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# Concept of the Week (PSIR Optional)

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## The New Great Game in Afghanistan

### The Graveyard of Empires

- Historically even when empires won some initial battles and made inroads into Afghanistan, they failed to govern or completely pacify the Afghan territory, thereby leading to the nickname “*Graveyard of Empires*”.

#### Afghanistan: The graveyard of empires

Number of military deaths in foreign interventions in Afghanistan (1839-2021\*)

Country	Foreign intervention	Military deaths
United States (2001-2021)	Operation Enduring Freedom	2,348
NATO - excluding US (2001-2021)	Operation Enduring Freedom	1,147
Soviet Union (1979-1989)	Soviet-Afghan War	14,453
British Empire (1919)	Third Anglo-Afghan War	236
British Empire (1878-1880)	Second Anglo-Afghan War	9,850
British Empire (1839-1842)	First Anglo-Afghan War	4,700

Afghanistan is particularly hard to conquer primarily due to the intersection of three factors:

First, because Afghanistan is located on the main land route between Iran, Central Asia, and India, it has been invaded many times and settled by a plethora of tribes, many mutually hostile to each other and outsiders.

Second, because of the frequency of invasion and the prevalence of tribalism in the area, its lawlessness leads to a situation where almost every village or house was built like a fortress, or ‘*qalat*’.

Third, the physical terrain of Afghanistan makes conquest and rule extremely difficult, exacerbating its tribal tendencies.

### The US- Afghanistan Conflict

- The US-Afghanistan conflict began in 2001 in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack as a part of ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’, the official name used by the U.S. government led by President G.W. Bush, for the Global War on Terrorism.
- Operation Enduring Freedom, which was a joint U.S., U.K., and Afghan operation, was separate from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which was an operation of North Atlantic Treaty Organization nations including the U.S. and the U.K.
- The U.S.-led coalition initially removed the Taliban from power and seriously crippled al-Qaeda and associated militants in Afghanistan. However, success in quelling the Taliban insurgency since the 2001 invasion has faltered.
- On 31 December 2014, under President Obama, Operation Enduring Freedom concluded, and was succeeded by Operation Freedom's Sentinel on 1 January 2015.

- US was increasingly aware of the 'never ending war' in Afghanistan and a new strategy was started to persuade enemy fighters to defect and join the Afghan government under Karzai.
- The U.S. and NATO formally ended their combat mission in Afghanistan on December 28, 2014, but retained a reduced force of approximately 13,000 troops to support and train Afghan troops until a drawdown was implemented in 2020.



### Timeline of the Peace Process

In 2019, more than 18 years of conflict, the US and the Taliban signed an "agreement for bringing peace" to Afghanistan. US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and top Taliban official Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar held negotiations on the United States withdrawing its troops from the country in exchange for the Taliban taking a pledge to block international terrorist groups from operating on Afghan soil.

In September 2019, then President Trump suddenly posted a tweet calling off the peace talks and cancelled a secret meeting with the Taliban and Afghan President Ghani after a US soldier was killed in an attack by the Taliban.

In Feb 2020, US and the Taliban inked an agreement in which the Taliban vowed that the country will not be used for terror activities. There was also a push for the intra-Afghan talks. On the other hand, Afghan President on the other hand said the Taliban must meet his government's own conditions before it enters talks.

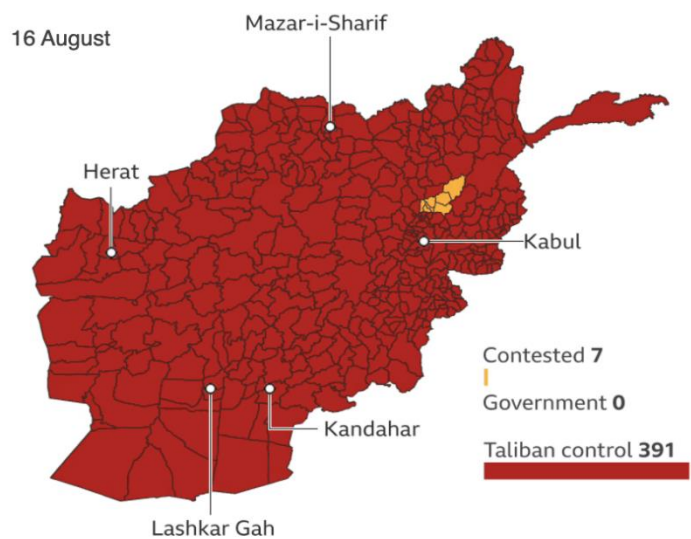
In September 2020, the Taliban and the Afghan government met face to face for the first time in Doha after the Afghan government completed the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners. While the Afghan govt demanded ceasefire while Taliban pushed for the country to be governed through an Islamic system.

