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Resolving the Ongoing Conflict in Afghanistan

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Introduction

A landlocked country located between South and Central Asia, Afghanistan has been a place of instability for decades. The country has been ravaged by multiple invasions, foreign intervention and internal conflicts throughout history. Despite the fact that the US-led coalition has been fighting the Taliban for 17 years, violence and terrorism are still a major issue within the country. The lives of many Afghan citizens have been ruined by the raging war, with civilian casualties also a significant issue.

The tribal dynamic of the society causes many internal conflicts which prevent the people from forming a unified front. While there is a democratic government in place, the illiteracy of the voters, constant voter fraud, and terrorist attacks prevent democracy from being fully implemented. In the recent years, the Taliban and the Islamic State have increasingly been making gains in parts of the country. If a change in how the conflict is handled is not made, the fight against Taliban could go on for multiple decades.

Key Vocabulary

Mujahideen: The name given to the guerilla fighters that fought against the USSR in the Soviet-Afghan War.

Taliban: The Taliban is a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist political movement that started in 1994.

ISAF: The International Security Assistance Force was founded by the UN to assist the interim government, train state forces and protect UN operatives in Afghanistan. Operational control was transferred to NATO in 2003. UN Security Council Resolution 2405 has extended UNAMA until 17 March 2019.

UNAMA: The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan is a political mission founded in March 28, 2002 at the request of the Afghani government. Its aim was to aid the development of the country. UN Security Council Resolution 2405 has extended UNAMA until 17 March 2019.

ISIL-KP: The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province, or ISIL-KP, is a branch of ISIL that is involved in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Their presence in Afghanistan has increased over the recent years.

Pashtun: The Pashtuns are an ethnic group that are gathered around the region that is now Afghanistan and Pakistan. Their traditional moral laws are called the Pashtunwali. They are also known as ethnic Afghans and their population is spread between thousands of tribes, whose unification has been a major problem. While the Pashtuns are the majority in Afghanistan, there are other ethnic groups living in the country and this should be kept in mind when preparing solutions for the issue. **It is**

advised that solutions be focused on the divide between these groups and tribes of the Pashtun for an effective outcome.

Tribalism: The state of being organized in tribes. Tribes are usually united by a place of birth, ethnicity or ideology. Recently, the adherence to tribalism has been blamed as one of the significant reasons of political instability and internal conflict in Afghanistan. Therefore, the connotations attached to it are assumed to be negative.

Fundamentalism: A way of interpreting traditions or holy texts. Fundamentalists believe in the strict, literal interpretation of scripture. In the context of Islam, it is the most conservative movement in the interpretation of the Qur'an.

Guerilla Warfare: A combat strategy that focuses on engaging targets in short, surprise attacks rather than full offense. This strategy is applied most when a group using it is outnumbered by their opponent, and works best when combined with knowledge of the surrounding environment.

War on Terror: Following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, the US launched the "war on terror", which shortly became an international military campaign to eradicate terrorism and mitigate its effects, especially focused on the Middle East.

Focused Overview

1) Soviet Invasion

To understand the current situation in Afghanistan, it is necessary to go back to 1979, when the USSR invaded Afghanistan in order to maintain their influence on the region. Due to the country's strategic importance, the US increased its support to the Mujahideen that were fighting against the Soviet forces, supplying them with weaponry, munitions, strategy and funding. After years of back-and-forth guerilla warfare, the USSR backed out of Afghani soil by November 1989. With the country in a power vacuum, the weakened local government was overtaken by Mujahideen militia groups when the capital, Kabul, was captured in 1992.

2) Civil War

In an effort to form a temporary coalition government until elections could take place, all militia parties signed the Peshawar Accord. This was an idea suggested by Ahmad Shah Massoud, one of the more prominent leaders among the militia. However, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the head of the Hezb-e-Islami militia, rejected to sign the agreement, claiming that a coalition would prove weak and ineffective. Hezb-e-Islami's subsequent attempt to take control of Kabul resulted in their expulsion from the capital.

