world production of opium. It has also been a site for training camps of Islamic extremists (modern revolutionaries, not conservatives like the Taliban). Those convicted of bombing the World Trade Center in New York and those accused of bombing the U.S. military residence in Khobar, Saudi Arabia, were primarily (Arab, not Afghan) veterans of these camps.

Hence the U.S. seeks a stable government that could be a partner in efforts against these threats. It does not express a preference among the various factions vying for power. Despite a persistent belief in the region that the U.S. is behind the Taliban’s rise, no evidence has emerged to substantiate that charge, and all U.S. officials deny it in private and public. Many officials recognize that the past policy of arming all anti-Soviet factions in Afghanistan, regardless of their extremism or lack of political support, contributed toward the current crisis and to the current U.S. policy dilemma.

The U.S. publicly supports the UN effort to construct a broad-based transitional government. It has provided diplomatic support to this effort by high-level visits to the country, despite considerable danger and insecurity. The U.S. government has made statements about violations of human rights, including those of women; and it has made it clear that humanitarian aid might not continue if some of the Taliban practices endure. At present the U.S. has no bilateral aid package for Afghanistan, and all aid goes to multilateral efforts such as the UN program to eliminate the estimated ten million land mines left by the Soviets and other military forces.

Unfortunately, these U.S. positions, specific to Afghanistan, are undermined to a certain extent by more general policies of the U.S. government. Most obviously, U.S. support of the UN as the proper vehicle for a negotiated settlement of the Afghan conflict is contradicted by congressional refusal to allocate funds for UN dues or the U.S. share of peacekeeping expenses. Partly as a result of this U.S. recalcitrance, the UN’s Afghan mission suffers from underfunding and understaffing.

In addition, U.S. policy toward Iran conflicts with U.S. stated policy toward Afghanistan and is one of the reasons that many in the region believe that the U.S. supports the Taliban. U.S. policy aims at isolating and containing Iran and seeking sanctions against countries and corporations that do business with it. The U.S. opposes all efforts by Iran to capture a share of Central

Asian trade and to serve as an outlet to the market for Central Asian oil and gas.

At the same time, however, a partnership between U.S. and Saudi oil companies has developed plans for a pipeline from neighboring Turkmenistan that ultimately could mean billions of dollars in trade. Iran sees this as part of the U.S. strategy of isolating and containing Iran, while Russia and some Central Asian states feared that the Taliban would seek to penetrate into Central Asia. Meanwhile, the U.S. has blocked any multilateral financing for pipelines or transport routes connecting the former Soviet Union (Caucasus and Central Asia) to Iran.

In the context of current U.S. policy, the attempt by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (the principal partners of the U.S. during the Soviet-Afghan war) to use the Taliban to open alternative trade routes and pipelines to Central Asia appears to Iran not so much as economic competition but as part of a strategy of encirclement ultimately aimed at destruction of the Islamic Republic.

If the U.S. is in fact supporting the joint Pakistani-Saudi backing of the Taliban in some way, even if not materially, than it has in effect decided to make Afghanistan the victim of yet another proxy war—this time aimed at Iran rather than the USSR. If, as the officials most closely involved in the U.S. policy insist, Washington’s overriding goal in Afghanistan is a stable government formed with UN assistance, then the policy of isolating Iran prevents the U.S. from supporting that policy with full credibility.

The lack of channels of communication between the U.S. and Iran, combined with the advocacy of Pakistan’s position that sometimes seems to emanate from the U.S. embassy in Islamabad, inherently make U.S. actions unbalanced even if they are not intended to be so. Furthermore, Washington has no direct channels through which to reassure Iran about its intentions.

Finally, the U.S. has not described and criticized in a straightforward manner the specific types of external interference occurring in Afghanistan. Public statements by the State Department condemn such interference but never specify who is undertaking it. Fortright statements would introduce a certain realism into the public debate which has been lacking.

### Key Problems

- U.S. policy toward Iran conflicts with U.S. stated policy toward Afghanistan and is one of the reasons that many in the region believe the U.S. supports the Taliban.
- U.S. support of the UN as the proper vehicle for a negotiated settlement of the Afghan conflict is undermined by congressional refusal to allocate funds for UN dues or the U.S. share of peacekeeping expenses.
- The U.S. has not described and criticized in a straightforward manner the specific types of external interference occurring in Afghanistan. Public statements by the State Department condemn such interference but never specify who is undertaking it.

Regardless of how much its past policies contributed to the current situation, the U.S. does not hold the key to solving the Afghanistan problem. It has little if any leverage with any of the current Afghan combatants. U.S. leverage with Pakistan is considerably reduced, since Washington terminated all assistance to that country in 1990, when President Bush could no longer deny that it was manufacturing nuclear weapons. The U.S. even has limited influence in Saudi Arabia, which has its own sources of money and knows that it is central to the U.S. vital interests in Gulf security. Obviously, the U.S. has little or no leverage with the regional states opposing the Taliban, namely Iran, Russia, India, and the Central Asian states.