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In June 2021, American troops quietly pulled out of Bagram Air Base, their main military base near Kabul, on July 2 2021. The Taliban started taking more areas under their control. On July 5, they said they could give a peace proposal in writing to the Afghan government by August. By July 21 2021, the Taliban had about a half of the country's districts under their control, as claimed by the US. On July 26 2021, the United Nations said nearly 2,400 Afghan civilians had been killed or injured in May and June.

- With the rapid advance of the Taliban, on August 14 2021, the Taliban take major cities Mazar-i-Sharif and Pul-e-Alam. The US sent more troops to help in the safe evacuation of its civilians and officials from Kabul. Inching closer to Kabul, the insurgents took Jalalabad on August 15 2021, without a fight. Within hours, Kabul fell too as the government collapsed, and Ghani fled Afghanistan.
- Stanley Johny argues that the U.S. made three fundamental mistakes, which led to the superpower's humiliating exit:
  - First, the U.S. went into Afghanistan without learning anything from the country's history, or was blindsided by the unipolar hubris.
  - The U.S., driven by the neoconservative globalism of the Bush administration, wanted to topple the Taliban and rebuild a centralised "democratic" state in Afghanistan. After vowing to defeat them, the U.S. launched the Iraq invasion to topple Saddam Hussein and export democracy there. This was the second mistake.
  - The U.S. has also been shifting its focus to East Asia where China is rising and therefore the need to leave Afghanistan. But the U.S. could have opted for a more orderly withdrawal.



## Impact on India

- India has considered to be Afghanistan a long-standing partner and instead of a 'boots on ground approach' took to developmental investments.
- According to Harsh V Pant, India's primary concern emanates from a perceived Pakistani victory in managing to bring the Taliban back to political power in Kabul, thereby energising Islamist extremists in South Asia to target India.
- M.K. Narayanan remarks that for India, the virtual retreat of the U.S. from this part of Asia; the growing China-Russia-Pakistan nexus across the region; and an Iran under a hardliner like Ebrahim Raisi, all work to its disadvantage.
- India's regional security environment could be further undermined if the Taliban let Pakistan use

Afghan territory for gaining strategic depth vis-à-vis India.

- While after capturing power, Taliban has called Kashmir a 'bilateral and internal' matter, India needs to be on its toes.
- Then there is the China factor. Given its close ties with Pakistan, Beijing would like to ensure that the Taliban sever their ties with Uighur extremists in Xinjiang. In exchange, China might emerge as the key economic benefactor of a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, nudging Pakistan to bring the country into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

## Opportunities for India

- According to Vaishali Basu Sharma, Pakistan's long-term interest lies in keeping the Taliban under its control, but not necessarily independent because there are elements within the group that are inimical to Pakistani influence.
- According to Harsh V Pant, India's role as Afghanistan's largest development partner cannot be easily dismissed; it also remains the most popular country for ordinary Afghans.
- New Delhi has strong ties with not only the US and Europe, which will be critical for Afghanistan's economic reconstruction long after foreign military forces leave, but also with neighbours such as Russia and Iran, key for Afghanistan's strategic autonomy.
- *Sushant Sareen* remarks that no end-game in Afghanistan. A new 'Great Game' is just starting. India needs to show strategic patience.
- The Chinese are already reported to be all primed up to accord recognition to the Taliban, followed by Pakistan. The Russians, Central Asian states and Iran would also do the same- the PRICs alliance comprising Pakistan, Russia, Iran, China and Central Asian states built around Afghanistan, an alliance that would obviate the need to seek Western recognition.
- India must prepare for the long game. This includes helping India's friends in Afghanistan by giving them refuge. They will be our strongest allies whenever things take a turn in Afghanistan- this being a strategic response.