

THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE AFGHAN QUESTION: STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS ON THE AFGHAN SOLUTION

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Abstract

The article examines how Taliban-ruled Afghanistan faces several challenges due to structural constraints in the post-US era. In this study, the authors aim to identify recurring obstacles to the Afghan state and nation-building process that cannot be adequately explained using reductive reasoning. The literature review identifies four structural variables contributing to the recurrence of political, economic, and humanitarian failures in Afghanistan. These variables include insecurities of regional states; the absence of a hegemon and diversity of political ideologies; regional defiance of the liberal world order; and US influence on the international economic system. Since Afghanistan cannot be fixed in any of the surrounding regions and constitutes a transitional point, the study addresses its regional fix by employing the concept of the Eurasian Balkans to analyze the Afghan question. The article concludes that its volatile fate stems more from external forces than internal ones.

Keywords: *Taliban, Post-US Afghanistan, Political Ideology, Liberal World Order, Humanitarian failures*

Introduction

This article examines the structural constraints associated with the Afghan question.¹ After the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan is experiencing political, economic, and humanitarian upheaval.

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¹ The Afghan question can be defined as Afghanistan's political instability, economic atrophy, and human rights violations. These are the inevitable consequences of decades of strategic competition between national, regional, and international players for power in Afghanistan. The American exit left a power vacuum, and the Afghan question resurfaced, just as the Eastern question did after the decline of the Ottoman Empire or the German question after Germany's total defeat in World War II.

Corrupt practices have plagued Afghan nation-building efforts; efforts to reconcile tribal and ethnic fissures and instil national pride in Afghans have largely failed. Externally, responsibility for much of the political instability and misery of its people can be traced to external powers seeking to realize their own strategic, ideological and economic interests in the country.² Afghanistan, located at the crossroads of all three regions, acts as an insulator state, standing on the edges of geopolitically important regions, and is a zone of weak interaction.³ Although, as an insulator, it stops the spillover of conflict from one region to another; nevertheless, it serves as a point of confluence for the variegated conflicts of the various states located on the inner fringes of the three regions. Afghanistan's instability tempts the intervention of more powerful neighbouring states, in compliance with local Afghan factions, who do so to deny geopolitical space to other claimants or to advance their own.

For the last two decades, the ruling governments in Afghanistan have often failed to derive popular legitimacy and overcome the reigning turmoil. A divided and heterogeneous society like Afghanistan has ample reasons to deepen its rifts on ethnic, religious, and interest-based issues. The patterns of Afghanistan's engagement with Pakistan, India, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Iran best illustrate this argument. Both before (overtly) and after (covertly) the U.S. invasion, Indo-Iranian and Pakistani aid energized conflicting local groups—the Tehrik-i-Taliban Afghanistan (TTA), the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Northern Alliance (in government), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and the Kashmiri Mujahedeen—to work together with regional warring parties. The TTP and Kashmiri Mujahedeen in South Asia while IMU carried out its agenda in Central Asia. Afghanistan's role as a proxy war theatre complemented the contours of surrounding regional conflicts with different ends, diverging interests, and distinct players. Afghanistan has been torn apart by the surrounding regions with the help of local abettors. The units of the nearby regions see Afghanistan through the prism of their regional conflicts, which serve as an auxiliary that burdens the conflict resolution approach within Afghanistan. A more pertinent theoretical lens at the regional level is needed to evaluate the Afghan question.

Almost five centuries ago, different parts of Afghanistan were contested and bloody frontiers of battling regional empires, such as the

² Marvin G. Weinbaum, "Afghanistan and Its Neighbors: An Ever Dangerous Neighborhood," United States Institute of Peace (*USIP*) (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2006) <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr162.pdf>.

³ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 41.

Uzbeks in Central Asia, the Safavids in Iran, and the Mughals in India.⁴ In modern times, these empires have evolved into modern nation-states, yet emulate the behavioural patterns of their predecessors. Once the rule of their forefathers ended, their successors longed to exert their influence exactly on the same geographical areas in Afghanistan. Patterns of intervention in Afghanistan by neighbouring states are rooted in history. Realistically, due to its location on the borders of various regions, it does not become a part of any adjacent regions. So what is the most effective theoretical lens to understand the region in which Afghanistan is located? The article uses the concept of the Eurasian Balkans to address this gap, which guides the study.

The second issue that deepens Afghanistan's political, economic, and humanitarian crises is the question of its reintegration into the international arena. Generally, a state that harbours terrorist or dissident organizations and engages in state-sponsored terrorism finds it difficult to reintegrate into the international community. In the mid-90s, Afghanistan ran training camps for regional and global terrorist organizations, posing a common threat to the international community. After August 2021, the Western world and regional states are hesitant to reintegrate Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. In this regard, the first regime of the Taliban is described to contextualize the apprehensions of the regional states about the Taliban's behaviour, and the importance of the role of the hegemon as a stabilizer in such a scenario is discussed. Drawing an analogy with the German question in the post-World War II era, it is inferred that if a hegemon controls a region, it helps moderate the partisan stakeholders' adversarial tendencies. In the Afghan question, the defined region has long been devoid of an active single hegemon. Especially after the collapse of the USSR, wise policymakers in Washington D.C. had already determined that such remote places and people could safely be excluded from America's New World Order.⁵

The third important variable relates to the collective behaviour of a particular region, particularly during the global transition of power. It is a well-observed pattern that a challenger emerges when a dominant power loses its grip over global affairs. Such developments encourage dissatisfied middle or relatively stable players in different regions to rally behind a potential challenger or to take a risk by defying the fundamentals of the existing world order. They deem the incumbent order obsolete for the fulfilment of their international agendas. In this scenario, smaller states bandwagon for the cause of a potential challenger unless the

⁴ Thomas J Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, preface x.

dominant power enters into alliances with smaller states that guarantee survival.

Finally, Afghanistan is too weak a state to flourish independently in this scenario. In the last two decades, a larger portion of its aid-dependent economy has relied on the goodwill of Western donors. Most states of the Eurasian Balkans have a revisionist approach to the liberal fundamentals—liberal democracy and universal human rights principles—of the liberal world order by sustaining tolerable economic wounds. However, the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan cannot afford the luxury of offending Western donors beyond a certain point.

Eurasian Balkans: Fixing Afghanistan's Place in the World

Is Afghanistan the Southern most part of Central Asia, the westernmost part of South Asia, or the Eastern most edge of the Middle East? Whatever the choice, it will be regretfully noted that the inclusion of Afghanistan is problematic.⁶ Fixing Afghanistan's place in the world has been an issue for various scholars from varying disciplines. Thomas Barfield, an anthropologist from Boston University, conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork in northern Afghanistan and fixed the country in the Turko-Persia region.⁷ His description of the Turco-Persian region almost echoes Dr Zbigniew Brzezinski's, Polish-American geostrategist and statesman, concept of the Eurasian Balkans. The study uses Dr Zbigniew Brzezinski's Eurasian Balkans lens to explain Afghanistan in the context of the region.

The concept of the Eurasian Balkans helps to understand Afghanistan with an expanded geographical concept that spans the various states of all three regions that surround it as a triangle: Central Asia at the upper point, the Middle East and South Asia at the lower western and eastern points, respectively. Eurasia, too, has its "Balkans," but the Eurasian Balkans are much larger, more populated and even more religiously and ethnically heterogeneous.⁸ Geographically, the Eurasian Balkans roughly embraces Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Georgia, Armenia and Afghanistan. In contrast, Iran and Turkey have the potential to be included in the region.⁹ Pakistan

⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷ Thomas Barfield defines the Turko-Persia region as "geographically, the Turko-Persia highlands are the large region of Asia that stretches from Anatolia and the Zagros Mountains in the east through the Iranian plateau to the Indian Plains. Its northern limits are the Caucasus in the west and the Eurasian steppe at the Syr Darya River in the east; its southern border runs through arid Baluchistan to the sea."

⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 123.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

and India are still remote, but they are also not disinterested in what may be unfolding in these new Eurasian Balkans.¹⁰ Although Pakistan is considered distant to the Eurasia Balkans, its active engagement over the past four decades has integrated its destiny with the geopolitics and geo-economics of the region. To its east, towering India blocks Pakistan's eastward march and thrusts it to the west and north, where Afghanistan, China and Central Asia states are located. Asserting its "look west-north" option, the geopolitical compulsions of the last four decades left Pakistan with no option but greater involvement in the affairs of the Eurasian Balkans. The peculiar dynamics of the region, such as energy reserves, strategic location, and ethnic and territorial fault lines, make the Eurasian Balkans a tinder box. In this volatile region, terrorism has emerged as a tool of policy. It is not South Asia, Central Asia, or the Middle East but the characteristics of the Eurasian Balkans that have the potential to explain the Afghan question. the term "region" in this article will refer to the Eurasian Balkans. The following four structural variables contribute largely to the Afghan question:

Insecurities of the Regional States and Taliban Regimes

The Taliban returned to Kabul after dethroning Ashraf Ghani's government on August 15, 2021. Contrary to the given pledges, its governance style is reminiscent of the past. Internally, the Taliban is consolidating its grip on the daily lives of ordinary Afghans through a stream of Islamic decrees. Externally, the theocratic regime has not yet gained the international community's trust. The absence of de jure status holds the Taliban regime in limbo. This uncertainty exacerbates the challenges to the fledgling regime, such as the fact that no aid, especially from the West, can flow directly to the Taliban regime in Kabul. The question of international legitimacy forced international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB), to suspend Kabul's access to their funds, posing major obstacles to UN aid missions. Although some exemptions are offered but yet Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) find it difficult out of fear of the sanctions.¹¹ The magnitude of the existing sanctions and the non-recognition of the Taliban regime makes it hard for the world to reach out to the Afghan people in this hour of need.

An interesting dichotomy can be observed in the approach of the various regional states, which were once the lifeline of the Taliban's struggles. After the Taliban seized power, prominent political pundits were expecting China, Russia, and Pakistan to recognize the Taliban regime soon. But the outcome has turned out to be quite the opposite. In

¹⁰ Ibid., 139.

¹¹ Akmal Dawi, "Online Crowdfunding Campaigns Struggle with Restrictions on Afghanistan," *Voice Of America*, February 8, 2022.

contrast to the current situation, various regional states struggled to tip the balance in favour of the Taliban in the fight against the American presence in Afghanistan. The aid to the Taliban came both in diplomatic and material forms. On the other side, regional states have left no stone unturned to achieve an amicable settlement between the then-Afghan government and the Taliban, despite several regional states having a history with the Taliban dating back to their first regime. However, regional states have not lost sight of their national interests, which have already been reshuffled after the Taliban takeover.

On the Afghan chessboard, China's stakes are relatively high. The instability in its immediate neighbour can resonate within and without China. Economically, in its 'westward march' under the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), Central Asia and Afghanistan serve as a land bridge that connects western China with the fertile regions of Eastern Europe and the Middle East, and so forth. In the South China Sea, China's hands are full. In the event of instability on its western fringe, it will be trapped between two fronts that could seep out its energies in its struggle against the odds. On the domestic front, Chinese policymakers have long worried about the potential spread of Islamic militancy in its Muslim-majority Xinjiang province.¹² In the worst scenario, China will be fighting three wars: against the US and its allies in the South China Sea; at home against the separatist movement in Xinjiang; and on the western fringe, a battle against ossified Islamist militancy. On the Western front, an anticipated Islamic arc—starting from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan and extending to Pakistan, prone to Islamic inspiration—can hamper China's smooth land access to the Middle East, Europe, and so forth. This section also ensures that oil and gas continue to flow from Central Asian states into China. The announcement of BRI coincided with Chinese diplomatic engagement with the Afghan peace process. Since then, it has operationalized multifaceted and multidirectional diplomacy for building regional consensus on Afghanistan. It hosted a series of intra-Afghan dialogues, ran shuttle diplomacy to mitigate mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan,¹³ and successfully mediated a three-day truce between the Taliban and the Ghani government.¹⁴

However, China was not alone in feeling a sense of foreboding about the possible spillover of Islamist militancy. Decades of chaos were stirring national security concerns in Central Asian states, Russia, and Iran alike. Russia also used its good offices to strike an intra-Afghan deal.

¹² Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

¹³ Sudha Ramachandran, "China's Peacemaking between Pakistan and Afghanistan," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, September 7, 2017.

¹⁴ Kamran Yousaf, "Afghan Eid Truce 'Backed by Pakistan, China,'" *The Express Tribune*, June 11, 2018.

However, its role as a peacemaker was seen with jaundiced eyes and marred by scandals.¹⁵ Iran, as Afghanistan's next-door neighbour and champion of the Shia cause, could not afford to be indifferent to developments that had the potential to bring back its ideological rival to power. Despite their ideological and historical hitches, all these regional states provided the Taliban with military and diplomatic support. The shared US threat in the region spliced these diverse factions together and garnered a united front against their common adversary. However, the withdrawal of American forces has untethered the deeply tied strings of unity in support of the Taliban, and it appears that the unabated support behind the Taliban has gradually waned. Their mutual histories reinforce this imperative and provide ample explanation for their current outlook.

The Taliban: Then and Now

Contrary to all expectations, the regional states have lurched toward recognizing the Taliban regime. History holds plausible reasons for the hesitance of the regional states. In the mid-1990s, the Taliban regime promoted Islamist militancy and terrorism. It allowed Afghanistan to be used as a launching pad for other militant organizations such as al-Qaida, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Harkat ul-Mujahedin, and so forth. The then Taliban regime hosted ostracized militant organizations, harboured international terrorists, including Saudi extremist Osama bin Laden, and ran militant training camps. With the financial and military help of Osama bin Laden, Taliban-ruled Afghanistan became an epicentre of militants, who were trained with the Taliban forces before returning to their homes to spread instability across the region.¹⁶

Taliban and Iran

Iran frequently oscillated between the two extreme poles of supporting the Taliban and fighting them. In the late 1990s, the Taliban's violation of international diplomatic norms brought Iran and the Taliban to the brink of war. In 1998, a small group of Taliban led by Mullah Dost Mohammed entered the Iranian consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif and gunned down 11 Iranian diplomats, intelligence officers, and a journalist.¹⁷ To avenge its diplomats, the Iranian government deployed 70,000 troops on the Iran-Afghan border that further intensified tensions between the two

¹⁵ Sajjan M. Gohel and Allison Bailey, "This Time, Russia is in Afghanistan to Win," *Foreign Policy*, July 1, 2020.

¹⁶ Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 7.

¹⁷ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 74.

countries.¹⁸ After 9/11, Iran had extended full support to U.S. Special Operations Forces and CIA in supplying the commanders of the Northern Alliance to defeat al-Qaida and the Taliban.¹⁹ Its concessions to the United States failed to fix US-Iran relations, which pushed Iran to the other extreme. Adapting to the precarious situation, Iran operated in grey areas, supporting the reconstruction process in Afghanistan and supplying weapons and shelter to the Taliban. In the war against the United States, Tehran provided shelter, training, and weapons to the Taliban, which often resented the Afghan government.²⁰ However, now the establishment of a Sunni theocratic regime in close proximity to the Shia theocracy in itself is a source of concern for the policy circle in Tehran.²¹ An ongoing process of reconciliation between them may work in the short term, but in the long term, the ideological and political influence of one depends on the negation of the other. The nature of sectarian schism runs beyond religion and goes deep into cultural and historical differences. The 21st century's Persianate Tehran and Arabicized Kabul share nothing worthy but a common lexicon of Islam to brand their diverse, distinct, and dissimilar religious perspectives.

Taliban and Central Asia

The Taliban's relations with Central Asian republics have not been peaceful. Afghanistan had served as a haven for Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and the IMU members. Based in Afghanistan and under the charismatic leadership of Juma Namangani, the IMU launched terror attacks deep inside Uzbekistan to dislodge then-president Islam Karimov. From Afghanistan, Juma Namangani extended his jihad to Central Asia and established his cult in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. He enlisted dissidents from every significant ethnic group in Central Asia, as well as Chechens and Dagestanis from the Caucasus and Uyghurs from China's Muslim province of Xinjiang, who were critical of their ruling regimes.²² Over the past century, Afghanistan has sheltered the fleeing Basmachis and IMU fighters, who used their bases in Afghanistan to wreak havoc in their homelands. Even today, reasonably, Central Asians fear that

¹⁸ Douglas Jehl, "For Death of Its Diplomats, Iran Vows Blood for Blood," *The New York Times*, September 11, 1998 .

¹⁹ Barnett R. Rubin, and Sara Batmanglich, "The U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy Gone Awry," *MIT Center for International Studies*, October 2008 .

²⁰ Alireza Nader et al., "Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown," *Rand Corporation*, 2014.

²¹ Kevin Lim, "Afghanistan Is a Bigger Headache for Tehran Than It Is Letting On," *Foreign Policy*, September 15, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/15/afghanistan-iran-taliban/>

²² Rashid, *Jihad*, 9.

the return of the Taliban will be an aspiration for other regional extremist groups.²³

Taliban and China

Even China failed to escape the terror the Taliban regime inspired. The ETIM became an asset for the Taliban, and Uyghurs constituted the front lines of the Taliban's assault on northern Afghanistan. Worrisome China reached out to the Taliban through Pakistan, but the initiative yielded nothing worthy.²⁴ In the late 1990s, Uyghur renegades set off a wave of violence in Xinjiang. In the face of the rising wave of Islamist militancy at its doorsteps, China, too, joined the US crusade of war on terror by supporting UN Security Council resolutions against the Taliban regime. Today, twenty years apart, the return of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan coincides with the Uyghurs' growing predicament with China. In Washington, democracy and human rights issues are once again elevated as policy tools. So, as a result, the paradigm shift prompts the US to take active notice of so-called human rights abuses in Xinjiang. China's efforts to re-educate its citizens in concentration camps are tantamount to human rights violations in the West.

The Absence of Hegemon & Pluralistic Political Ideology

The role of the regional hegemon in international economic stability has long been the subject of discussion in academic circles. Kindleberger argued, "for the world economy to be stabilized, there has to be a stabilizer, one stabilizer."²⁵ A stable, open international economic system can only be established under a hegemonic power structure, which is characterized by a single state having a predominance of power. Kindleberger based his argument on the 'logic of collective goods' since all the countries benefit from the hegemon irrespective of whether they can contribute or not.²⁶ Political stability is one of the prerequisites for economic growth that the hegemon takes into account, and ensures to sustain it for robust economic growth. This public good of international stability does much to stabilize weak states of the bloc. A hegemon also gives the normative foundations for political behaviour, blueprints for the economic system, and a complete set of strategic principles to guide, regulate, and monitor the national behaviour of the allied states. To

²³ Richard Weitz, "Central Asia's Taliban Surprise," *Middle East Institute*, 16, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/central-asias-taliban-surprise>.

²⁴ Rashid, *Jihad*, 176.

²⁵ Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression: 1929-1939* (California: University of California Press, 1933), 305.

²⁶ Michael C. Webb and Stephen D. Krasner, "Hegemonic Stability Theory: An Empirical Assessment," *Review of International Studies* 15, no. 2 (1989): 184.

sustain its hegemony in times of crisis, it must maintain market momentum, invest in allied states, acquire the ability to harmonize the political ideologies of its alliance members and provide security guarantees to the weaker allies. Robert Gilpin argued that "a wider set of resources- ideological and status appeals- are integral to the perpetuation of hegemonic order."²⁷ Provision of these essentials enables hegemon to exercise "adjudicative and preventive diplomacy," whereby the hegemon ensures that group interests should take precedence over individual interests in any internal conflict. Such composition and accomplishment pave the way for consensus building, which burgeons an environment where the zero-sum game supplants the positive-sum game in the hegemon's sphere of influence.

The peaceful power transition from Great Britain to the US was grounded in some commonalities: a shared civilization, a common political ideology, and a way of life. In the course of its rise to hegemony, the United States not only benefited from commonalities with the previous world order but also innovatively entwined various international regimes, spearheaded the project of liberal democracy, and positioned itself as the custodian of humanity. It weaved a credible chain of security alliances, garnered the golden age of capitalism, promoted democracy, and made these elements the basis of the new system through various institutions. The Bretton Woods system was supported by the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and NATO, a new set of initiatives designed to revive and protect an American sphere of influence run along liberal lines.²⁸ The U.S.-led ordering mechanism- change in the governance of an international system²⁹- evolved in the western half of the European continent, and Moscow replicated the same attitude in the eastern half. The U.S-led order rallied upon reciprocal, consensual, and institutionalized relations and has acquired the status of constitutional hegemony.³⁰ These arrangements effectively reduced the possibility of instability in the hegemon's sphere and provided a reliable platform for coordination and consensus in times of crisis and opportunity. The pattern helped the US emerge as a regional hegemon-first in the Western Hemisphere and Europe in a bipolar world - and later as a global hegemon in the post-Cold War era. It enabled the US to keep its alliance system cohesive and united under one roof of common political ideology in the face of any threat or crisis.

²⁷ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 34.

²⁸ Gideon Rose, "The Fourth Founding: The United States and the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 1 (January/February 2019): 14.

²⁹ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 42.

³⁰ Gilford John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 22.

The World Order and Dispute Resolution Mechanism

The US-led ordering mechanism offered a credible platform for conflict resolution in the post-war period in Western Europe. Its first test came was a form of a territorial dispute over Germany's reintegration into the international arena following WWII. In the context of the Cold War, beginning in 1950, it was evident that the United States sought to reintegrate federal Germany as much as possible into the international arena.³¹ However, on the Rhur-Rhineland Question, the French did not share the US policy approach. The French were bent on stripping Germany of its coal resources and industrial heartland and openly called "for the internationalization of the Ruhr and the political separation of the Rhineland from the rest of Germany."³² However, the ordering mechanism of the liberal world set the stage for a consensus political ideology and institutional mechanism to reach consensus decisions in light of the positive-sum game. A single political system, guided by a hegemon, acted as a blanket to cover the political, economic, and strategic schisms.

The Eurasian Balkans: The Region without a Hegemon

The Eurasian Balkans either remained devoid of a true hegemon or, during Pax Americana, fell out of US interest. The United States had good reasons for disengaging from the region. The region consisted of anti-American regimes; many were deemed "black boxes" due to their airtight regimes. Without a hegemon, it remained retarded in modern-era diplomacy and hesitant to intermingle with the outside world concordant with modern-day requirements. In various aspects, some regional states still play by the 19th century rulebook. Deprived of a hegemon and a direction setter, the region strayed in search of political ideology, security guarantees, and a distinct economic system. Economically, the regional states benefited from the blueprints of the Western economic system, but politically, they duped Western democracy with national ideals while exhibiting vagrant instincts in security field. The security mistrust flourished, pushing regional states toward internal and external balancing mechanisms, reliance on proxies, and, in extreme cases, state-sponsored terrorism. These patterns, such as national insecurities, ideological divisions, and religious schisms within regional states, are reemerging in their foreign policy choices since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. Not a single and coherent step has been taken to deliberate on the Afghan question under a single leadership or in light of regional consensus for the

³¹ Constantin Chira-Pascanut, "Discreet Players: Jean Monnet, Transatlantic Networks and Policy-Makers in International Co-operation," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, no. 6 (2014): 1252.

³² Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 67.

common good. Regional forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) hold a vague charter for conflict resolution and do not have the teeth to implement or discuss security-related issues, as do NATO or the European Union. Ironically, the region exhibits a mosaic of conflicting political ideologies with revisionist agendas. Its political texture ranges from theocratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian to military-dictated regimes and semi-democratic setups, contrary to each other in fundamentals.

Following the Taliban's take-over, regional states are racing to set and put forward their own agendas. Iran hosted a meeting of all of Afghanistan's neighbours- China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan- plus Russia in October 2021.³³ The third round of the Moscow format, which focused on respecting Afghan sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, was held in Russia during the same month. The press communiqué seemed more concerned with preventing mutual interference than formulating a plan of action.³⁴ The two arch-rivals Pakistan and India held two separate summits on the same day: the former under the banner of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the latter under the name of the Central Asia Dialogue. It also manifested the deeper division between both sides about Afghanistan.³⁵ China has its arrangement and has called for a two-day summit on March 30, 2022. Even the first summit of the SCO after the fall of Kabul on September 17, 2021, in Dushanbe on its twentieth anniversary, failed to provide a comprehensive road map or a joint mechanism for dealing with the Afghan question.³⁶ Unlike the German question, in the Afghan case, the power is so diffused within regional states, that it precludes the rise of a true hegemon to manage the regional issues for the collective good. The two leading regional states, China and

³³ Maziar Motamedi, "Iran to Host Multilateral Conference on Afghanistan," *Al Jazeera*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/18/>

³⁴ Elena Teslova, "Moscow Format Meeting on Afghanistan Adopts Joint Statement," *Anadolu Ajansi (AA)*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/>

³⁵ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "India, 5 Central Asia Nations to Jointly Combat Afghan Terror," *The Economic Times*, December 20, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/>

³⁶ Dushanbe Declaration on the 20th Anniversary of the SCO, <http://eng.sectsco.org/news/20210917/782639.html>.

Russia, project an appearance of coordination, but in practice, their differing regional interest and identities set absolute limits.³⁷

Regional Defiance to the Liberal World Order

Presently, a short-lived unipolar world with American predominance comes to an end. The declining ability of America to act unilaterally against the rise of China as a peer competitor, and the emergence of smaller power poles heralds the dawn of a multipolar world. In the 21st century, the power transition is no longer an exclusive matter of the European continent. Asian states have been outpacing their European counterparts in many aspects. The nominal GDP of Asia is predicted to increase from \$33 trillion in 2021 to \$39 trillion in 2023, surpassing that of the United States (\$34 trillion) and Europe (\$26 trillion).³⁸ Despite its dynamic growth, the Asian continent remains highly fragmented in terms of alliances and political ideals. It also hosts various flashpoints capable of escalating into wars and the anti-American bloc is internally divided.

In Donald Trump's National Security Strategy, America's foreign policy focus swung from terrorism to the new threats to its national security coming out of Moscow and Beijing. The Biden administration is struggling against rising autocracy. The world has once again bifurcated into autocratic and democratic blocs. In this division, China and Russia take the lead in rallying around smaller authoritative states and other quasi-democracies in the region. The dissatisfied group is more inclined towards autocracy and poses severe threats to the liberal components of the world order. Although the liberal economic system benefits the economies of the autocratic states, liberal elements such as democracy and universal human rights standards put major obstacles in their politics. It appears that these states, in general, and China, in particular, want to be the beneficiary of the global economic order without abiding by the spirit of its liberalism in many ways.³⁹ So they strive for a radical transformation that could accommodate their autocratic needs.

Are Human Rights Universal?

Human rights organizations, NGOs, and the European Union accused many members of the dissatisfied group of a poor record of

³⁷ Ron Synovitz, "Regional Powers Seek To Fill Vacuum Left By West's Retreat From Afghanistan," *Radio Free Europe*, December 25, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/>

³⁸ Chetan Ahya, "Asian Economic Growth to Outstrip Americas and Europe," *Financial Times*, January 31, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/>

³⁹ Michael J. Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Current International Order*, (California: RAND Corporation, 2016), <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/>

human rights standards, twisted democratic practices, and press censorship.⁴⁰ ⁴¹ ⁴² The argument of cultural relativism, on the other hand, is quite dominant in the challengers' discourse against the Western-chartered human rights protocols. They regard them as a product of the decadent West with no relevance in Asian societies.⁴³ Various debates in their political circles and academia question the universal applicability of human rights standards and dismiss them as individualistic Eurocentric products that do not fit into collectivist Asian societies. According to universal human rights standards, there are cases in China, Russia, Iran, and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan that implicate them as human rights violators.

US Renewed Commitment to Democracy and Human Rights

As the United States' foreign policy shifts to a new paradigm centered on China containment, the promotion of democracy and human rights are once again chosen as powerful tools for distinguishing between "good" and "evil" empires. This current is quite visible in the policies of the Biden administration. President Biden has been emphatic about democracy and human rights in his key policy speeches and also declared the launch of the "Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal."⁴⁴ This rings an alarm bell for states with poor implementations of human rights protocols and a disruptive record of democracy. In the politics of "democracy versus autocracy," "sanctions and incentives" go hand in hand to punish the violator and reward conformance.

Against the backdrop of strategic competition between the US and China, this region can be termed the equivalent of Cold War Eastern Europe, which is transforming into a sort of zone of interdiction for America. Geographically, it is adjacent to China and Russia, falls within their spheres of influence, and constitutes their backyard. It is infested with authoritarian regimes where America has no or poorly committed ally. Several regional states may find it challenging to maintain Western

⁴⁰ Kenneth Roth, "World Report 2021: Rights Trends in Russia," Human Rights Watch, January 13, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/>

⁴¹ Kenneth Roth, "World Report 2021: Rights Trends in China," Human Rights Watch, January 13, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/>

⁴² Amnesty International, "Amnesty International Report 2021/22," (London, 2022), 197.

⁴³ Thomas M. Franck, "Are Human Rights Universal?" *Foreign Affair*, 80 (1), 80, no. 1 (2001): 195.

⁴⁴ "Announcing the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal," *The White House*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/09/>

standards of democracy and human rights. Instead, under the catchy slogan of 'non-interference' in the internal affairs of other states, China gravitates more toward these authoritarian regimes and quasi-democracies. Although the region is riddled with conflicting political ideologies, as a whole, it emerges as a challenge to the liberal norms of the U.S.-led world order. The motivation for resistance to the US liberal world order is entrenched in their revolutionary ideals, which once steered them toward self-determination or revolutions.

US Influence Over the International Economic System

America carries great clout over the international financial institutions—the IMF, WB, and WTO—which gives it a greater ability to sanction or reward those who defy or comply with its principles. Across the bipolar and unipolar eras, the United States has been simultaneously a system maker and privilege taker.⁴⁵ The US has often exercised its economic influence by sanctioning those who showed defiance and refused to play by the rules. North Korea, Iran, Iraq, China, Russia, and others have been sanctioned in the last fifty years. In some cases, sanctions have solely been successful in deterring the violators in Poland in 1981, against Iraq in 1990-91, and in 2003 in Myanmar's case. In other cases, sanctions were used in conjunction with other factors to achieve the desired result.⁴⁶

After the Taliban took over Kabul, another hostile regime fought against the US in Afghanistan for twenty years. The American response was swift, resulting in sanctions that initially froze more than 9.5 billion dollars in assets held by the Afghan Central Bank. Later, by executive order, half the money was allocated for the families of the 9/11 victims and the other half for ongoing humanitarian aid in Afghanistan.⁴⁷ By recruiting global financial institutions in its sanctions program, the IMF delayed the release of \$ 370 million scheduled for August 23, 2021.⁴⁸ The Washington-based World Bank has suspended its funding for developmental projects in Afghanistan. Since 2002, the institution has committed more than \$5.3 billion (£3.9 billion) to reconstruction and development projects in Afghanistan.⁴⁹ Ironically, the wealthy donors

⁴⁵ Michael Mastanduno, "System Maker and Privilege Taker: U.S. Power and the International Political Economy," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 122.

⁴⁶ Lee Jones, *Societies Under Siege: Exploring how International Economic Sanctions (Do Not) Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2015), 52.

⁴⁷ "Executive Order on Protecting Certain Property of Da Afghanistan Bank for the Benefit of the People of Afghanistan," *The White House*, February 11, 2022.

⁴⁸ Beth Timmins, "IMF Suspends Afghanistan's Access to Funds," *BBC News*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58263525>

⁴⁹ Silvia Amaro, "World Bank Halts Aid to Afghanistan, 'Deeply Concerned' on Prospects for Women," *CNBC*, August 25, 2021.

belong to the global north and are aligned with the US vision for global governance, where the global south either has a subtle say or is excluded. China still seems reluctant to offer a Marshall Plan-like vision for reconstructing Afghanistan; given its financial needs, Afghanistan is compelled to gaze at the Western world for aid. Although the West has been responding on a humanitarian basis, its efforts have fallen short of the magnitude of the disaster.

To avert a humanitarian disaster, the EU pledged €1 billion in aid to Afghanistan.⁵⁰ In November 2021, the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) set up a special trust fund to avoid a humanitarian crisis. In response to the appeal, Germany contributed \$56.4 million, Sweden \$34 million, Norway \$32 million, Turkey \$3 million, Luxembourg \$2 million, and the UN Development Program \$6 million.⁵¹ In September 2021, the UN hosted a donor conference to raise \$606 million, which ended up with pledges of over \$1 billion, with most of the contributors coming from the western world.⁵² Although, until now, the Western countries' contribution in aid has outpaced that of China, Pakistan, Russia, and other former sympathizers of the Taliban regime. However, the Western response is paltry compared to its contributions to the global war on terror, the Western response is paltry. The meagre aid from the western donors might cap the unfolding humanitarian disaster, but drastic measures need to be taken in the long run.

During the war on terror, the West remained an important lifeline for Afghanistan. The wealthy donors of the West fall into the democratic quarter in its war on autocracy. As the US withdrew and Kabul fell, Afghanistan fell off the economic radar of these donors, at least for the time being. In contrast, the dissatisfied group lacks a number of quality actors. Most of them are struggling with their economies, facing security threats from one another and democratic clubs. By and large, they have little capacity and experience in the nation-building process and lack the resources to sponsor such undertakings, and in China's case, a strong commitment can overburden its nascent standing on the global horizon.

Area for Further Research and Recommendation

The article uses an outside perspective to contextualize the Afghan question. Further research will pave the way for more concrete policy recommendations. Academic research that explores realistic regional

⁵⁰ European Union, "Afghanistan: Commission Announces €1 Billion Afghan Support Package," *European Commission*, October 12, 2021, <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/>

⁵¹ MPTF Office, "Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan," UNDP, 2021, <https://mptf.undp.org/fund/>

⁵² Jamey Keaten and Edith M. Lederer, "Donors Pledge \$1.2 Billion in Emergency Funds for Afghans," *AP NEWS*, September 13, 2021,

integration options is the most crucial area to investigate in this regard. Post-World War II Europe holds profound lessons for the Eurasian Balkans on "coping with regional turmoil in the aftermath of a protracted war despite divergences". The establishment of supranational institutions will be a one-stop remedy for the Afghan question's thriving pathogens. Comprehensive research regarding regional integration of the Eurasian Balkans on the EU model can be a worthwhile academic exploration in the direction of policy recommendations. A supranational setup can help states, with diverse strategies, converge on a consensus point for the region's greater good of the region.

Conclusion

The article raises the question of Afghanistan's regional fix and employs the concept of the Eurasian Balkans to analyze the Afghan question in a regional context. Thomas Barfield's concept of the Turko-Persia region and Zbigniew Brzezinski's Eurasian Balkans draw the same perimeter for the region in which Afghanistan fits as a unit. Four attributes of the Eurasian Balkans, such as a sense of perpetual insecurity in its units, the absence of a hegemon in a region proliferated with diverse ideologies, an entire region with a revisionist agenda, and relative dependence on Western economic clout, are continually shaping and reshaping the dynamics of the Afghan question. The Afghan question is rooted in the structural configuration of the Eurasian Balkans. In the absence of a proactive regional hegemon, the regional units become unable to regulate the Taliban's behavior, as once the US regulated the French in the German question, and the provision of aid to cope with the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe. On the one hand, the Taliban's stringent behavior towards an inclusive government stoked the suspicions of regional states. On the other hand, the condemnation of universal human rights, the abhorrence of liberal democracy, and strict regulations for women fuel Western anger. Mistrust and conflicting regional regimes contribute another punch of instability to Afghanistan's destabilizing affairs. For a long time, structural problems like covert intervention by regional states, inconsistent regimes with liberal democracy, and an aid-dependent economy plagued Afghanistan.