Conservatives in Congress who formerly supported the Afghan mujahidin now demand a more unilateral policy in which the U.S. would act to ensure the return of

death, the assassination of Iranian opposition figures, and Iran's opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations.

Although there are grounds for discussion with Iran on all these matters, it is unrealistic to expect that Afghanistan could be treated as a totally separate issue in U.S.-Iran relations. Nonetheless, at least in multilateral forums and perhaps through allies such as Germany and other channels, the U.S. should seek to reassure Iran that U.S. policy in Afghanistan recognizes Iran's interests as a neighboring country and is not aimed at excluding it. With this principle in mind, Washington should actively support a negotiated understanding among Afghanistan's neighbors that guarantees that 1) none of them will be excluded from Central Asian markets, and 2) none of them will use Afghanistan against the others. Then these neighbors as well as the U.S. can support the efforts of the United Nations to form a more representative government.

The U.S. can also provide leadership in an area that has been given insufficient attention: creation of a program for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Thus far there is little indication that the international community is prepared to offer any alternative to the fighters and opium growers of Afghanistan. Indeed, in a world beset by donor fatigue, it is difficult to envisage yet another massive program of aid. In this context, the interest in Afghanistan by oil companies could be used creatively to support peace rather than aggravate conflict. The U.S. could work through multilateral financial institutions to design a public-private partnership for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Key to any such program would be the creation of institutions to manage funds generated, including rents from pipelines, that would provide some accountability to the Afghan people at large and avoid the corruption and decay that oil wealth has brought to states such as Iran and Nigeria.

Such a program of reconstruction conditional on a UN mediated agreement would provide the international diplomatic effort with significantly more leverage than it now enjoys.

*Written by Barnett Rubin of the Council on Foreign Relations. CFR takes no position on policy issues, and this article is solely the responsibility of the author.*

## Key Recommendations

- The U.S. could work through multilateral financial institutions to design a public-private partnership for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.
- Key to any such program would be the creation of institutions to manage funds generated, including rents from pipelines, that would provide for some accountability to the Afghan people at large and avoid the corruption and decay that oil wealth has brought to states such as Iran and Nigeria.
- The U.S. should support the UN effort with real power by deploying what means Washington can command to persuade Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to cease support for the Taliban and to cooperate with the UN mission.

the former king of Afghanistan, Zaher Shah, to establish what they would consider to be a moderate regime. Besides the fact that the former king has no demonstrated capacity for ruling, unilateral action by the U.S. would inevitably stir up Iranian resistance. This might subject the Afghan people to yet another proxy war—and this time without even the strategic rationale of opposing the Soviet invasion of a nonaligned state. The U.S. does not have the means to bring peace to Afghanistan by unilateral action.

The most productive use of U.S. power in Afghanistan would be to support the UN effort with real power by deploying what means Washington can command to persuade Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to cease support for the Taliban and to cooperate with the UN mission and other regional states. In con-

junction with such efforts, the U.S. should open up communications with Iran. Serious problems remain over the *fatwa* (judicial decree) under which the late Ayatollah Khomeini sentenced Salman Rushdie to

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**Editors**  
Martha Honey (IPS)  
Tom Barry (IRC)

**Production**  
Grant Moser

**Communications Director**  
Erik Leaver (IRC)

### Orders and subscription information:

**Mail:** PO Box 4506  
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87196-4506  
**Phone:** (505) 842-8288  
**Fax:** (505) 246-1601  
**Email:** resourcectr@igc.apc.org

### Editorial inquiries and information:

<b>IRC Editor</b>	<b>IPS Editor</b>
<b>Phone:</b> (505) 388-0208	<b>Phone:</b> (202) 234-9382/3 ext. 232
<b>Fax:</b> (505) 388-0619	<b>Fax:</b> (202) 387-7915
<b>Email:</b> resourcectr@igc.apc.org	<b>Email:</b> ipsps@igc.apc.org
<b>Website:</b> <a href="http://www.zianet.com/infocus">http://www.zianet.com/infocus</a>	

# *sources for more information*

## Publications

Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

Barnett R. Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

## Organization

**Center for Preventive Action  
Council on Foreign Relations**  
58 E. 68th St.  
New York City, NY 10021  
Voice: (212) 734-0400  
Fax: (212) 517-4967  
Email: brubin@email.cfr.org

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Interhemispheric Resource Center  
P.O. Box 4506  
Albuquerque, NM 87196-4506

Institute for Policy Studies  
1601 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
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