Afghanistan in the whirlwind of US-Russia rivalry in Central Asia

Yahia Baiza

Original article

Article history:
Received: 6 June 2017
Accepted: 16 October 2017
Published: 29 November 2017

Correspondence:
Yahia Baiza: ybaiza@iis.ac.uk

Peer review:
Double blind

Publisher:
Veruscript, Unit 41, Pall Mall Deposit, 124-128 Barlby Road, London, W10 6BL, UK

Copyright:
© 2017 Baiza. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and its authors credited.

Keywords:
United States; Russia; Central Asia; Afghanistan; theories of conflict

Citation:

Link to this article:
https://www.veruscript.com/a/4ZEWGU/
Afghanistan in the whirlwind of US-Russia rivalry in Central Asia

Yahia Baiza\textsuperscript{1,*}

\textsuperscript{1} The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 210 Euston Road, NW1 2DA London, United Kingdom

Abstract

Afghanistan has been the political and military focal points of the United States (US) and Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) for over a half a century. Initially, from the 1950s through to the 1970s, the superpowers competed for influence through educational, economic and technical development projects. They used their international development aid as a strategic tool to penetrate the country’s political elite circles to create a space for their political and strategic influence. The nature of development aid then changed to a series of proxy military conflicts throughout the 1980s, which also changed the fate of Afghanistan from that of a developing to that of a conflict country. The current US occupation of Afghanistan (October 2001-present) is the latest in the cycle of conflict and rivalry between the US and Russia in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Against this background, this article presents an analysis of how (i) the US and Russia create a context and a situation in which they develop, advance, and implement their political and military discourses and strategic concepts, intending to influence each other’s areas of strategic interests; (ii) the different components of conflicts and violence are interconnected with one another; and (iii) their rivalry for strategic influence in Afghanistan and the broader region of Central Asia triggered a cycle of conflict and a series of continuing proxy wars in Afghanistan. This article applies Johan Galtung’s theories of conflicts as the broader theoretical framework. The developed framework combines Galtung’s three theories of conflict, namely the ABC triangle of conflict, triangle of violence and triangle of peace strategy (Galtung, 1967, 1996). The findings of this article demonstrate that both the US and Russia fight each other in Afghanistan as well as in the wider Central Asia region by supporting and maintaining their satellite countries and periphery elites in power and negotiate each other’s spheres of strategic influence on that basis. This article demonstrates that while this approach provides political leverage and strategic gains in the short and medium period, there are significant losses for both parties. While Afghanistan suffers from the continuing political game, the war in Afghanistan is also making a lasting impact on both the US and Russia as well as all other regional powers that are directly and indirectly involved in this conflict.

Methodological and theoretical frameworks

The methodological and theoretical frameworks in this study complement each other. The qualitative research paradigm and Johan Galtung’s theories of conflict comprise this study’s methodological and theoretical frameworks. They share a common epistemological view that emphasises the contextual, historical and social construction of meanings, interventions, and conflicts in society. This study argues that no forms of intervention, including military and political, are entities in themselves. They all come into being and continue to exist as long as conditions and fluxes feed their existence. The methodological and theoretical frameworks will aid this study to develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter and explain how the different components of conflict and violence in Afghanistan are interconnected with one another, and how they contribute to a cycle of conflict that continues until the present time.
In applying Johan Galtung’s theories of conflict as the overall theoretical framework, this article combines his three mutually interlinked triangles together (see Figure 1). They have been experimented and tested since the 1970s in various academic and non-academic settings, such as peace studies, development studies, and conflict resolutions. Each triangle offers a theoretical framework with a specific approach to conflict, violence, and peace. The first one is Galtung’s classical triangle of conflict, comprised of three corners of attitude (A), behaviour (B), and contradiction (C), popularly known as the ABC triangle of conflict. The second triangle formulates a specific approach to address direct, structural, and cultural violence in situations of conflict. The third triangle focuses on peace strategies, namely peace-keeping, peace-making, and peace-building. These theories individually and collectively provide a theoretical framework and direction, through which situations of conflicts could be analysed and explained.

Theoretical framework one: The ABC triangle of conflict

The application of Galtung’s ABC triangle of conflict, as shown in Figure 2, assists this study to explore how the US-Russia rivalry in Afghanistan escalated from the level of international aid to the level of a proxy war, and how the different components of the conflict are interlinked. The ABC triangle of conflict looks at the attitude (A), behaviour (B), and contradictions (C) of conflict between involved adversaries. This theory argues that a conflict arises through enemies’ attitudes, physical behaviours and contradictory goals. Although there is a two-way relationship between all three corners of the triangle, a conflict ultimately happens when at least two adversaries enter a field and become incompatible to resolve their differences and trigger the C corner (contradiction) that forms the core issue of a conflict. Since the three corners are mutually linked together, a negative change in attitude leads to a negative physical behaviour,
which would then escalate the adversaries’ incompatible interests and goals to the level of contradiction and conflict.

A comprehensive understanding of the nature and structure of the US-Russia rivalry in Afghanistan requires the identification of major components of the conflict and their relationship with one another. In this respect, it is important to move beyond the US-Russia relationship, to identify critical nodes within the national context of Afghanistan and analyse their attitudes and behaviours towards other variables. Undoubtedly, the political elites and governments of Afghanistan are major players in the conflict. Since the rule of Abdur Rahman Khan (1880–1901), Pashtun or Afghan tribal politics, customs and codes of conduct have dominated Afghanistan’s national and international affairs. The Pashtun governments and politicians form and inform the country’s internal and external affairs within the parameter of tribal politics, interest and goals. This tribal politics developed into a structured tribal nationalism in the 1920s and matured by the middle of the 20th century, monopolising the state’s judicial, legislative, and executive bodies and other national resources, such as economic and educational infrastructures, in favour of the Pashtun tribes. Consequently, the state in Afghanistan became a Pashtun-state, instead of a nation-state, which deprived non-Pashtun groups of meaningful participation in the national and international affairs of the country.

Pashtun nationalism had a significant effect on the country’s national and international affairs. Applying Galtung’s theory of conflict, the Pashtun government’s negative attitudes and physical behaviours towards non-Pashtun groups led to the development of an uneven and vertical structure of violence, which is also known as structure-oriented violence. In the context of Afghanistan, the Pashtun-state favoured Pashtun groups and interests, and promoted them to the

---

top of a politically-created social structure. Simultaneously, it increasingly oppressed, marginalised, and pushed non-Pashtuns towards the lower and bottom levels of the social structure. Galtung states that the oppressed periphery in the vertical relationship does not have the requisite means and sufficient space (Spielraum) to form goals and pursue them in an organised manner consciously. Pashtun nationalism created intense attitudes and behaviours of hate and division among the country’s Pashtun and non-Pashtun populations, which not only prevented the formation of an acceptable national identity for all ethnic groups in the country but also negatively affected the country’s international affairs.

Internationally, the Pashtun authorities connected the politics of Pashtun nationalism with the issue of the Durand Line or the border dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan to create political allies in the region. The US and Russia politically exploited the emerging situation in their favour. The US tied Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Iraq into a new pact called the Baghdad Pact. At the same time, India and the Soviet Union created an informal alliance and supported Afghanistan’s claim for the frontier tribes on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line. India expressed its dissatisfaction with the July 1947 British-administered referendum, which did not give the frontier tribes the choice of independence or joining either Afghanistan or Pakistan. The Indian leaders argued that the frontier tribes should have been given an opportunity to decide which state to join. Apparently, India’s disapproval of the referendum was intended to politically provoke Afghanistan against Pakistan, while India itself inherited the problem of Kashmir with Pakistan. As a result, since the creation of Pakistan, Pashtun governments in Afghanistan view India as a “friendly” and Pakistan as an “enemy” state. This attitude towards India and Pakistan dominates the national politics of Afghanistan vis-à-vis both countries.

The US and Russia politically exploited the emerging situation in their favour. They used the border disputes between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India to create political allies in the region. The US tied Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Iraq into a new pact called the Baghdad Pact. At the same time, India and the Soviet Union created an informal alliance and supported Afghanistan’s claim for the frontier tribes on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line. India expressed its dissatisfaction with the July 1947 British-administered referendum, which did not give the frontier tribes the choice of independence or joining either Afghanistan or Pakistan. The Indian leaders argued that the border tribes should have been given an opportunity to decide which state to join. Apparently, India’s disapproval of the referendum was intended to politically provoke Afghanistan against Pakistan, while India itself inherited the problem of Kashmir with Pakistan. As a result, since the creation of Pakistan, Pashtun governments in Afghanistan view India as a “friendly” and Pakistan as an “enemy” state. This attitude towards India and Pakistan dominates the national politics of Afghanistan vis-à-vis both countries.

3 During the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880), the British authorities forced Muhammad Yaqub Khan, son of the ousted Amir Shir Ali Khan (r. 1863–1866 and 1868–1870), to sign the Treaty of Gandamak (Yahia Baiza, *Education in Afghanistan: Developments, Influences and Legacies since 1901* (London: Routledge, 2013), 21–22), in which Yaqub Khan agreed to adjust his relations with foreign states in accordance with British advice, i.e., placing them directly under British control. In addition, he also agreed to give the control of a significant portion of the southern Pashtun tribes over to England, including the control of the Khyber and Michni passes (Josef Popowski, *The Rival Powers in Central Asia: Or the Struggle between Russia and England in the East*. Translated from the German by Arthur Baring Brabant and edited by Charles E. D. Black (London: Archibald Constable, 1895), 126–131). These areas formed the informal border between India and Afghanistan, and became the official border in 1893, after the British forces were defeated in 1880 and Afghanistan, at least in her internal affairs, had regained its independence. Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (r. 1880–1901) agreed to receive a British mission under Sir Mortimer Durand, Indian Foreign Secretary, and on 4 November 1893, Durand and the Amir agreed on a formal boundary between the two countries. Both parties agreed to make the regions starting from Waziristan in the Pamir, in the north-east of Afghanistan, and running southwards across Kafiristan (now known as Nuristan), Chitral and the Baroghil Pass up to Peshawar, and thence up to a portion of Waziristan (Waziri, Biland Khel, Kurram, Afridi, Bajaur, Swat), and part of Baluchistan (New Chaman and Chagai) (Ahmad Ali, *Amir Abdur Rahman Khan wa Khat-e Durand* [Amir Abdur Rahman Khan and the Durand Line] (Kabul: Riyasat-e Mustaqil-e Matbuat, 1951), 4; Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 2nd edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 426), as the official border between India and Afghanistan. After the partition of Britain India into India and Pakistan, the latter inherited the border line, which came to be known as the “Durand Line,” and the divided regions.
The US support for Pakistan pushed Afghanistan towards the Soviet Union. For instance, the US decision to approve military aid to Pakistan in February 1954 and to refuse Afghanistan’s request for similar support in December of that year tied Afghanistan to the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union exploited the arising opportunity and showed a positive attitude and behaviour towards Afghanistan. Sayed Qasim Reshtia states that the Soviet Union stepped in and offered military equipment, training facilities and economic cooperation to Afghanistan. The Soviet Union’s support enabled Prime Minister Muhammad Dawood (1953–1963) to launch a series of five-year economic plans, the first one starting in 1956. Dawood’s freedom from the US tied him to the Soviet Union. Moving away from one key variable pushed him towards the other. Consequently, the Soviet Union had an ideal opportunity to expand its strategic interests, goals, and sphere of influence in Afghanistan. From the year 1955 onwards, the Soviet Union increasingly gained easy access to the country’s political and military elite circles and was able to create a space for developing a Marxist-Leninist party inside Afghanistan, which came to be known as the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The Soviet Union’s attitude towards Afghanistan encouraged the US to increase its involvement in economic and educational projects in Afghanistan. Both parties divided the country between north and south. This balance of power, strategic, and structural symmetry between both parties lasted for nearly two-and-a-half decades.

The situation changed when conflicts of interests and goals turned into direct and structured violence. In 1973, Dawood staged a military coup against his cousin the monarch, Muhammad Zahir (1933–1973), and received the support of the army elite, many of whom had already been trained in the Soviet Union and became members of the PDPA. The collapse of the monarchy, which was one of the PDPA’s key political goals, was the primary interest why the party collaborated with Dawood. However, since Dawood was the ousted monarch’s cousin and former prime minister, he could only be tolerated for a temporary period. Therefore, as Rupert Colley also states, after the coup d’état, the relationship between President Dawood and the PDPA members as well as the Soviet Union reversed. He decided to expel the Soviet advisers and began to look elsewhere for assistance. Meantime, Dawood allowed some North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) experts to visit the northern parts of the country and conduct military studies alongside the Soviet Central Asian borders. This change of attitude soon led to a negative behaviour between all three parties. The Soviet Union’s leaders feared that Dawood would ally himself with the West. To de-escalate the situation and prevent an emerging contradiction, in April 1977, the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982) invited President Dawood to Moscow for further talks, in which Brezhnev raised his concerns about the presence of NATO experts in the northern parts of the country. Reportedly, Dawood responded that:

We will never allow you to dictate to us how to run our country and whom to employ in Afghanistan. How and where we employ the foreign experts will remain the exclusive prerogative of the Afghan state. Afghanistan shall remain poor, if necessary, but free in its acts and decisions.

The above statement nevertheless gives a hint that Dawood could not tactfully handle the crisis and read its potential negative consequences. The unfolding course of actions demonstrates that both

---


10 For full details of the US-Soviet economic and educational aid, see Baiza, Education in Afghanistan, 101–114.


President Dawood’s government and the Soviet Union failed to demonstrate the required compatibilities to handle the crisis, de-escalate their negative behaviours, and prevent an emerging contradiction and a potential conflict. President Dawood’s above-quoted response shows his simplistic understanding of the Soviet Union’s decades of support for Afghanistan. He thought that he could free himself from the Soviet Union’s influence by joining other regional and international alliances. Therefore, he could not realise that his decision to move away from the Soviet Union would change the equilibrium and would lead to the collapse of his government, which he built with the support of the Soviet-backed PDPA. Dawood’s decision to expel the Soviet advisors, and arrest and even possibly execute key leaders of the PDPA, led the PDPA’s members in the national army to stage a military coup in April 1978 in which they killed Dawood and overthrew his government.

**Theoretical framework two: The triangle of violence**

Galtung’s triangle of violence in Figure 3 comprises three corners of direct, structural, and cultural violence. This theory helps to understand and analyse different aspects and components of violence. As he states, violence has both visible (direct) and invisible (structural and cultural) dimensions. Like negative attitudes and behaviours, which lead to contradiction and conflict, cultural and structural violence encourage direct violence.\(^\text{13}\) Galtung’s theory of violence shows that there are a mutual link and circular relationship between the three corners of the triangle of violence. For instance, structural and cultural violence lead to direct violence, whereas direct violence reinforces both structural and cultural violence. He argues that while violence hurts directly (direct violence) and indirectly (structural violence), there is a culture that justifies violence (cultural violence).\(^\text{14}\) Even though it is argued that violence is in the human mind, \textit{i.e.}, a part of human nature, Galtung adds that peace ought to be built in the culture and structure of society, not just in the human mind.\(^\text{15}\)

---


\(^{15}\) Galtung, “Violence, war, and their impact.”
Galtung’s theory of violence provides a useful theoretical framework to explore, analyse and explain different dimensions and components of violence and their properties in Afghanistan. The coup d’etat and the Soviet support transformed the PDPA from an “underdog” to the “top-dog” position. The top-dog, however, soon engaged itself in exercising as well as facing various forms of violence. The PDPA, as has previously been discussed, had already been engaged in direct as well as indirect forms of violence. They allied with President Dawood to oust King Muhammad Zahir (1933–1973) and then staged a military coup against Dawood in April 1978. The PDPA emerged to power (1978–1992) with all components and structures of violence, i.e., direct, structural and cultural. They exercised all these forms of violence internally on their party members and externally on their underdog adversaries. Also, the PDPA was suffering from an internal schism, which had already existed within the party in both structural and cultural forms long before its rise to power. Upon their ascendance to power, the predominantly Pashtun-led Khalq (People) faction usurped power and began to purge their comrades from the Parcham (Banner) faction of the party. At the same time, they faced intense opposition from mushrooming resistance, i.e., jihadi, parties inside and outside Afghanistan.

Moreover, in order to rescue the party from the brink of collapse, the Soviet Union ultimately invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. The Soviet occupation (December 1979–February 1989) further escalated the crisis. The resistance parties, which had already opposed the state during the rule of President Dawood, continued their resistance against the secular-oriented PDPA and the communist ideology. They used the Soviet military intervention as a pretext to justify their resistance as an act of religious duty. They brought religion and the notion of jihad as additional layers of argument to legitimise their political cause and mobilise people against the PDPA and the Soviet army. Simultaneously, the US declared its support for the jihadi parties and withdrew its cooperation with the central government in Afghanistan. The US authorities provided political, military and financial support to the resistance parties and glorified them as the jihadi parties and freedom fighters. These terminologies show the creation of religious and political contexts in which the US-led alliance could justify their participation and direct involvement in the rising conflict and violence. For instance, the argument that Islam was under threat and that the mujahidin or the freedom fighters need the means to fight back the Soviet occupation of their country were parts of such politics. However, the US primary interest and the ultimate goal were to roll back the Soviet empire from the gate of South Asia. With the support of its Western and Arab allies and Pakistan, the US created an international anti-Soviet front, which soon gave birth to a global jihadi movement. The involved parties exploited the notion of jihad for shielding and justifying their acts of violence. The conflict in Afghanistan became a political quagmire for the Soviet Union, without any prospect of winning it. Eventually, the Soviet leaders modified their interests, goals, attitudes, and behaviours in order to create a context in which they could negotiate a deal with the US. After nine years of violent conflict, the Soviet leaders withdrew their army from Afghanistan in February 1989 and soon after abandoned the PDPA and the country.

The Soviet Union itself collapsed on 26 December 1991. It was not necessarily a direct consequence of the Afghan war, while the Soviet Union’s economic recession in the 1980s, and the 1986 oil price collapse also played a significant role in the break-up of the empire. However, one could argue that the war in Afghanistan certainly constituted one of the key influencing factors on the Soviet economy and political system, which contributed to the collapse of the Soviet empire. The PDPA remained in power only a few months after the fall of the Soviet Union, as the jihadi parties ascended to power on 28 April 1992. After fighting an asymmetric conflict against the Soviet army for nine, and the PDPA for nearly 14 years, the resistance parties moved to power and formed the Islamic State of Afghanistan (ISA).

The resistance parties ascended to power with all forms of violence. Throughout the 14 years of “jihad,” they were not only engaged in vertical acts of violence within their respective parties, but they were also immersed in horizontal acts of violence against their fellow resistance parties as well as the national and the Soviet armies. Therefore, visible and invisible acts of violence became a structural part of their party organisation and a cultural part of their political ideologies. After becoming the political “top-dog” in Afghanistan’s power structure, the ISA’s leading parties engaged themselves in a bitter internal war. The Sunni-dominated parties’ negative attitudes and behaviours towards the Shi’a party of Wahdat-e Islami (Islamic Unity) led to fierce battles and violence in Kabul. At the same time, the Tajik-dominated Jamiat-e Islami (Islamic Association) party, which led the ISA, and the Pashtun-dominated Hizb-e Islami (Islamic Party) fought fierce battles against each other. Their ideological will for excluding the ethnically Hazara and religiously Shi’a groups from the government, and political will for the monopoly of power, led to extreme acts of violence and bloodshed. In February 1993, the Pashtun-Tajik government of the ISA committed one of the most horrific crimes in the modern history of Afghanistan. The Tajik forces of Defence Minister Ahmad Shah Massoud, and the Pashtun forces of Abdur Rab Rasoul Sayyaf, holding the Interior Ministry, massacred some 2,000 Hazara Shi’a citizens of the country in the western part of the capital city Kabul. Eventually, these developments not only weakened the ISA but also undermined its credibility and legitimacy to rule the country. Later the Taliban, a radical Pashtun Sunni movement, emerged to power (1996–2001), but the situation did not improve. Since the Taliban leaders and commanders were members of the jihadi parties, it was too naïve to expect them to behave differently than their predecessors. Their negative attitudes and behaviours towards non-Pashtuns, the Shi’a communities, and women, escalated and complicated the crisis. They structured their acts of violence in the form of introducing a strict Saudi Wahhabi doctrine of shari’a, mixed with the Pashtun tribal codes of conduct, and Pashtun religious nationalism.

Regional proxy wars further complicated the conflict scenarios in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia, representing itself as the leader of the Sunni Muslims, and Iran, claiming the leadership of the Shi’a Muslims, fought their proxy war through the Sunni-Shi’a jihadi parties. Similarly, India-Pakistan rivalry, and the US-Soviet agreement on preventing the jihadi parties from governing Afghanistan, played additional roles in exploiting the Sunni-Shi’a and Pashtun-non-Pashtun differences among the jihadi parties. Galtung states that the US and the Soviet Union often strike their deals by keeping their peripheral elites in power, a clear example of which is Gorbachev-Reagan cooperation on Afghanistan. The Soviet leaders did not accept any kind of religious extremism alongside the borders of their Central Asian republics. It meant that the ISA was doomed to failure from the very beginning of its foundation. The attitudes and behaviours of these players and their direct and indirect engagements in violence, coupled with the resistance leaders’ fight for the monopoly of power and resources, brought all kinds of power struggle into Afghanistan and turned the conflict into a deadlocked civil war.

Theoretical framework three: The triangle of peace

Peace-thinking and peace strategy is a major and perhaps the most important component of all conflicts. In an asymmetric conflict of power, a superpower easily defeats its adversary on the battlefield. However, whether a victory on the battlefield can win the war itself is a different question. The US engagement in Vietnam and the former Soviet Union’s experience in Afghanistan showed that military and technological superiority does not guarantee an ultimate victory. Rather, it is a comprehensive peace-thinking and peace strategy that can make a lasting difference. Applying Galtung’s theories of conflict and peace strategies, it is only the de-escalation of negative physical

---

18 See Galtung, Theories of Conflict, 7.
19 See Razaq Mamoon, Raz-e Khwabidah: Mamai Marg-e Farooq Yaqobi (Kabul: Intisharat-e Saeed, 2010), 77–84.
behaviour and attitudes that guarantees the softening of adversaries’ positions and the reduction of their contradiction and conflict. Similarly, a peace strategy requires changes in both the cultural and structural forms of violence that can lead to avoiding direct violence. These two strategies, according to the previously discussed Galtung’s theories of conflict, have to be taken into account while trying to transform conflicts and situations of violence into peace, and creating a context for initiating the triangle of peace-keeping, peace-making and peace-building (see Figure 4).

A conflict, as Galtung states, has its life cycle. It begins when involved adversaries have incompatible interests and goals, and their negative attitudes and behaviours lead to a state of contradiction and conflict. Also, it means that conflict is not an independent entity. It continues to exist as long as conditions and fluxes feed it. Since violence and conflict do not have an external body, peace must also come from within a given conflict and situation of violence. In the words of Galtung, there is no external peace. He defines peace as a relation between two or more parties, be they persons, parties, organisations, states, or nations. Peace, from Galtung’s viewpoint, is nothing other than the transformation of conflict. The US-Russia rivalry in Afghanistan has been running through a cycle of conflict, which involves a series of proxy wars and incompatible goals between various regional and national adversary groups.

The cycle of conflict and violence in Afghanistan continues. After abandoning Afghanistan for nine years (1992–2001), the US returned to the region, when Vladimir Putin had become Russian president. He managed to stabilise and restore Russia’s economy, and expand Russia’s political

Figure 4. Triangle of peace.

22 In August 1999, President Boris Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin as Prime Minister of the Russian Government. Shortly before the New Year of 2000 rolled in, President Boris Yeltsin proposed that Vladimir Putin becomes Acting President. Putin was elected President of Russia on 26 March 2000 and was re-elected to a second term on 14 March 2004. At the end of his second term of presidential office, he was appointed Prime Minister by presidential executive order on 8 May 2008. The delegates at the second round of United Russia’s 12th party congress approved his nomination for 2012 presidential election. He won the election and became Russia’s president for the third time on 4 March 2012, and holds this office until now 2017 (Vladimir Putin, “Biography,” Vladimir Putin, Personal Website, 5 June 2017. Retrieved from: http://eng.putin.kremlin.ru/bio).
influence in Central Asia as well as in world politics. Apparently, these developments encouraged the US to return to Afghanistan and the South-Central Asian regions. For its return to Afghanistan and the borders of the Central Asian republics, the US needed new conditions to create a space for intervention. The events of 11 September 2001 played into the hands of the US politicians, who turned against the Taliban for harbouring terrorism and sheltering Osama bin Laden, who was believed to have masterminded the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in America. The Taliban’s refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden created the necessary pretext for the US to form a coalition force and invade Afghanistan.

The US took the lead in the cycle of conflict in Afghanistan through launching their offensive against the Taliban in October 2001. The US airstrikes and Afghanistan’s Northern Alliance’s ground offensive in October 2001 overthrew the Taliban on 11 November 2001. The emerging situation allowed the US policy-makers to create a space and context in which they could implement their political discourses and strategic interests vis-à-vis Russia at the borders of Central Asian republics. The US politicians, influential analysts and strategic thinkers deemed the war in Afghanistan and then in Iraq as quick military triumphs. President George Bush’s 2002 and 2003 speeches on the “State of the Union” and “Mission Accomplished” respectively testify to this claim. In praise of these victories, Max Boot, a prominent and influential American war and political analyst, heralded the Iraq victory as a remarkable achievement in history. He also heralded the combination of modern military technology (precision of firepower), special forces, psychological operation, speed and flexibility, as the qualities of America’s modern way of war and the current strategy of the Office of the Secretary of Defense and Office of Force Transformation. Also, he viewed the US military intervention in Afghanistan as a low cost and easy job that would destroy terrorist networks and cells before they could strike again as they had in September 2001. Undoubtedly, the 2,500 deployed combat forces in December 2001 formed the foundation of Boot’s analysis. Therefore, he viewed it as a low cost engagement. However, a quick victory on the battlefield is not the end of the war, but the beginning of emerging complexities. Peace-keeping, peace-making and peace-building are much more complex than winning a battlefield.

The US policy-makers and strategic analysts had a simplistic approach to the complex system of war and military interventions. Max Boot’s analysis is typical of a simplistic linear approach to a complex system of war thinking. His focus, as well as that of other policy-makers’, was on winning the battlefield, i.e., defeating the enemy’s combat force, rather than securing a long-term strategic success and peace-building. Antulio J. Echevarria II, in his analysis of Russell Weigley’s The American Way of War, and Max Boot’s Savage Wars of Peace, suggests that both authors interpret the American way of war in simplistic terms. They tend to ignore and shy away from thinking about the complicated process of turning military triumphs into strategic successes. Failing to acknowledge the complexity of a war system of thinking and military intervention, quick victories on the battlefields do not guarantee a long-term strategic success. America’s current war in Afghanistan provides evidence that the US military strategy is not very much different from that of the former Soviet Union and the traditional deployment of large-scale army personnel.

Afghanistan is an easy land to enter but it is difficult to extricate oneself out of it. The current conflict has become a political quagmire for the US in the same way it had pulled down the former Soviet Union for nine years. Apparently, no one in Washington ever predicted that the number of
Since early 2004, the Taliban have reconstituted themselves in Pakistan and strengthened.

US personnel would increase exponentially from 2,500 in 2001 to 100,000 in 2011,\(^{29}\) (excluding 32,457 non-US NATO forces from 25 nations\(^{30}\) in less than ten years’ time. Equally, President Bush, the US policy-makers, and war analysts did not expect to officially acknowledge more than 2,400 military deaths as well as more than 20,000 casualties, and over $117 billion spent as of March 2017,\(^{31}\) of which $70 billion alone was spent on building Afghanistan’s national security forces.\(^{32}\) These figures do not include other costs of war, such as Afghan military and civilian casualties, and the military and civilian losses of all other nations involved in the country’s various reconstruction efforts. The current military intervention has certainly been a costly war, and so far with highly unpredictable outcomes.

After fighting the Taliban for 16 years, without a prospect of winning the war, the US politicians modified their policy from fighting the Taliban to making peace with them. This change of policy tends to divide the Taliban between radical and moderate, and offers them certain incentives to lay down their weapons. This policy became the formal approach of the US-led coalition and their supported government in Afghanistan, and was officially declared during the January 2010 London Conference on Afghanistan.\(^{33}\) The US needed this self-modification in the same way as the former Soviet Union did in 1988–1989, to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan.

Peace cannot be imposed, offered, or implemented from outside. The US, the government of Afghanistan, political parties inside Afghanistan, and the Taliban, not to speak of the regional rival forces, namely India, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China, have incompatible goals and interests. Staying just with the Taliban as an example, as Faisal Devji in his commentary on The Poetry of the Taliban puts it, the Taliban construct their meaning of the US-led war in Afghanistan in terms of US and British double standards of human rights.\(^{34}\)

Since early 2004, the Taliban have reconstituted themselves in Pakistan and strengthened their positions in Pashtun-dominated areas of south and east Afghanistan where government officials and security forces were largely absent.\(^{35}\) Today, as of September 2017, they control nearly 40 percent of the entire country.\(^{36}\) Therefore, it is unlikely that small incentives will convince the Taliban to accept a peace settlement. The Taliban, as Devji suggests, take their support, thought and identity, from the historical and contextual setting of the frontiers, which they employed against the British, the Soviet Union,\(^{37}\) and now against the US. It seems that the policy of peace with (moderate) Taliban is meant to create a context for the US


authorities to scale down their mission from active combat to providing military support, advice, and training to Afghanistan’s security forces. Consequently, President Barack Hussein Obama’s (2009–2017) government began the withdrawal of US troops in June 2011. Over the next six years, President Obama significantly reduced the number of the US forces from 100,000 in 2011 to an estimated 8,400 in 2017. On the contrary, President Donald Trump’s recent Afghanistan and South Asia strategy, and his planning the deployment of 3,000 to 5,000 troops to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan, shows that peace is a far away and elusive goal. Furthermore, the channel through which President Trump announced his decision on a major issue concerning the deployment of thousands of US troops to Afghanistan also shows that the US authorities and decision-makers are far from understanding the real situation in Afghanistan and how to address it. Normally, decisions concerning war and the deployment of armed forces to a combat zone are announced in a televised speech. Instead, Pentagon announced the decision through a news release. In the view of Mark Landler and Michael R. Gordon, the news release suggests that neither President Trump nor people around him have a clear understanding, strategy, and roadmap of how to address the US involvement in Afghanistan. The conflict in Afghanistan proves that knowledge of war technology and intelligence guarantees victory on the battlefield, but they are not sufficient to win a war, let alone creating a context for peace.

Conclusion

This article explored, analysed, and discussed the US-Russia rivalry in Afghanistan, using Johan Galtung’s theories of conflict as the theoretical framework. It analysed the US-Russia rivalry in relation to (i) their strategic interests and goals, intending to limit each other’s spheres of influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia; (ii) uncovering and analysing the involvement of major components in the conflict and their relationship with one another; and (iii) the impact of the examined rivalry on creating a platform for internal and external actors to engage and fuel a series of proxy wars and cycles of conflict and violence that continue until the present time. This article argued that while the conflict in Afghanistan provided limited political leverage and strategic gains, there are significant losses for all involved parties, particularly the US and Russia. The presented analysis and debates have demonstrated that intervention is a complex phenomenon. All forms of intervention, let alone military and political ones, reflect a complex system of thinking and the multi-linear relationship between various factors and variables. Initially, the two superpowers competed for influence in Afghanistan with the long-term objective of encroaching upon each other’s spheres of influence in Central and South Asia. They used international development aid programmes from the 1950s to the 1970s to advance their strategic interests in Afghanistan. These development projects helped Afghanistan to improve its economic, technological, educational, and security sectors. As a result, the country was gradually moving from being an underdeveloped towards being a developing country. The nature of development aid then changed to a proxy military conflict in the 1980s, which also changed the fate of Afghanistan from a developing to a conflict country.

Moreover, this article also identified and analysed the politics of Pashtun nationalism as one of the significant nodes that created and spread negative attitudes, behaviours, and contradictions that led to, and institutionalised, structural and cultural violence within the country. The politics of Pashtun nationalism also made Afghanistan vulnerable in international affairs and played into the hands of the US and Russia as well as regional powers, each advancing their strategic interests and goals in the region.

Over the course of the past four decades, Afghanistan has continuously been experiencing an open-ended cycle of conflict. The whirlwind of the US-Russia rivalry has inflicted a series of multi-layer conflicts and violence across the country, starting with the Soviet invasion in the 1980s and continuing with the current US invasion. The latter mirrors the former’s experience in many ways. The US focuses on penetrating the Central Asian republics, while Russia, with its major regional allies, namely China and Iran, fights to defeat and possibly roll back the US Empire from the gate of Central and South Asia. The former Soviet Union experienced a similar situation in the 1980s, when the US and its Western, Arab, and Pakistani allies fought the Soviet army in Afghanistan, intending to roll back the Soviet Empire from the gate of South Asia.

The US politicians and policy-makers desperately look for a strategy that would enable them to change the status quo in their favour so they can declare and possibly end their current mission in Afghanistan as a triumphant victory. Donald Trump’s latest Afghanistan and South Asia strategy and commitment to deploy more troops to Afghanistan is part of such a strategy. However, it is highly unpredictable whether more troops will secure a respectable exit, let alone a triumphant victory. However, there is only one predictable fact, and that is that war has become a lucrative industry for some and there is always funding for it, whereas peace is less likely to receive constructive attention, let alone substantial funding. However, despite this lucrative aspect, the current war in Afghanistan is extremely costly for national budgets. The short-term political gains are no substitutes for long-term political and economic losses. The present conflict in Afghanistan provides new lessons and questions, without fully formed answers.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Russell Harris, Wendy Robinson, and Anna Kudinova for editing and proofing, and two peer reviewers for their comments on, this paper.

Funding sources

None.

Competing interests

Yahia Baiza declares that he has no conflict of interest.