



# APPRECIATING TURKEY'S AFGHANISTAN POLICY

Merve Seren

**T**HROUGHOUT history, Afghanistan has suffered tremendously due to the strategic competition resulting from various iterations of the Great Game, which has in turn shaped and been shaped by the political, military, economic, and socio-cultural transformations of the country. Yet, ending up as a “traumatized state” was not only a result of the imperial rivalry between the Russians and the British, nor even of the expansionism of Afghanistan's neighbors, but also due to the country's historical propensity towards bloody revolts, coups, and assassinations plots. Since its establishment, for instance, the Afghan flag was changed nearly 30 times, with a similar fate befalling its national anthem. This only goes to show how deeply entrenched political turmoil and societal unrest are in the history of Afghanistan.

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Since the establishment of Turkish-Afghan diplomatic relations, Ankara has conducted an active foreign policy towards this conflict-ridden state. In Turkey's early Republican era, the relationship between the two countries was largely shaped by Afghanistan's attempts at modernization. Its reformist king, Amanullah Khan, looked up to Atatürk's Turkey as a role model.

During the Cold War, Turkey sided with the West (by virtue of its membership in NATO and its rapprochement towards what is now known as the European Union) in the context of an unfolding strategic competition between the Eastern and Western blocs.

And then came the post-Cold War era, which dramatically changed the strategic landscape of the regions surrounding



Photo: Guliver Image/Getty Images

*“The Turkish legation in Kabul,” unsigned and undated photo*

Turkey. Still, Ankara could not immediately recalibrate its foreign policy engagement towards Afghanistan: the latter's domestic, regional, and international dynamics were already heavily influenced by the Taliban. The 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan marked a turning point for Turkey, compelling it to adopt an active foreign policy in Afghanistan within the framework of NATO's ISAF and RSM missions. Turkey seized this opportunity to position itself as a ‘noncombatant’ military actor with rising soft power.

**M**ore specifically, once the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, Turkey began to

perceive Afghanistan as its main strategic leverage in gaining more autonomy in international politics. That being said, this new vision of Turkish foreign policy favored a cooperative security approach (at least in the context of Afghanistan) rather than one that relied on military operations, thus placing greater importance on soft power.

These Turkish tools were utilized in support of the goal of achieving political stabilization as well as the economic and social reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Throughout the course of this second longest-running mission in NATO's history (KFOR, which continues to operate

under UN Security Council resolution 1244 (1999) and has included a Turkish contingent since the beginning, is technically the longest-running NATO mission in history), Turkey played a critical role in security and state-building missions, also contributing to provisional reconstruction and infrastructure investment. Ankara enhanced its engagement in war-torn Afghanistan by projecting its soft power capacities among various ethno-linguistic and religious groups.

Ankara sees the consequences of the decision by the United States to withdraw from Afghanistan as a window of opportunity to both re-normalize Turkey's relationship with the United States and to recalibrate Ankara's regional power status. Ankara initially believed that Turkey would gain more strategic leverage and improve its international image by contributing to the political process in Afghanistan. But once the announcement of a U.S. withdrawal signaled that the Taliban would play a more important role in Afghanistan, Turkey's initial plan failed, ushering in a new era of Turkish-Afghan relations whose course remains indeterminate in important ways.

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This essay seeks to unpack and contextualize Turkey's strategic rationality in Afghanistan by taking into consideration the dynamics of historical continuities, particularly those concerning their national, regional, and international determinants. Without considering historical continuities, it is not possible to make sense of Turkey's strategic position towards Afghanistan—both over the past 20 years and in the time ahead.

#### DRIVERS OF FAILURE

Four related historical processes are critically important to understanding the present failure in Afghanistan, and each in one way or another

has had an impact on Turkish ambitions and Turkish foreign policy in that country and, in some cases, further afield. The *first* is an overall Western ignorance of the geopolitical context in Afghanistan. The strategic position of Afghanistan in regional and global geopolitical competition is one of its most essential features. The political, economic, security, and social dynamics within Afghanistan have been repeatedly shaped by power struggles among different foreign actors.

In the late nineteenth century, for instance, the power struggle between the Russian and British empires became

the dominant external determinant for Afghanistan. While Great Britain sought to prevent Russian geopolitical expansion towards Afghanistan to protect its primary interest in its Indian colony, Russia's main concern was preventing British territorial consolidation in its near abroad. As part of Great Britain's strategic anxiety, Afghanistan's political landscape was constructed and anchored in the practices of British imperialism, later becoming the main strategic reference point for Kabul's foundational political narrative during the establishment of modern Afghanistan.

