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## Will the enduring proxy-war be ever ended in Afghanistan?

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Date:	April 13, 2021	

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### Will the enduring proxy-war be ever ended in Afghanistan?

This article long-story-short explains a four-decade of Afghan conflict, the causes, and effects of the ongoing proxy war in passage of the modern history of the country. Furthermore, this paper elucidates roles and conducts of the major powers in the conflict; it unveils their national security priorities as well, along with their rivalry and disputable foreign policy objectives. The paper also explicates whether peace and stability are achievable or not. Finally, it draws a tragic and upsetting conclusion, which is a black eye not only for the Afghan leadership but also for the global players. Despite no perception of any potential peace in Afghanistan, this paper by no accounts encourages an exodus of Afghan Nation.

#### D-day in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is overwhelmingly engulfed and hampered by proxy-war roughly for 4 decades, and the country has become a chessboard not only for superpowers but also for regional countries and beyond. The cumulative toll of the war on the country and its people is massive. The conflict between Soviet Union-India proxies and Pakistan-US proxies just began, when Sardar Muhammad Daoud Khan took an oath as Afghanistan's first president in 1973. In the course of his tenure, ISI-CIA backed warlord Gulbudin Hikmatyar launched his first armed face off in the eastern Afghanistan, and meantime the KGB sponsored Marionettes and MSS puppets hurled their surge in the whole country.

As a result, pro-Soviet proxies toppled Daoud Khan's presidency thru a military coup in 1978, which paved the way for the Red-army incursion. In the decade subsequent the Soviet invasion in 1979, 1.5million Afghans lost their lives, another million were wounded and disabled, 6.2 million took refuge either in Pakistan, Iran and the rest of the world, and 2.2 million more were internally displaced. The fiscal damage caused by invaders during this period approximated around \$644.8 billion. United States, China, Pakistan, Iran as well as Arab countries initiated anti-Soviet front, and began to harbor, train, and sponsor and arm their proxies in order to defy pro-Soviet proxies. The armed strife lasted a decade and the so-called freedom fighters/jihadi terrorists caroled "war until the end of occupation". Thus, the era of invasion dramatically came to an end in 1989, but the proxy war continued, and the self-styled freedom fighter/jihadi terrorists again chanted "war until the end of communist regime".

In 1992, the communist led government was ousted, following the super powers (Soviet Union and the United States) total withdrawal from the region. Awkwardly, the proxy war interred into the new phase and the conflict warmed up among Indian, Iranian, Pakistani and Saudi proxies.

Iran and India supported the Northern Alliance, whereas Pakistan and Saudi Arabia backed Hikmatyar (1992-1996), in the aftermath of such a skirmish capital of the country was effusively ruined, and a 100

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thousand innocent Afghans killed and 1000s either injured or disabled, thousands internally displaced and fled to rest of the world. As Pakistan-Saudi Arabia came short to topple, the northern alliance led government, Pakistan and its Arab and western allies originated Taliban movement in 1994.

In 1996, Taliban movement was able to overthrow the Northern Alliance leadership and conquered two-third of the country, and ruled Afghanistan barbarically, brutally and mercilessly. Hence, Iran, India and Russia instigated counter measures, called Resistance Front to fight back the Taliban Movement and the proxy war sustained until 2001.

In 2001, the 9-11 phenomena occurred in the US, and the American administration launched a crusade to bring to justice, who took American lives. Taliban movement, which harbored Usama Bin Laden the mastermind of the 9-11 incidence, rebuffed to hand over him to Washington, accordingly, the American Administration commenced a full-scale war against Taliban to get rid of the alleged Islamic Emirate, which ended up with American occupation.

America's two-decade-long occupation, beginning in 2001, which still goes on resulted the death of 3.500 coalition forces and the loss of 150.000 Afghan civilian and military personnel, in order to achieve purported "Nation Building" and "Democratization". The occupiers endeavored to bring to power their puppets, via phony democratic process in hope of using Afghan territory for their strategic purposes.

In 2002, Pakistan, China along with some Arab monarchies started to regroup Taliban movement and other proxies to fight pro-American and pro-Indian Kabul regime, due to the strategic divergence with the US, Russia and Iran have also jumped in, to support Taliban's resurgence ironically with American taxpayers money. The insurgents (proxies) chanted again "the war until the end of foreign/American occupation".

In 2020, some hoodwinked and naïve policy makers have advised Donald Trump the American potentate to draw down the combat forces, and open negotiation in order to reach an agreement with Taliban. The settlement was made between the US and the insurrectionaries, the US started withdrawing, expecting that peace will prevail in Afghanistan. Seemingly, peace will not carry the day, since the rebels call for war until dethroning Ashraf Ghani.

Now the question is whether the proxy war will be ended anytime in the future, in other words whether peace and stability are achievable. The experts stipulate (for) an interim government to integrate Taliban in the political system of the country. Some others enjoin additional approaches to be employed to transform the conflict, including the agreement to rule the country in accordance with a viable model, such as the Swiss model, whereby some representatives choose a leader for a limited time based on performance. Nevertheless, these approaches do not seem to be convincing and substantial, even if all at odds factions reach a comprehensive settlement to form a broad-based government, peace and stability will not be achieved, and the proxy war will be sustained.

#### Implications of global players' divergence

In order to answer the above said question, we have to find out the root cause of the conflict, to the best of my knowledge; the Afghan proxy war is deeply ingrained in and intertwined with regional and trans-national disputes, therefore it makes sense to look into each conflictual issues, one by one. Indo-Pakistan dispute.

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Subsequent the end of British rule in 1947, British-India was divided into two separate nations, India and Pakistan, since then the countries have fought a series of conventional wars, mainly over the region of Kashmir, of which possession has been claimed by the countries. The partitioned, which was based on Hindu and Muslim majorities, caused mass migration and clashes, resulted hostility, violence and bloodshed. Consequently, the first Indo-Pak war took place in October 1947, following assault on Kashmir by Pakistan's tribal forces. The war lasted roughly two years, which ended up with ceasefire and provisional demarcation – now called the line of Control.

In 1965, the second Indo-Pak war occurred due to a series of cross-border clashes. The clashes turn to a full-scale war, when Pakistani soldiers crossed the line of control deep into the Indian administered Kashmir in search of starting insurgency against Indian army. The war came to an end, when officials of both countries agreed upon acknowledging peaceful vows.

A third Indo-Pak war erupted, when Pakistan was further divided into two parts Eastern and Western Pakistan. As a result, both East and West Pakistan began to tussle, due to the significant Indian role in the conflict, eastern Pakistani soldiers Surrendered to Indian Army and Western Pakistan got independence, which now called Bangladesh. In 1987, a nation-wide election took place in India and in Indian administered Kashmir, but the so-called Islamic movements did not acknowledge the result of the election, which eventuated an armed standoff against the Indian rule in Kashmir. Kashmir was acutely polarized, some of the inhabitants demanded independence from India, while the others sought to be integrated with Pakistan. Subsequently, armed resistance broke out, since then Pakistan's ISI start to train, finance, shelter and sponsor the insurgent groups to fight Indian Defense forces, which has continued until here and now.

#### Sino-Indian row

Apart from border dispute, which occasioned a Sino-Indian war in 1962, China and India are warming up to contain one another; China has kicked off Belt and Road Initiative. This initiative (BRI) puts China at the heart of the new Pan-Eurasian economic order; the effort has drawn commitments from over 60 countries, and international organizations, and has been described as China's project of the century.

The massive undertaking is divided into two main components: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road. The "Belt" is a series of overland routes that will collectively connect China with Western Europe through the resource-rich countries of Central Asia. The "Road," counter intuitively, refers to a dizzying sea route that flows around Southeast and South Asia, through Africa, and into the Mediterranean.

In counter measures, India has a continent-crossing plan of Washington-Tokyo oriented (South-Central Asia policy) which is called North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC); the objective is to link India with Central Asia, Caucasus and Europe thru Iran (if Iran is aligned with Washington) and possibly Afghanistan. India has been trying to interweave itself deeper within the infrastructural and economic fabric of Eurasia.

The NSTC is a multimodal trade corridor which extends from India to Caucasus, linking the India Ocean and Persian Gulf to Caspian Sea, which lies from Jawaharlal Nehru and Kandla port in western India to the port of Bandar Abbas in Iran, then go road and rail north thru Baku to the Caucasus and beyond.

The second route goes along the eastern side of the Caspian Sea, connecting the new Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway to amalgamate with the North-South Transnational Corridor.

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The third route linking India with Chabahar port of Iran then goes to Afghanistan extends to Central Asia, which is currently suspended due to Washington's mounting pressure to give it up if not India, will face sanctions. India is a big driver of enhancements to Iran's Chabahar port. The country (India) is also backing a 218-kilometer road connecting the heart of Afghanistan with a border to Iran, the Kaladan multimodal project in Myanmar, the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR), which goes all the way from Dhaka to Istanbul, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, and, possibly, developing Trincomalee port in Sri Lanka as well as Delhi-Kabul Air Corridor in order to bypass and debase Beijing oriented Pakistani Corridor.

In the face of American drawdown, there are some speculations India is considering deploying around 15 thousand troops to Afghanistan to deter threats posed by China and Pakistan and to safeguard its strategic projects in the region. Meanwhile India has consolidated its effort to support Afghan security forces in general and sponsor the Afghan intelligence Networks in particular. As a result of recent joint actions, Afghan intelligence Agency (NDS) and Indian intelligence organizations (IB, RAW, DIA and the inter-service Joint Cipher Bureau), the Afghan counter intelligence department was able to crack down the active and sleeping cells of Chinese MSS in the capital of Afghanistan.

Meantime India and China are pushing the blame game accusing one another for aggressive actions at the border points, which revitalize the Sino-Indian border dispute.

The sovereignty over two large and various smaller separated pieces of territory have been contested between China and India. The westernmost, Aksai Chin, is claimed by India as part of Jammu and Kashmir and region of Ladakh but controlled and administered as part of Chinese autonomous region of Xinjiang. The other large disputed territory, the easternmost, lies south of the McMahon Line.

It was referred to as the North East Frontier Agency, and is now called Arunachal Pradesh. The McMahon line was part of 1914 Simla Convention between British-India and Tibet an agreement rejected by China which caused Sino-Indian war in 1962. The border dispute was in somehow resolved in 1996 as part of Confidence-Building measures.

But tension recently has risen as India has stationed sophisticated military hardware at the border, namely after receiving green signals from Washington and Tokyo, meanwhile India accuses China for acts of aggression at border, India claims, that China has ordered its military units to be positioned at the crossing line, therefore India has taken reactionary steps.

#### Iran-Saudi Arabia dispute

The Saudi-Iran dispute originated, when widespread riots and rattles erupted in Iran, which put Iranian at armed standoff. As a result, the Iranian kingdom was toppled, and the King (shah) fled, and there was a power vacuum in the country in 1979. Thus, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini rushed to lead the mutiny, in order to fill the gap. He brought a strategic shift to the Iranian foreign policy, so that he tried to reestablish Iran as a regional power based on Shia Islam to counter-weight Sunni Islam. Although Iran had been a Shia country, but had had a secular regime and Shia Islam had not been promoted as state religion. Khomeini's strategic foreign policy shift was perceived as warmongering by the Sunni Muslim world, and especially by Saudi Arabia, which has customarily declared itself as leader of the Islamic world. Moreover, the country is home for two holiest places – Mecca and Medina –, Saudi Arabia is the Guardian, and responsible to protect them reach out their role in the entire globe especially within the Islamic world. Therefore, millions

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of Muslims take part at pilgrimage each year, which has added to the importance of Saudi Kingdom as an advocate of Sunni Islam.

On top of geo-political and geo-strategic discrepancy that the Kingdom has with Iran, Saudi Arabia arranges Sunni Islam as fundamental of its foreign policy object, whereas Iran's forward policy for the region based on the tents of Shia Islam, hence there is divergence of policy objectives, which challenge and contradict each other. In addition, the countries are oil-rich and overflowed with petrodollars to export their dogmas to the rest of Islamic world, thru both conventional and unconventional measures.

#### Sino-Russian and USA animosity

Despite significant divergence between China and Russia in both regional and international arena, the countries have striven to expand their cooperation in several directions namely in diplomatic, political and defense realms. China and Russia consider the US as a challenge to the national security of both Beijing and Moscow. The countries are bearing in mind that alignment between Moscow and Beijing is thought to be the best possible measure to deter US hegemonic policy. Russia and China are working together to fill the gaps of their military capability, accelerating their technological innovations, supplementing each other's defense competency to emasculate US global leadership, challenging US dominance in strategic regions as well.

Their joint naval drills are supposed to be projected as a counter measure to minimize the US capability, and to defy US regional scenario. Furthermore, the countries accelerate their cooperation to erode US military advantages. In order to enhance their efforts, Russia provides China with advanced weapons to remove the US from their backyards. Their joint efforts have put America under immense pressure to reconsider its defense budget and its alleged commitments to advocate a free and open Indo-Pacific. The countries are doing their best to counter American Democratic measure in form of "color revolutions", substantiating each other to defend their interests in multidimensional environments, creating norms around cyber and internet sovereignty, and augmenting anti-American elements even radical Islamists to gain the power and expand their territorial control. They legitimize each other's conducts to persuade swing states to abandon the US.

Moscow and Beijing consolidating their efforts to inter to the new spaces more likely Artificial Intelligence, they strive to offer diverse digital system and other technologies. They also joined hands to disqualify American financial measures in the global economic arena especially bypass the US sanctions and minimize the US ability in financial realm as part of the US foreign policy objective.

They have long before tried to de-dollarize the world financial system, which will in turn curtail the US capability in the area of export control. Nonetheless, the US has launched counter measures to limit Sino-Russia cooperation and the threats they pose to Washington. In response to Sino-Russian partnership, the US stationed and installed vigilant technologies all around the countries to curb their liabilities.

Additionally, in response to the Sino-Russian joint-partnership, the US adopted a new maritime strategy in December 2020 the three maritime services of the US military – the US Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard. The strategy elucidates both China and Russia as resolute adversaries, who pose a long-term strategic threat to the national security of the US in the global arena particularly in Indo-pacific domain. In comparison to the old strategies, the new strategy presses on the importance of sea control, which ascribes the possibility of armed conflict with at maritime level. Moreover, the strategy signifies the importance of Coastguard as a part of main element to deter multidimensional threats posed by Sino-Russia. The new

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strategy also implies and stress on building partnerships and cooperation with other countries to defend the US global perspective. It clarifies as well that current US defense capability is not sufficient. Thus, the maritime forces ought to be modernized in order to counter Sino-Russia maritime strategy. According to the new strategy the size and shape will boldly change to answer the current and future challenges.

#### Sino-Russia rivalry

China and Russia enmity lays back to the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) conflict took place in 1929 between Soviet Union and China, which was the bloodiest conflict of its time. Joseph Stalin played a significant role to neutralize Chinese efforts to recapture the Railway. In order to attain its goals China used both conventional and asymmetric approaches to eliminate Soviet Union control over the Railway. Obtaining green signals from Japan, Stalin forcefully trespassed the region and pushed back Chinese armed forces, which was connoted as a sign of aggression, and ended up with border dispute. Throughout, the history both countries unsuccessfully endeavored to find a peaceful and acceptable solution to the border conflict. Consequently, in 2003 Russia and China signed an agreement to resolve the border dispute. In 2005, Moscow and Beijing finalized the border issue, nevertheless, Chinese leadership still claims that Vladivostok Russia's Far East city is part of Chinese territory, besides Beijing asserts that Russia has annexed 350,000 square mile of Chinese territory. Nonetheless, due to American Air, Land and sea superiority, in global level and particularly in Indo-pacific, Asian and African regions, which is considered as threat to the national security of China and Russia. Therefore, Moscow and Beijing agreed upon to build up partnership and cooperation along with filling each other's gaps in term of defense, aerial, sea and digital technologies, to rule out American Maritime strategic challenges. In addition, kick out the US military forces from their back yards. It is worthwhile to note Sino-Russian cooperation or partnership is not strategic, because is not built on natural basis, rather it instituted on a tactical measure to deter American aggression. It is very conventional term that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, which means Beijing and Moscow have a common enemy "the United States". Therefore, they disregard their border dispute for the time being, which will definitely be brushed up, when the US is out of the race in the global arena.

According to the management criteria, partnership or cooperation is based on three terms; short term, midterm and long term in other word operational, tactical and strategic, taking in to account the mentioned terminologies the Sino-Russia partnership is operational and tactical then to be strategic/long-term. While China has been shifting its soft strategic measures, the country tries to apply hard power in Central Asia "Russia's back yard". Beijing considers stationing military forces in the region to defend the country's Belt and Road initiative extended to the region. China wants to safeguard its geo-economic and geo-political objectives thru future military installations in Central Asia. Therefore, Beijing's motives are irreconcilable with the foreign policy objectives of Moscow for the region, because China pursues to advance trans-Eurasian transportation corridor in order to bypass Russia. Furthermore, China recently built an airport in Xining-Uyghur autonomous district close to Afghan and Tajikistan borders, which is the first airport of such kind in the mountainous area of Badakhshan. China's initiative in this form, offers Beijing enjoying upper hand to get hold on Natural resources of the disputed region. The country undertook to build extra 25 airports in the region in order to expand its military buildup. Hence, Russia reconsiders its partnership with China, the balance between Beijing and Moscow is changing in the region.

In addition, Sino-Russian partnership is depended on China's commitment to full carbon neutrality by 2060. The Beijing will reduce consumption of all fossil fuels, including natural gas, which will definitely play a significant role in future cooperation and partnership between Moscow and Beijing.

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China has recently made public that the country will almost be carbon neutral in 40 years; means the country will reduce 65% of its oil consumption and 75% of its natural gas consumption. These assertions will disqualify forthcoming efforts to run a mega-pipeline "Power of Siberia-2" in order to pump Russian natural gas to China. In order to minimize its dependency on Russian Natural Gas, China has diversified its efforts to import natural gas from central Asian countries. China made a technological breakthrough in domestic natural gas production, which will in turn reduce Chinese dependency on Russia. In couple of decades, Russia will totally lose its fuel and gas advantages to leverage China. Between 2050-2060, China will independently handle its energy needs, and develop its defense, maritime and digital technology including artificial intelligence. China will increase its defense budget up to 1 trillion dollars. Until 2060, the US will completely be out as a major element of world order. So there would be no need for Russian cooperation, China alone would be in a position to police the world and Russia will become Beijing's number one geo-political enemy.

#### Turkish and Indo-Greek-Saudi potential conflict

Although Greece and India are separated by great geo-political distance, the countries cooperate and collaborate on many issues, and work closely to deepen and further, expand their bilateral ties, since Turkey pledged to harbor, train, and sponsor and arm Kashmiri separatist jihadi terrorist groups under the auspices of Pakistani ISI. The recent strategic developments have highlighted semi-dormant areas of common Indo-Greek security interests and concerns. The incentive for such a convergence between India and Greece caused by the hastily growing strategic cooperation between Turkey and Pakistan to utilize jihadi terrorism as a tactic to promote their foreign policy objectives, which occasions hypothetically risky destabilization potentialities in the eastern Mediterranean and South Asia. From now on, it is clear that Erdogan's Turkey is an obvious threat not only to Mediterranean, but also to South Asia and even to global peace and security. The Turku-Pakistani alignment has materialized a distinct threat to both Athens and New Delhi making Indo-Greek strategic cooperation a natural outcome of desire of both countries to secure and foster their strategic interests. Pak-Turku axis made Saudi the strategic ally of Pakistan during cold war and thereupon withdraw economic and strategic sponsorship and join Indo-Greek alliance. Since then, the countries even added Sudan exploring how to strengthen multilateral security cooperation with other states that share similar concern about Turku-Pakistani flexing their muscles in the Mediterranean, red sea and Indo-pacific region and South Asia. The partnership among Greece, India, Saudi Arabia and Sudan put immense pressure on the US to make Turkey give in the preplanned sale of T129 Atak Helicopters to Pakistan, because American technology is part of the aircraft design, the Turkish company selling the helicopters must first secure the US export licenses before delivery can take place.

#### Indo-Russian Split

New Delhi and Moscow have been enjoying fruitful bilateral relations since dozens of decades almost in all occupations, this relationship meaningfully turned to a strategic cooperation in 2000, since then the countries have been holding annual dialogue to further bilateral relations. For the first time, from the time when, the strategic cooperation emerged, Moscow called off the annual summit, initially due to Delhi's participation in the Indo-Pacific initiative and Quad, whereby the country is more inclined towards the US hub in the region, which could assumingly pose a threat to the alleged Sino-Russian strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific region.

Furthermore, the Ladakh Standoff between China and India made Moscow choose to gradient towards Beijing, although the head of the Carnegie Moscow Center Dmitri Terin proclaims that Russia will not

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choose between Delhi and Beijing, while Russia looks at the world differently. In addition, it is in Moscow's interest to encourage a multipolar region in which several powerful axes exist he added. Despite India is a sales market for Russian products especially military ones, and the country's export to India reaches 8 Billion USD. Alternatively, Sino-Russian bilateral trade had crossed \$110 Billion, China is a huge sales market for Russian energy, agricultural and military products, and China's share increased to 18 percent since 2013, which was 16 percent thereupon.

China even overtook Germany to become Russia's largest trade partner. Therefore, Moscow should choose between New Delhi and Beijing, so Russia chose China rather than India. Hence, India has no other choice, but setting up a strategic partnership with the United States and its allies. Consequently, the alignment between China and Russia, on the other hand cooperation between India and the US will widen the gap between Moscow and New Delhi, which will definitely have adversarial implication for the entire region.

Conclusion: in accordance with the analysis, the proxy war may last 100 plus years, and the countries will keep the ongoing war taking place in Afghanistan. They have chosen Afghanistan, since the country is primarily, no man's land and its inhabitants are cheap and sucker to be taken on board, hired and utilized as fodder in favor of any local, national, regional and trans-national state and non-state actors or institutions.

Promoting their foreign policy objectives thru Afghanistan serves more or less to avoid direct confrontation among rival countries. Imagine once the war or direct confrontation takes place between India and Pakistan, