
AFGHANISTAN: PEOPLE, LAND AND ITS GEO-STRATEGIC RELEVANCE

Dr. Adil Zaman*

ABSTRACT:

Afghanistan, a completely landlocked country, is located in the heart of South Central Asia. Afghanistan's physical geography has had a profound impact on the country's history and culture. The complex set of mountains that lie at the heart of the country is one of the most obvious features. The local tribes or ethnic divisions are the outstanding social feature of life in Afghanistan. The important geo-strategic location of Afghanistan plays an important role in the region which connects South and Central Asia and Middle East. Because of this strategic location, Afghanistan has been targeted by various invaders. It has also been a source in which the local powers invaded the neighboring states to establish their own empires. Besides, the strategic location of Afghanistan was the central point responsible for the intense rivalry between Britain and Russia during the nineteenth century. It was on August 19, 1919 that Afghanistan regained its independence from Britain following the third Anglo-Afghan war. Since the late 1970, the land of Afghanistan has been under turbulence due to civil war among various Afghan war-lords. This was further intensified by foreign occupation, first by USSR in 1979 and then by the US in 2001 in order to topple the government of the Taliban.

KEY WORDS: Afghanistan, Ethnic groups, Geo-Strategic location, Cold War, Taliban.

INTRODUCTION:

Geographically, Afghanistan can be described as a land-locked country located in South-Central Asia. Besides, it is also described as being located in South Asia, Middle East or the Central Asia. It shares its border with many important countries in the region i.e. Pakistan in the South East, Iran in the West, three Central Asian states, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the north and China in the East

* Assist. Prof. Department of Political Science, University of Balochistan, Quetta

(1). One of the important features of social life in Afghanistan is its ethnic divisions or local tribes. People show their utmost loyalty to their own ethnic group, tribe or kin which is commonly known as *qawm* in their language. Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmens and Aimaks are the prominent ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Comparatively, rural Afghanistan is the best example tribal loyalty where ethnic groups take dominancy over the people (2).

PEOPLE

In Afghan war, which was one of the deadliest conflicts of the twentieth century, nearly 2 million people were killed along with 15 thousand Soviet soldiers and approximately 2 million were wounded(3). In this war, more than 6 million Afghans migrated to Iran and Pakistan in order to save themselves from the wrath of war. This Afghan migration is considered as one of the world's largest refugee population since the 1981 (4). Therefore, it is estimated that at least 50% of Afghanistan's local population (which was approximately 15 to 17 million people at the beginning of war, now the present population is 22 million) has been killed, wounded and homeless (5). There would hardly be any region of Afghanistan which was not touched by war.

The present population of Afghanistan is of a mixed nature, and consists of distinct groups – tribes or communities – each preserving its own blood and traditions, and avoiding marriage with other tribes as far as possible. We may divide them first into Afghans and non-Afghans. The Afghans (including those who call themselves Pukhtoos) exist almost everywhere in the country, but principally in the south of the Hindu Kush under various tribal designations, as Durranis, Barakzais, Sadozais, Achakzais, Usufzais, Ghilzais etc., together with the different tribes inhabiting the slopes, pockets and valleys of the Suleiman Range, which are now known collectively as the Frontier tribes (6). The non-Afghans consist of Tajiks, Turks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turcoman, Hindkis, Arabs etc., with Kizilbashes (Shias) and a sprinkling of Hindus and Jews. The non-Afghans are chiefly found in the north of the Hindukush; the Jews mostly in Heart; the Kizibashes in Kabul; and the Hindus in the chief towns (7).

Few scholars agree on the intricate details of Afghanistan's population statistics. Approximately eighty percent of them are Sunnis and the remaining twenty percent belong to the Shia sect (8). Kabul, which had a population of one million at the time of the Russian invasion, now has over 3 million people in it. Only 25 percent of the village population is now outside the major towns (9). The more powerful

tribes compete for power and are often hostile to each other. They speak 20 languages, though most of them understood two – Pushtun or Pashto and Dari which is a special variation of Persian.

Demographically, the Pushtuns represent the largest of the Afghan ethnic groups and form at least 40 percent of the population of the country. They are Hanafi Sunnis except for the Turis who are Shias. The Pushtuns have dominated over the rest of the Afghans ever since Ahmad Shah Abdali- a Durrani pushtun – formed a confederation of Afghan tribes in 1747. The Durrans ruled over the country for over two hundred years occupying all the important positions in the civil and military establishment. This has been resented by the ethnic minorities in Afghanistan. In matters of day to day life and in their reactions with others, the Pushtuns strictly follow their own tribal traditions and customs the most well known being the Pashtunwali (10). Pashtunwali is the tribal honor code of Pashtuns which is unwritten and for centuries governs the Pashtun way of life. Basically, these codes are followed by the Pashtuns of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Pashtun refugees all around the world. The elements of Pashtunwali are strongly observed in the Pashto-speaking areas. Even it is impossible to find a child in those areas, whether male or female, who are not aware with the main codes or principles of Pashtunwali. The key codes of Pashtunwali are *melmastia* (hospitality), *badal* (revenge), *nanawati* (asylum or refuge) etc. Thus, Pashtunwali through these codes lays down rules of conduct for the Pashtuns (11).

The Tajiks are the second-ranked ethnic group, comprising about 20 percent of the population. The 3.5 million Tajiks claim Iranian descent. They are mostly Hanafi Sunnis. Some are Ismaili shias (12). Most of them are agriculturists or petty traders leading a settled life unlike the Pushtuns who are mostly nomadic in character.

The Uzbeks were mostly driven into Afghanistan from Uzbekistan in central Asia when the Soviets pushed their communist ideology southwards. There are about one million Uzbeks in Afghanistan (13). They have not played any significant role in the Afghan polity. They inter marry freely with their Tajik neighbors but rarely with the Pushtuns, who consider them somewhat less than social equals.

About 870,000 Hazaras (14) live in the inhospitable Hazarijat area in central Afghanistan. Their mongoloid features confirm their descent from the hordes of Chengiz Khan who swept the land astride the Hindu Kush in the 13th century. Most of them are Imami Shias and gain strength from the moral support they receive from the Iranians. Some are Ismailis and a few of them are sunnis (15). They are relatively poor and are mostly engaged in menial jobs. In the earlier times they were taken as

slaves by the Pushtuns and even today they are at the bottom of the social pile (16). The other Afghan tribes are the Aimaks (800,000) who are Hanafi Sunnis living close to the Iranian border. They speak a dialect of Dari. Also along the Iran-Afghan border are found Farsiwan (600,000). They belong to the Ismaili faction of the Shia sect. The Brohi (200,000) are Hanafi Sunnis inhabiting the desert area of southwestern Afghanistan. The Turkomen (125,000) are found in the northwest. The Baluchis (100,000) are also Sunnis. They are a nomadic people moving between Sistan and Herat. The Nuristanis (100,000) are Sunnis who are living in the mountainous terrain in the northeast opposite the 'Kafir' valleys of Chitral in Pakistan (17).

LAND AND ITS IMPACT (MOUNTAINS AND PASSES):

Afghanistan covers an area of 796, 095 sq. km which is smaller than Pakistan but slightly bigger than France in size (18). Stretches 1,300 Km from South west to Northeast, Afghanistan has a total width of 600 km. The British carved the narrow stretch of territory in Afghanistan known as Wakhan Corridor in order to prevent the former Soviet Union having direct access to their possessions in India. Afghanistan has a dry weather, with an average rainfall of only about ten inches and must therefore depend for irrigation upon its rivers, of which there are a number born in the mountains (19) It is estimated that of the total area of the country only 7.8 million hectares comprising 12% of the total area is under cultivation of this area only 5.3 million hectares or 9% have irrigation facilities, but due to lack of water only 2.5 million hectares or 4% of the total area the country is used regularly every year. Moreover, only 4.78% of the total area of the country, mostly in the south and east, is under forests. Much of the uncultivated country side, however, provides summer grazing land for large herds of sheep, goats and camels, all of which are important sources of income (20).

In the country three- fifth of whose total area is mountainous, by far the most impressive physical features is a home of the Hindu Kush (Persian for "Killer") which bisect Afghanistan from northeast to south west for about 450 miles (21). Ibne-Batuta, the famous Muslim traveler and historian of the fourteenth century, crossed the Hindu Kush and gave it its present name because so many Hindu Slaves brought from India died while negotiating this formidable physical barrier covered for the most part of the year with snow (22). It is one of the highest and most impressive ranges in the world. The Section of the range to the north of Kabul, the

Afghan capital, is called Kohi-i-Baba (Father mountains), a northern ridge farther to the east is known as the Safed Koh (White mountains). The extreme western part is called the Porpomisus. The name that was applied to the entire system by the geographers of ancient Greece (23).

Many passes cut through the central Hindu Kush mountains, and in the past provided the main routes north and south. Dupree divided Afghanistan into ten natural provinces: East, South, Central, West, Northwest, North Nuristan, Badakhshan, Wakhan, and Monsoonal Afghanistan (24)

GEO STRATEGIC RELEVANCE DURING COLD WAR ERA:

With the departure of British from the sub-continent, Afghanistan lost its importance in the eyes of the western bloc. This was because of the reason that the western bloc, in order to counter Soviet expansion, found Pakistan as its main ally in the region. But the scenario changed with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 which brought Afghanistan once again to the limelight. This situation attracts the intervention of regional powers and thus changed dramatically the strategic balance of the region. Afghanistan in the above context of strategic relevance gained further importance after the disintegration of Soviet Union (25).

POST COLD WAR ERA AND AFGHANISTAN'S GEO-STRATEGIC RELEVANCE:

The withdrawal of Soviet Union from Afghanistan once again changed the geo-strategic importance of Afghanistan. With the disintegration of USSR in 1991, new independent states in Central Asia came into being. In order to end its dependence from Russia, those new Central Asian states were desperately looking for the new routes or means of communication to export its oil and gas resources. In this scenario, Afghanistan once again acquired the strategic position by providing its land route from Central Asia to Arabian Sea. Thus, it can be asserted that Afghanistan, despite its landlocked position, plays a very vital role as a trade route and an energy corridor for the Central Asian states (26).

TALIBAN AND ITS IMPACT ON THE GEO STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT:

Soon after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US-supported Mujahidin took control of the country. The US on the other hand, instead of continuing its support to the Mujahidin, left the region and thus created a power vacuum which soon resulted in the emergence of Taliban rule (27).

As Afghanistan had been abandoned by both Russian and the West, the Taliban had no interest in acting as buffer, and pursued their own agenda (28). At that time, people of the war torn Afghanistan warmly welcomed Taliban as they promised to bring peace and stability in the country. However, Taliban's ill-policies and their struggle for power having no political ambitions and refused to share power with other main factions pushed the country, once again, into another period of instability. At this point, Afghanistan can be described as a country which was legally undivided territory of fragmented power. This situation lasted till December 2001. Taliban turned into real threat of Islamic fundamentalism when it hosted Al-Qaeda and its leadership. The US came into confrontation with the Taliban when the US embassies were bombed by Al-Qaeda in 1998 (29). However, it was the 11 Sep 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre, which roused the world community and forced them to deal with the menace posed by Taliban and its associates.

THE RELEVANCE AFTER THE INCIDENT OF 9/11:

The War on Terror started by the US and its allies disturbed the region and further added a great deal of turbulence in Afghanistan. The incident of 9/11 gave the US an opportunity to bring Afghanistan under its effective control both politically, militarily and economically.

This effective control over Afghanistan will help the US in getting access to oil and gas resources of Central Asian states and also to contain and check the influence of China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and India. Besides, the US will also keep a check on the nuclear states in the region. If the US wants Afghanistan to be its asset, it has to be created first and the US has to invest its efforts for the construction of Afghanistan in order to make Afghanistan a reliable ally.

On the other hand, the US exit from Afghanistan could create political vacuum which would most likely to be filled by Iran, India and Russia (30).

CONCLUSION:

Afghanistan has a very old history and can be said as the cradle of civilization, as different people from different region of the world entered this land and created history. This led to the creation of heterogeneous nature of society in the land of Afghanistan. While discussing about the people of Afghanistan, the first and the leading point discussed was ethnicity, which play an important role in Afghan society. Besides, Afghanistan has an uneven and rocky physical geography. This physical topography has lead to the development of various tribes and ethnic groups in Afghanistan such as Pushtoons, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Balochs etc. Important ethnics groups in Afghanistan were discussed in this paper, which is very important to study and is helpful for those who want to know and understand the present situations in Afghanistan. In building up the territorial structure of Afghanistan, ethnicity plays a very vital role. Despite thousands of years of integration, different ethnic groups in Afghanistan have maintained their uniqueness without overlapping each other. Taking into consideration the geographical and historical experiences of Afghanistan, it can be said that it could not develop politically, socially and economically like other modern democratic countries of the world. During the Cold War era, Afghanistan continued to be at the centre stage of International Politics, with Pakistan playing a very vital role of acting as the frontline state for the US for supplying its military, financial and other necessary materials to the Afghan Mujahidin. Thus it can be said that Afghanistan, due to its potential of influencing the politics and societies of its neighboring states, has attained great importance in the region.

REFERENCES

- 1) Dr. Nabi Misdaq, *Afghanistan Frailty and External Interference*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p. 10-11.
 - 2) Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2010, p. 17.
 - 3) Abdullah Zaheeruddin, "Taliban Army Hosts Billionaire," Associated Press, Lahour, 5 March, 1997. p.89.
 - 4) Khan, Abdur Rahman, "The life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan", Oxford University Press, Lahore 1980, p.61.
 - 5) Goodson, Larry P. "Afghanistan's Endless war", University of Washington Press, 1998.p.121.
 - 6) Dr. Abdul Ghani, "A brief Political History of Afghanistan", Najaf Publishers, Lahore, 1989, p.47.
 - 7) For a full Account of the Afghan tribes, see Appendix I. "The people of Afghanistan".
 - 8) L.Dupree, "Afghanistan", Princeton University press, Princeton New Jersey, 1973.p.56.
 - 9) Daily Telegraph, London, 15 May, 1989.
 - 10) "The Pushtunwali" is an unwritten code of Justice and social behavior which is partly based on the Holy Quran, Sunnas (traditions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH)) and the local of Afghan traditions.
 - 11) Dr. Nabi Misdaq, *Afghanistan Frailty and External Interference*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p. 10-11.
 - 12) Op.cit., Dupree, p.59.
 - 13) Carleton S.Coon, "The Races of Europe", New York, 1939, pp. 634-638.
 - 14) Ibid
 - 15) Ibid
 - 16) M. Urban, "War in Afghanistan", St. Martins Press, New York, USA. 1988. p.2. Also see Bellow. H.W. Races of Afghanistan. Publications. London, pp III. 116.
 - 17) Op.cit., Dupree, p.64.
 - 18) Statistical year book, UNESCO, 1989, p.101.
 - 19) Reshtia, S.Q., "The Rivers of Afghanistan", Kabul, 1946, p.82.
-

- 20) Hamidullah Amin, "The Human and Physical Aspects of Afghan Regionalism", paper read at a conference on Rural Life in Afghanistan held at the University of Nebraska, Omaha, 23-25 September, 1976.
 - 21) The name was first explained in the writings of the fourteen century Moroccan Arab, Muhammad Ibn-Abdullah Ibn-Batutah. "The Travels of Ibn-Batutah", (London, 1829).
 - 22) Gibbs, H.A.R., "The Travel of Ibne-Batuta", Oxford University press, London, 1967. p. 81.
 - 23) Arnold Fletcher, "Afghanistan, Highway of Conquest", Cornell University Press, New York, 1996, p.11
 - 24) Op.cit., Dupree, p. 3.
 - 25) Elisabeth Leake, "The Defiant Border: The Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands in the Era of Decolonization, 1936-1965", Cambridge University Press, New York, 2017, p. 3.
 - 26) Des Freedman and Daya Kishan Thussu, "Media & Terrorism: Global Perspectives", SAGE Publications, London, 2012, p. 175.
 - 27) Dick Camp, *Boots on the Ground: The Flight to Liberate Afghanistan from Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, 2001-2002* (Minneapolis, USA: Zenith Press, 2012), p. 73.
 - 28) Jeanne K. Giraldo and Harold A. Trinkunas, *Financing and State Response: A Comparative Perspective*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2007, p.95.
 - 29) James J. F. Forest (ed.), *Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century: International Perspectives*, Praeger Security International, London, 2007, p. 103.
 - 30) Ishtiaq Hossain and Mohsen M. Saleh (ed.), *American Foreign Policy and the Muslim World*, Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, Beirut, Lebanon, 2009, p. 371.
-