Later, in the context of global geopolitical competition during the Cold War, Afghanistan became a strategic backbone for the Soviet Union in its struggle against the West. Thus, the same basic geopolitical anxiety, which can be defined as an imperial requirement to protect its sphere of influence and is easily traceable back to the nineteenth century, provoked the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan in 1979. Notwithstanding the fact that the United States became the mastermind and leading sponsor of the mujahideen resistance to the Soviets, geopolitical competition over the country continued to shape

Afghanistan's trajectory even the Red Army left the country in the late 1980s. After the 2001 American invasion, yet another phase of geopolitical competition emerged as part of the changing regional security landscape, which provided a greater role for regional actors and local dynamics.

In addition to the historical aspect of geopolitical competition, geo-economic factors have also shaped the fate of Afghanistan, as it sits on the world's second-largest lithium reserves. With natural resource scarcity being a constant, the control over resource-rich territory was one of the main

reasons that drove numerous invasions of outside powers throughout history.

The *second* historical process that is critically important to understanding the present failure in Afghanistan is the country's internal complexities, historically determined by the interaction between external and internal developments. The continuity of the periods of British, Soviet, and American domination of Afghanistan is a textbook example in understanding the complex nature of a geopolitical triangle whose three points consist of

*The continuity of the periods of British, Soviet, and American domination of Afghanistan is a textbook example in understanding the complex nature of a geopolitical triangle whose three points consist of national, regional, and international constraints.*

national, regional, and international constrains. While the local resistance to the British Empire was the dominant motivation for political and military mobilization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the revolt against Great Britain became the main reference point in the fight against the Soviet Union during the 1980s. More importantly, the resistance against the Soviet Union paved the way for the rise of the Taliban as a key actor on the Afghan scene, ultimately leading to the externalization of geopolitics surrounding Afghanistan.

Moreover, the process of transformation of Afghan politics during the first period of Taliban rule in some ways dramatically changed the historical trajectory of geopolitical competition over Afghanistan. After the 2001 American invasion brought an end to the Taliban regime, a new political mobilization began to shape post-invasion Afghanistan. This time, the mobilization against the Soviet Union became the main reference point for ensuing Taliban resistance against the United States and its NATO allies.

There are many reasons behind the failure to rescue Afghanistan from its decades-long state of collapse. However, one must understand that Afghanistan's

war fatigue does not only stem from geopolitical rivalries, but mostly from internal frictions. Some examples of the latter include the eternal dream of establishing Pashtunistan, ethnonationalism, and sub-nationalism—that is to say, realities and myths about tribes, sub-tribes, as well as clans and khels. This will be discussed at some length below.

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The *third* dynamic concerning the failure in Afghanistan relates to America's strategic conception of preemptive war, made most manifest during the presidency of George W. Bush, which neglected conventional determinants. In the post 9/11 era, Afghanistan turned out to be the most important country to the implementation of an American-centric vision of counterterrorism. While the initial plan was to overthrow the Taliban regime and eliminate al-Qaeda, the U.S. strategy of counterterrorism was transformed into one of state-building. NATO's post-2001 mission and the nation-building project ignored and undermined the aforementioned three pillars of Afghanistan's political landscape. This ultimately led to the re-emergence of three existential threats to the future of Afghanistan under the second Taliban rule. Each requires a somewhat lengthy account because the details are largely unknown to most outside observers.

The first existential threat is Afghanistan's territorial integrity, a fragile construct built on artificial borders drawn in 1893 by the British Empire in a treaty that established the Durand Line. This line separates Afghanistan from Pakistan and continues to be a disputed demarcation—a fundamental security issue still waiting to be resolved. Despite having received substantial support from Pakistan since the early 1980s, even the Taliban never formally recognized the Durand Line. Hence, the line appears to remain a fundamental obstacle to managing the volatile Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship. However, the Durand Line is not to be considered a simple territorial issue. It serves an ethnic claim, whose aim is to unite all 'Pashtuns' and establish a state of Pashtunistan. While the Pashtuns constitute the largest segmentary lineage group in Afghanistan, they are the second-largest in Pakistan's ethnic composition, after the Punjabis.

The second existential threat the future of Afghanistan under the second Taliban rule is ethnonationalism, since the Pashtun ethnicity has been directly associated with the state ideology and societal identity. Afghanistan was founded by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747 with the unification of various Pashtun tribes. Their nationalism has become the state ideology under the rule of King Mohammed Nadir Shah, who changed Afghanistan's destiny at

the beginning of 1930s by amending the constitution in a modernist manner. Indeed, following Nadir's rule, the state's legitimacy has relied on nationalism rather than Islam. Accordingly, citizenship became linked with the feeling of belonging, innately specified to a certain nation, with a common history rewritten to reflect a narrative of a shared ethno-biological basis.

Although there were some attempts to remedy the problem of discriminatory citizenship—like amending the term "Afghan" to depict all citizens rather than being used synonymously with "Pashtun"—Pashtunization remains an unresolved issue. In fact, the United States and its allies have been widely accused of exacerbating the Pashtunization problem in Afghanistan, especially with regards to decisions made in the wake of the 2001 Bonn Conference. This is believed to have been the first step in a Pashtun-centric nation-building project.

Conversely, Turks, Tajiks, and Hazaras voice their objections for being underrepresented as ethnic groups. It is alleged that the percentile distribution to ethnic groups in the country's demographic image has long been fabricated as part of a "Pashtunization project." Interestingly enough, the first and only national census in Afghanistan was conducted just before the 1979 Soviet invasion, which lacked precision (since

then, several surveys were carried out, but none aspired to reach the level of a general census). Still, a lack of confidence in the results has resulted in a failure to make comprehensive, accurate, and reliable analysis of the country's ethnic diversity. Indeed, Afghanistan's multiethnic composition is much wider than is conventionally thought. For instance, 200 different ethnic groups were identified in a study conducted by the Soviet Union and 54 were described in one conducted by Germany. Yet only 14 of them are recognized in Afghanistan's 2004 Constitution.

Nevertheless, ethnicity remains one of the major obstacles to mitigating risks and threats stemming from the demographic transition in Afghanistan. Both Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani were accused of staying silent while the Taliban were steadily expanding their territorial control from the south to north. Especially noteworthy were the Taliban's operational successes in Afghan Turkestan, where significant gains were made without anyone putting up a real fight. In other words, both post-9/11 Afghan presidents stand accused of allowing the Taliban to capture districts of northern Afghanistan to enact a strategy of "forced demographic change," all done as part of a Pashtunization process.

The third existential threat relates to both "tribalism" and "clanship." These

are the most complex concepts and phenomena to comprehend, since they exist as "reconstructed" political and social realities of Afghanistan. In addition to ethno-nationalism, preexisting divergences of interests among various ethno-linguistic groups have worsened over time. Tribal rivalries and clan tensions have evolved into a more chaotic power struggle. Decades-long rivalries between Pashtun tribes—mainly the clash of a group of intellectual elites known as "Abdali" or "Durrani" and poor locals termed "Ghilzai"—indicate tribal factionalism among Pashtun nationalists. The tribal game was also present in the political contest between Karzai, who belongs to Durrani, and Ghani, who is of Ghilzai origin, but more famous as a "Kuchi"—a name assigned to Afghan nomads. Relevantly, it is alleged that Ghani deliberately left the capital to the Ghilzai-dominated Haqqani Network, before fleeing the country on 15 August 2021. The Taliban, on the other hand, whose co-founder is Mullah Baradar from the Durrani tribe, had captured other metropolitan areas, such as Kandahar and Herat (and, of course, Kabul).

Although the rivalry between Durrani and Ghilzai Pashtuns has been ongoing for centuries, the latter have succeeded in taking over national power only four times; under Mir Wais in 1721, Nur Mohammad Taraki in 1978, the Taliban under the rule of its first supreme leader

Molla Omar in 1996, and again the Taliban in 2021 under its new leader Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada. Therefore, when analyzing the drivers and influences of the Taliban insurgency, one must first understand tribalism and clanship in Afghanistan in order to fully comprehend the nature and character of the Taliban movement.

However, the problem is much more complicated than the well-known conflict between Durrani and Ghilzai tribes. In addition to various tribes (zai), there are also sub-tribes (khel)—and clans and sub-clans, too. The role and significance of tribalism and clanship in Afghanistan can be traced back to 1921, when a special department was established during Amanullah Khan's kingship—an institution that can be regarded as the predecessor to the Ministry of Border and Tribal Affairs. Furthermore, recently issued ID cards (called "Tazkira") indicate the tribal/ethnic backgrounds of Afghans—a rather controversial novelty in light of Ghani's attempt to create an inclusive 'Afghan' category of common nationality for all ethnic groups in the country.

Indeed, 'intra-tribal cohesion' and 'tribal representation' will also be a challenging test case for the Taliban in its second attempt to rule Afghanistan. On the one hand, tribal ties are an important element that bind the core leadership and the commanders—preventing

political fragmentations in the organization. On the other hand, nurturing such ties allows the Taliban to continue to engage in an 'inclusiveness discourse'—one of the main criteria to be recognized as a legitimate government and a major step to lift the sanctions and start diplomatic and economic relations with other countries.

The above-mentioned existential threats that were misread and/or underestimated by the U.S. and other coalition forces remain the uppermost drivers of the 'relative peace' that was lost in Afghanistan. Analyzing Taliban fundamentalism within the limits of religious ideology was nothing more than trying to neutralize an octopus by cutting only one of its eight tentacles.

The *fourth* and final historical driver behind the present failure in Afghanistan should be understood in the context of Taliban's strategy of resistance that undermined the post-2001 political transformation in the country. The first dynamic that strengthened the Taliban's political and military mobilization is the severe use of force by the U.S. military in Afghanistan. While the coalition's military strategy was successful in its early stages—succeeding to push back the Taliban and to minimize its territorial control—over time the fight against al-Qaeda caused unrepresented civilian casualties. This led to the emergence of a resistance narrative,

which provided a golden opportunity for the remobilization of anti-NATO partisans.

Another vital dynamic that gave more maneuvering space to the Taliban was poor governance in dealing with social, economic, and political issues as well as the lack of effective Security Sector Reform (SSR) in the context

of NATO's mission of creating a fully capable Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). More importantly, the strategy of irregular (read: guerilla) warfare against the U.S.-

led coalition also played an important role in positioning the Taliban as the major security provider for the local population. The territorial gains made during the process of U.S. withdrawal provided more opportunities for the Taliban to ensure local consent and win over local population. This, in turn, accelerated the downfall of the U.S.-sponsored and supported Afghan state apparatus.

#### TURKISH STRATEGIC REASONING

Against this backdrop, Turkey's Afghanistan policy should be understood with reference to the historical trajectories of Afghanistan. Out of all NATO member states, Turkey has always been the most advantageously placed to deal with Afghanistan-related issues. Turkey's Afghanistan policy

can be divided into two basic temporal periods: the past and the past-present (if it can be put this way). While history is significantly important, it is not the only determinant—Turkey's policies during the NATO mission is also a particularly important indicator of the internalization of the historical dynamics toward Afghanistan.

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Afghanistan has always represented a unique place for Turkey, as both an ancestral home of sorts and as a land whose religious and cultural heritage deserves to be protected. Afghanistan

has been a Turkic dwelling-place since the second century BC—from the Iskits and Hephthalites to the Ghaznavids and the Seljuqs of the Oghuzs, Khwārezm-Shāh to the Chagatai, the Mongols, the Timurid, and of course the Mughals. The great Turkic ruler Babur Shah's tomb in Kabul and Rūmī's journey from Belkh to Konya are only two examples indicating why Afghanistan is a distinctive destination for Turkic people in particular and many Muslims in general. This historical linkage has been produced and reproduced by many official statements in creating the meta-narrative of Turkish foreign policy.

Although Turkish-Afghan relations trace back to the Ottoman period (precisely, the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries), the relationship has not always been a favorable and beneficial one—as evident from Sultan Abdulhamid's 1877 failure to form an alliance to counter Russian threats. However, this began to change by the early twentieth century, when Afghanistan gained independence from Great Britain through the 1919 Rawalpindi Agreement. Over time, Turkish advisors, doctors, teachers, military officers, and technocrats were sent to Afghanistan. Even during a very critical period—the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923)—Atatürk assigned numerous delegations to provide medical and law enforcement training to Afghanistan. The arrival of technocrats and experts to Afghanistan also demonstrates that a series of reforms were undertaken in the scope of Afghanistan's first state-building project, drawing on important lessons learned by Turkey's own modernization drive.

In return, Afghans responded to Turkey's calls to join the anti-imperialist struggle with equal sincerity and support. Young Afghans that studied in Turkey at the time and infantry platoons that arrived directly from Afghanistan joined Turkish troops in the Anatolian War. Moreover, many Afghans contributed small donations to Turkey's war effort, despite the country's poverty. While Turkey was still waging a full-scale war for independence, Afghanistan formed and secured its diplomatic relations with Turkey

through the Treaty of Alliance, adopted by the Ankara government on 1 March 1921. Afghanistan became the second country (after Armenia) to recognize the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Likewise, the first embassy of the new Turkish state opened in Kabul, which also holds the distinction of being the first diplomatic mission to be inaugurated in an independent Afghanistan. As a remarkable ally, Afghanistan has always offered consistent commitment to support Turkey's survival. For instance, at a dinner served in honor of the Turkish Government on 31 July 1921, the Afghan ambassador openly threatened to declare war on London if it dared wage war against Turkey. He added that if the British were secretly helping the Greeks, Afghanistan would utilize tribes to wreak havoc on the North-West frontier of India.

Consequently, the Turkish-Afghan relationship evolved into a lasting friendship during the Atatürk period. Atatürk's Turkey became both a role model and a key ally for King Amanullah Khan's Afghanistan. Bilateral relations reached at their highest level in 1928, when the monarch paid a visit to Turkey and signed the first Technical Cooperation Agreement between the two countries.

However, Atatürk warned Amanullah to handle the modernization project with care, reminding him to take into

account the differences in values, attitudes, and perceptions between Turkish and Afghan societies. Since Atatürk was highly aware of the difficult circumstances and worst-case scenarios, he advised Amanullah to consider the characteristics of Afghan society as *sui generis*—in other words, to develop a unique modernization model to implement Western-style reforms pertaining to Afghanistan's own dynamics. Atatürk's advice, however, was not heeded. Amanullah's optimistic and perfectionist approach soon resulted in a rapid decline of public support, strong resistance from enraged religious figures, and a chaotic tribal revolt—all of which forced Amanullah to abdicate the throne in January 1929.

**B**ilateral relations mostly developed and gained momentum during the eras of Amanullah Khan, Nader Shah, and Zâhir Shah. Not only did Ankara make significant investments in Afghan education and infrastructure, but Turkey also played a crucial role in resolving the Afghan-Iranian territorial dispute. Furthermore, Ankara provided huge political support to Kabul in Afghanistan's successful campaign to gain membership in the League of Nations and become a signatory to the 1937 Saadabad Pact (a treaty signed in Tehran involving Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey).

While the Turkey-Afghanistan relationship never experienced a major

breakdown, the overall level of this strategic partnership remained quite low and its effects relatively limited. This was mainly due to the frequency of crises and paradigm-shifting events that occupied the attention of both states. Obvious examples that diverted attention away from the bilateral relationship include World War II, the Cold War, numerous coups in both countries and elsewhere, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Afghan Civil War, and finally, the rise of the Taliban regime.

#### **NATO AND TURKISH SOFT POWER**

**S**ince the early 2000s, Turkish foreign and security policy towards Afghanistan has been subjected to critical changes. Evidently, 9/11 focused global attention on Afghanistan: the Taliban-led country was labeled a "terrorist safe heaven," and so on. Turkey's security concerns were further triggered by the 2003 Istanbul bombings—a series of mass-casualty suicide attacks carried out by Al-Qaeda. This led Ankara to support landmark anti-terrorism resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council as well as NATO's new counter-terrorism measures.

From the very beginning, Ankara was highly aware that Bush's War on Terror and the U.S.-led nation-building project had serious deficiencies, were based on incorrect assumptions, and utilized the wrong tools for Afghanistan. Therefore, Turkey attributed critical importance to

bringing its knowledge and experience to the various international missions present in Afghanistan by engaging in peacebuilding and state-building efforts within ISAF and RSM, and, in particular, capacity-building of ANDSF within SSR.

Turkey undertook the command of ISAF-II (2002-2003); assumed the leadership of ISAF-VII in 2005, the same year it took over the running of Kabul's airport; inaugurated the Turkish Provincial Reconstruction Team in Wardak (near Kabul) in 2006; undertook the com-

mand of Regional Command Capital (RC Capital)—which was comprised of Kabul city and 14 districts of Kabul province—between 2009 and 2014 on a rotational basis with France and Italy; established the Gazi Military Training Center to train non-commissioned officers and soldiers in 2010; and started contributing to NATO's new non-combat RSM mission in 2015. Following the Turkish parliament's approval to extend the deployment of troops for 18 more months as part of NATO mission in December 2020, the handover of duties took place in NATO Headquarter TAAC-C in Kabul, between Turkish Brigadier Generals Ahmet Yaşar Dener and Selçuk Yurtsızoğlu, in March 2021.

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**B**eing very familiar with the internal dynamics of Afghanistan, Turkey—despite American pressure—consistently refused to play a combat-role in the country, in an effort not to damage the feelings of brotherhood between two nations. In the meantime, apart

from security missions, Turkey became one of the leading foreign contributors to Afghanistan's peace, stability, and welfare. Turkey not only trained thousands of Afghan military and police officers, but also made it possible for thousands of Afghan girls and boys to have equal educational opportunities by constructing 21 schools and four educational centers across eight provinces.

Indeed, Turkey's urge to increase its soft power and to deliver on its commitments to invest in a better future for Afghanistan is evident from the activities of many Turkish institutions, including the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), YTB, and the Maarif Foundation. TIKA, for example, successfully completed more than 1,000 projects on education, culture, health, agriculture, and infrastructure through its offices in Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif.

Additionally, the Turkey-Afghanistan Business Council was established in

2002 under the Foreign Economic Relations Board of Turkey (DEİK), which ensured Turkish contractors were able to play a more active role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Almost 700 projects were successfully completed by hundreds of Turkish companies operating in Afghanistan, ranking the country first among foreign investors in Afghanistan's construction sector.

While the majority of projects were in the field of contracting and engineering consultancy, Turkish companies also showed an increasing interest in investing in energy and mining. For instance, the Turkish Afghan Mining Company (TAM) was established as a joint venture between Turkey's Yıldızlar Holding and Afghan Gold and Minerals Consortium (led by Afghan entrepreneur and politician Sadat Naderi and a U.S.-based mining and exploration company CENTAR).

In 2018, for example, TAM announced the signing of two contracts with the Afghan government to develop two sites in the Balkhab District in Sar-e Pol and Badakhshan. This represented the largest gold and copper mining exploration effort in the history of Afghanistan. However, in December 2019, the spokesperson of Afghanistan's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum declared that the contracts had been terminated on the grounds that TAM could not

fulfill commitments made during the bidding process. Allegedly, the real reason behind the cancellation was the upcoming election in Afghanistan. This example illustrates the deep roots of ethnonationalism in the country (and, of course, how conflict-of-interest rules Afghanistan). Without getting into the details, suffice it to say here that the aforementioned Sadat Naderi is the son of Hazara's famous politician and religious leader, and that his brother Sayed was the security advisor to Abdul Rashid Dostum, the famous ethnic-Uzbek leader who was a member of the Northern Alliance and later served as the country's Vice President during most of Ashraf Ghani's term in office.

Despite its failures, TAM set a good example of how mutual benefits and win-win cooperation could result from the management of natural resources—that is to say, not only to further financial gain for a Turkish company, but also to contribute to changing Afghanistan's internal dynamics—with potentially far-reaching geopolitical implications. The project showed that if Afghanistan could come to manage its natural resources with the help of a trusted ally, then many of the parameters of insecurity and instability—such as economic dependency, drug trafficking, corruption, lack of public services, local conflicts, insurgency, immigration,

public health risks and environmental hazards—might be solved.

### STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Turkey's strategy in Afghanistan is shaped by local, national, regional, and global dynamics. During the process of the U.S. withdrawal, Turkey saw that the Afghanistan issue represented a golden opportunity to re-normalize its relations with the United States. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the partnership between the two countries has been on a downward trajectory due to a shift in Washington's preferences, particularly in the Syrian conflict. Under the Obama Administration, the U.S. adopted a strategy of defeating ISIS by supporting the PYD and the YPG, despite both being organic Syrian offshoots of the PKK, which has been listed by the U.S. State Department as a foreign terrorist organization for more than two decades. The Trump Administration maintained the same strategy and preferred to consolidate the YPG's territorial control. So far, the Biden Administration has upheld similarly close cooperation with the PYD and YPG.

While Washington's continued strong support for Syrian both the PYD and the YPG remains the most severe challenge in the bilateral relationship, Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system deepened strategic disagreements between these two NATO allies, since the U.S. perceives Russian

technology and its technical support as an intelligence threat against the F-35 fighter program. The disagreement concerning Turkey's S-400 procurement led the Trump Administration to impose CAATSA sanctions on Turkey, which basically means Turkey will be unable to purchase this next generation of combat aircraft.

Therefore, in the initial stage of the U.S. withdrawal, both Ankara and Washington thought the Afghanistan situation could come to represent a momentous occasion for the two allies to finally reach a deal on the re-normalization of the bilateral relationship. In this context, given its well-known expertise and experience, Turkey emerged as a key player for continuing to run and maintain the Kabul airport—an obviously fundamental and complex duty, given the volatility of the situation on the ground. However, America's mismanagement of its withdrawal and the Taliban's rapid and complete victory changed the bilateral agreement between the U.S and Turkey.

In the aftermath of the Taliban return to power in 2021 and the establishment of a Taliban-led interim government, Turkey has continued to focus on Afghanistan—not as part of its strategic relations with America, but rather as part of its own foreign and security policies' priorities. Three dynamics are important to understand



Turkey's strategy vis-à-vis Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

The *first dynamic* is shaped by Turkey's domestic concerns regarding migration issues. As the literal geographic bridge connecting East and West, Turkey has always been affected by intense waves of migration from Middle Eastern countries. The migration flux from Syria to Europe in the last decade was especially challenging for Turkey, with a broad range of issues still being managed.

The year 2021 was the seventh year in a row marking Turkey as the home to the largest number of refugees in the world; nearly 4 million Syrians are registered as being "under temporary protection" and more than 350,000 others (mostly from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan) enjoy a similar status. While Syria and Afghanistan continue to be the largest source of migration to Turkey and the region, a new wave of Afghan migrants fleeing the return of the Taliban has pushed Turkey's absorption capacities and resources to the limit, given that the impact of the migration wave from Syria has not subsided yet. Therefore, along with observation towers built along the Turkish-Iranian border,

Turkey's control of Kabul Airport—together with Qatar—is also important for managing the migration issue and strengthening Ankara's hand in its relations with Western countries.

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The *second dynamic* is shaped by Turkey's local and global security concerns as Afghanistan reemerges as an exporter of radicalism, violent extremism, terrorism, and separatism. Indeed, there are more than 20 terrorist organizations operating in Afghanistan today that can develop tactical and strategic collaborations with or against the Taliban. Primarily, al-Qaeda and the Haqqani

Network remain potential threats to the Taliban. The FBI has placed a \$10 million bounty on the head of the Taliban government's Interior Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani. If the Taliban wish to be recognized—more than 15 terrorists hold ministerial portfolios in Afghanistan's current government—it must first conduct 'intra-Taliban negotiations.'

In addition, the Taliban's choices with regards to how it relates to foreign fighters and other terrorist groups like the TTP, ISIS, the ISKP and the PKK will be a key determinant for Turkey's future

involvement in Afghanistan. The Taliban's choices will not only show whether it has the political and military power to secure Afghanistan, but also reveal the nature of its objectives and approaches. For instance, a lack of Taliban fighting capability might lead to an increase in ISIS threats or FTF mobilizations towards Turkey. Likewise, the security vacuum and poverty in Afghanistan might increase opium cultivation and production. This could, in turn, increase illicit drug trafficking, which poses a critical threat to Turkey—the country is a key pathway to the route to the EU that passes through the Balkans—as it offers the PKK an intensified cooperation with the Taliban and other organized criminal groups.

Above all, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan may lead to the creation of a new "Taliban model" for likeminded movements to emulate—after all, the Taliban can be credibly portrayed as having defeated the United States and its international coalition forces on Afghan soil despite very limited resources. 'Taliban romanticism' might be a reference model for other fundamentalist groups and terrorist organizations that can spread extremism and terrorism in the region.

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Finally, the second Taliban era might deepen and widen ethnic and sectarian wars in the region. In fact, the post 9/11 era already revealed that sectarian wars had replaced ethnic ones, leaving open the possibility of witnessing more destructive, lethal, and longer sectarian wars in geographies all over Asia and Africa in the context of the second Taliban era.

The *third dynamic* is shaped by Turkey's urge to play a geopolitical role. Under the AKP's rule, Turkey remains committed to the goal of being a regional power and a more influential global actor, which requires regaining international prestige. Thus, continuing engagement in Afghanistan is important for Turkey's power projection, not only militarily but also in terms of soft power. If another international coalition force is formed in Afghanistan, it will likely be an Eastern one—in contrast to Western involvement of the past two decades. Therefore, Turkey's strategic partnership with Qatar, or a new regional consensus that it may reach with Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, India, and the neighboring countries such as Uzbekistan, will be very important for the country to consolidate its geopolitical gains.

**WHAT’S NEXT?**

Turkey will continue to support peace in Afghanistan for the sake of preserving its historical, ethnic, social, and cultural heritage, but also in furtherance of its own geopolitical and geo-economic interests. Potential unrest or outright civil war in Afghanistan would subject Turkey to another unwanted wave of mass migration, raising not only border security concerns but also causing a humanitarian crisis, enabling terrorist flows, and imposing additional financial burdens—issues that could determine the upcoming elections in 2023.

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Apart from its official narrative, which is based on the nostalgia for ‘brotherhood,’ sustainable peace and development in Afghanistan will benefit Turkey’s overall interests the most. Therefore, Turkey’s historical responsibility, along with its geopolitical and geoeconomics interests, will shape the country’s involvement in Afghanistan.

So far, Turkey has employed a cautious engagement strategy with the Taliban’s Afghanistan. Ankara’s discourse and attitude has been similar to that of its Western allies: open for dialogue, but not ready for recognition. Although, unlike some Western countries, Turkey

has never pursued any sort of “carrot and stick” policy, since Ankara is acutely aware that this could only invoke unwanted traumatic memories in Afghan circles, causing mistrust and ruining relations. Realizing that the Taliban cannot be a controlled with carrots and sticks in the long-term, Ankara appears to believe that the ‘gradual engagement criteria’ must be flexible and adapted to Afghanistan’s internal dynamics.

Clearly, it is vital to comprehend what to expect from the Taliban: a mujahedeen, terrorist political actor that is largely composed of nationalist Pashtun Molla’s and

Qari’s, heavily influenced by both Deobandi and Salafism, and trying to apply Islamic rules in its pure and primitive form. It would be irrational to expect them to embrace a Western-style democracy or even the Western concept of the rule of law and human rights. Their ‘ulema’ mindset is what it is: Turkey’s engagement criteria must be unique and tailored to respond to the Taliban’s standards and limits. In return, given Afghanistan’s dependency on foreign aid and inflows of money, it seems that the Taliban do not have much of a choice other than to sacrifice its fundamentalist ideology to a certain extent and

to present an acceptable level of ‘inclusiveness’ and ‘openness’ in order to establish sustainable governance.

Therefore, Turkey’s involvement will be shaped by decisions made by the Taliban leadership: either striking a balance between their fundamentalist and tribalist ideas whilst complying with the current world order; or preserving its insurgent mindset and continue to rule as a closed regime. If its leadership selects the first option, then Turkey will be the gatekeeper for the Taliban’s engagement with the West. If the Taliban choose the second option, it is highly likely that its monopolist approach will plunge the country back into civil war, which will once again be supported by the West.

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**THREE LESSONS**

The United States, NATO, and partnering countries spent 20 years attempting to either survive or leave Afghanistan to the Taliban rule. All the great powers—Great Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States—could not escape the Afghan trap; a heavy political and financial burden caused by lost lives and operational costs. There is no doubt that there are many lessons to be learned from the Afghanistan case, yet three of them bear the biggest significance for the future.

The first one is the impact of religion in the country. Western-style policies in countries like Afghanistan might work in the short- and medium term, but these are highly likely to face resistance in the longer-term. Although the Soviet Union or the U.S. intervened upon the invitation or permission of the Afghan state, after a while they were both labeled as ‘occupying powers.’ While the Ameri-

can endeavors to create a democratic country were highly appreciated by some stratum of people living in Kabul and nearby cities, in the more conservative southern and eastern provinces these ignited fear and anger, which were followed inevitably by attempts to preserve their religious identities and socio-cultural structures. For these reasons, the Taliban successfully imposed their own form of justice by establishing ‘shadow governance’ in the rural areas. For example, the self-proclaimed judges sitting in Taliban tribunals kept delivering sentences such as stoning, flogging, and amputation.

The second lesson is the significance of socio-cultural intelligence in analyzing internal dynamics—especially the local actors and conditions in Afghanistan. For 20 years, many of the Western countries based their assessments on information collected from Kabul or other cities, which led them to misread

trends in Afghanistan as a whole. Socio-cultural intelligence requires the ability to gain deep insight: ‘mirror imaging’ tends to be easier for people who share the same religion and have similar enough social and cultural values. This explains why so many Western analysts claimed that Ghani’s flee, the Taliban’s territorial expansion, and Kabul’s fall were “surprising” and “shocking.” However, on the ground the picture could not have been clearer: the “Pashtunization project” was gaining momentum and the rivalry between the Durrani and Ghilzai tribes was becoming more evident in the last decade. The fact that the Taliban displaced non-Pashtun ethnic groups from captured regions—e.g., Daykundi and Panchshir—and replaced them with Pashtuns is a concrete example whose significance, at least, went largely unnoticed in all too many Western circles.

The *third* lesson has to do with the failure of ‘exporting’ leaders to other countries. Hamid Karzai, Ashraf Ghani, Zalmay Khalilzad, and Şir Mohammad Abbas Stanikza were all radical Pashtuns who were given support to bring peace for Afghanistan. It must always be kept in mind that the fate of Afghanistan should be determined by the Afghan people. In a similar manner, a strategy of eliminating one terrorist group by creating another cannot succeed in the long run. Thus, supporting ISIS or ISIS-K, or transforming “resistance groups” into “proxies” will not work for Afghanistan. Forcing people to choose with some version of the famous post-9/11 phrase “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists,” will only pave the way for new insurgencies and civil wars in the future. ●