Following his expulsion, Hekmatyar started bombing Kabul with the help of the Pakistani Intelligence Agency (ISI). ISI's primary goal was to establish an administration that was friendly to Pakistan. In 1994, the militia forces led by Massoud succeed in driving Hekmatyar out of most of his strongholds, thus putting an end to the attacks on the capital.

3) Rise and Rule of the Taliban

However, in September 1994, a group called Taliban led by Mullah Muhammad Umar,

promised to restore order and reinstate a true Islamic State. Quickly gathering a large number of followers, the group rose to prominence. There are reports that indicate a connection between the ISI and the quick rise of Taliban, suggesting that the agency directed their support towards the newly founded group following the failure of Hekmatyar's forces. Taliban expanded quickly across Afghanistan, gaining control of 12 provinces and amassing an army of 25.000 soldiers. Despite a short-lived defeat during the bombing of Kabul, Taliban forces entered the capital in September 1996.

Under the rule of the Taliban, Afghanistan saw a regression to more traditional Islamic values. For example, women were prohibited to work or receive education past the age of 8 and clothing restrictions were put in place. Furthermore, women were not allowed to leave their houses unless they were accompanied by a close male relative.

In 1997, a resistance group to the north of the country called the Northern Alliance started to form, led by Massoud. Throughout his campaigns, Massoud called for a more democratic regime and demanded elections take place.

4) US Invasion

Following the September 11 attacks, the US initiated the War on Terror and demanded that the Taliban extradite Osama bin Laden for his involvement in the attacks and expel Al-Qaeda from the country. When the Taliban refused to comply with these terms and retained a state of inaction, the Security Council condemned the Taliban for harboring the terrorist organization and started supporting the resistance's local efforts to overthrow the government.

On October 7th, the US launched Operation Enduring Freedom, and began airstrikes, targeting the forces of Taliban and Al-Qaeda. This was soon followed by the deployment of Joint Special Forces on the northern side of the country. The number of soldiers was boosted massively once British, French, German, Dutch, Italian, Canadian, Polish and Turkish troops joined the fight against Taliban. Before deployment, a coalition was formed between the international forces and the Northern Alliance. The coalition quickly overpowered the Taliban. Kabul was taken on November 13th. They were driven out of the north of the country with the capture of Kunduz on November 26th, after which most Taliban members defected or fled to Pakistan. By the 7th of December, Kandahar, the first city Taliban conquered, was liberated. Consequently, a significant number of Taliban and Al-Qaeda's forces retreated to the mountains.

5) Interim Period

Following negotiations between the 2nd and 5th of December, an interim government was created between the major influential groups in Afghanistan as stated in the Bonn Agreement. The president of this administration was Hamid Karzai.

In 2002, Hamid Karzai was elected as President for two years by the Loya Jirga (Grand Council). A new constitution for the Islamic State of Afghanistan was also drafted by the Loya Jirga. Within the following years, the government's collaboration facilitated the delivery of international aid and led to a period of development. Hamid Karzai was reelected in the election of 2004. Presidential elections were a great source of joy for the populace, with

2004's election being the very first democratic election in Afghanistan's history.

6) Resurgence of the Taliban

Shortly after the democratic elections, Taliban insurgents started hindering the developments and efforts to stabilize the country. They engaged the ISAF and Afghan army as well as civilians in guerrilla warfare. The mountainous terrain provided them with a simple and effective defensive strategy.

Elections took place in 2005 with a low turnout rate which was caused by the people's lack of understanding of the candidates' stances. When President Bush visited the country in 2006, he requested that NATO increase its military presence in the region. As his final action regarding Afghanistan, he increased the count of American soldiers drafted in the country by 4,500. Barack Obama further increased this number by 17,000 in February 2009, followed by another 4,000 troops next month. In December, he once more increased the troop count by 30,000 while declaring that troop withdrawal would begin in 2011.

The elections held that year once again had a low turnout rate, this time due to Taliban threats and attacks. Parliamentary elections of 2010 were also marred by the Taliban's influence and allegations of fraud.

In January 2010's International Conference on Afghanistan, the attending countries and organizations came up with a framework to gradually transfer the control of ISAF regions over to Afghan forces.

7) The Death of Osama bin Laden

On May the 2nd, 2011, a US Seal Team raided a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan and shot Osama bin Laden. News of his death spread extremely fast, causing an increase in terrorist attacks within the year.

After news of American soldiers burning copies of the Quran in 2012, another terrorist organization called the Haqqani Network escalated their attacks in Afghanistan. Pakistan denied harboring the Haqqanis, but the suspicion caused the tension between the two governments to rise to a new level.

In 2014, another round of elections was held with better security standards than those in 2010. During the first and second rounds of voting, casualties ensued, some due to Taliban. The candidates that went on to the second round were Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. The results indicated that Ashraf Ghani was elected, yet allegations of voter fraud made this result less decisive. The two candidates signed an agreement by which they shared the administrative powers, while Ashraf Ghani went on to become the official president.

2014 was reported to be the bloodiest year in Afghanistan since the US' invasion. With NATO putting an end to ISAF on December 28th, security responsibilities were handed over to the Afghan police and military. Regardless, the violence and casualties had not decreased within the years following the resurgence of the Taliban. Therefore, the international military presence in the country did not stop, with NATO launching Operation Resolute Support (ORS)

to support and train Afghan forces and provide operational assistance to Afghan institutions.

8) New Offensives

With the launch of ORS, ISIL-KP expanded its operations, gaining territory on the eastern side of Afghanistan. With situations like these making Afghanistan dangerously unstable, the US delayed the withdrawal of troops until 2016, after which NATO also decided to extend ORS.

2016 was amongst the more unsuccessful years military-wise, especially for the US. While ISIL-KP was pushed back, the Taliban managed to gain territory across the south of the country.

After Taliban took hold of an estimated 20% of the country, Barack Obama canceled a former pledge to end military presence in Afghanistan. However, in May 2016, the recently announced leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mansour, was killed. In the same year, the Afghan government granted immunity to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in light of a peace agreement signed with Hezb-e-Islami.

In 2017, attacks of both the Taliban and ISIL-KP became more frequent. In January, a bomb attack in Kandahar killed six diplomats. Two months later, 30 people are killed with more than 50 wounded in an attack on a military hospital. The Islamic State later claimed responsibility for the attack.

In 2018, the terror attacks continue on with an ambulance explosion in Kabul, causing more than 100 casualties. The fight against the Taliban still seems to have no clear end in sight.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Afghanistan

Since the ongoing conflict is in their country, the largest stakeholders are the Afghan government and people. The war in Afghanistan has had a severe impact on the lives of civilians. It has caused many to become internally displaced. Furthermore, civilian casualties throughout the war have been worryingly high. In the first half of 2018, there have been 5,122 civilian casualties according to Al-Jazeera News. Afghanistan's administrative government has changed drastically throughout the events of the last 40 years. Once the Taliban had been pushed back, Afghanistan was able to become a more democratic country, with the country's first ever elections having taken place in 2004. Afghanistan's GDP growth rate last year was 3.6%. Nowadays, Afghanistan is developing at an incredible rate despite the ongoing war, acts of terrorism and other impeding factors. Once the wars and foreign involvement are able to be ended, Afghanistan's economic performance is predicted to soar.

United States of America

The USA's involvement in Afghanistan began after the September 11 attacks. The situation in Afghanistan, for better or for worse, is the way it is because of the USA's response to these attacks. In fact, the US had already requested that the Taliban extradite Osama bin Ladin for bombing US embassies located in Africa in 1998. After 9/11, President George Bush launched the "War on Terror" and invaded Afghanistan which was then ruled by the Taliban. Following US' actions, an international coalition was formed with other UN countries and the local resistance in a plan to defeat

the Taliban. In a matter of months, most of Afghanistan was free of Taliban influence. The US has been supporting the Afghan government for the development and security of the state ever since. Even though various presidents have pledged to withdraw US troops from the country multiple times, they have gone back on their promises due to various reasons and ended up extending their mission. The most drastic increase in troop numbers was seen during the Barack Obama administration. Most recently, Donald Trump has announced that more troops will be sent to assist the fight against the Taliban and ISIL-KP.

Islamic Republic of Pakistan

A neighboring country to Afghanistan, Pakistan has always wanted a friendly government in Kabul. To the extent of achieving this goal, they have been supporting terrorism in Afghanistan. When the Taliban were first driven out of Afghanistan, they took refuge in the mountains and Pakistan. In 2012, they were also suspected of harboring the terrorist organization, the Haqqani Network. They have also been backing the Taliban's operations. One of the major reasons why the Taliban is still standing strong in Afghanistan is predicted to be Pakistani support.

Timeline of Events

Date of Event	Description of Event
December 1979	The USSR invades Afghanistan.
November 1989	The USSR fully retreats from Afghanistan.
April 24 th 1992	The Peshawar Accord is signed.
September 26 th 1996	Taliban enter Kabul, declaring the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.
September 11 th 2001	The World Trade Center and Pentagon are attacked by four airplanes captured by Al-Qaeda operatives.
October 7 th 2001	Operation Enduring Freedom begins.
August 3 rd 2003	Operational control of ISAF is taken over by NATO.
January 2009	Reports of Taliban "shadow governments" spurring up across the country.
2009	US President Barack Obama calls for multiple increases of troops in Afghanistan, reaching a final troop count of 100,000.
January 2010	International Conference on Afghanistan takes place.
May 2 nd 2011	Osama Bin Laden is killed by a US SEAL team in Abbottabad, Pakistan
September 2014	Power sharing agreement is signed between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah.
December 28 th 2014	NATO officially concludes ISAF operations.
2015	ISIL-KP gains territory in West Afghanistan, capturing provinces previously held by the Taliban.
January 2015	Operation Resolute Support is launched by NATO
July 2016	President Obama extends the US' operation in Afghanistan until 2017.
August 2016	Taliban makes gains in southern and northern Taliban, capturing Kunduz.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

- [Authorizing the establishment of an international security assistance force in Afghanistan \(S/RES/1386\)](#)
Security Council Resolution 1386 was a resolution that entailed the creation of ISAF. It was signed on the 20th of December, 2001.
- [Authorizing the establishment of UN assistance mission in Afghanistan \(UNAMA\) \(S/RES/1401\)](#)
Security Council Resolution 1401 was the resolution that led to the creation of UNAMA. It was signed on the 28th of March, 2002.

Possible Solutions

The most effective end to the conflict in Afghanistan will be brought about with the total defeat of the Taliban. What 17 years of war has proven is that there is need for a new strategy in dealing with this terrorist organization. No amount of increase in American troop numbers has been able to put a final end to the group. This shows that the troop increases alone are not enough of a solution. Many strategists believe that the Taliban could keep resisting the forces of the US and Afghan military for 50 more years with the correct tactics. The right answer to ending the conflict will not come from endless increases in military presence. Rather, it will be about creating or arriving at a political settlement, and then incorporating the military to support such a settlement. Additionally, efforts must be put in to stop Pakistani support of the Taliban.

The Afghan population is distributed among several ethnic groups and local communities that often operate autonomously. There are thousands of different tribes and various ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Many of the disagreements and internal conflicts stem from this divide. If a widely acceptable solution is to be reached, a way must be found to reconcile the differences in cultural values and ethnicity while still respecting the ideas of every stakeholder.

Lastly, there are reports of widespread corruption within the Afghan government. Corruption impedes development, which connects back to how effectively the military operates. If the country is freed from the Taliban yet still ruled by a corrupt government, internal conflicts and political instability will still ensue.

Further Reading

Here are some useful links to continue reading/researching about the issue:

- [CIA World Factbook](#)

The CIA World Factbook is the most reliable and concise source to learn about the dynamics of a country. It summarizes the most important details in a succinct manner.

- [Quora | Topic: Afghanistan](#)

Quora is one of the most reliable discussion forums on the internet. Reading people's opinions and

answers to a wide variety of questions might spark up further curiosity about the issue and prove to be more productive than reading articles. However, when considering the reliability and accuracy of an answer, one should make sure the source is credible.

- [Uppsala Data Conflict Program](#)

The Uppsala Data Conflict Program provides a detailed report of casualties in conflicts worldwide.

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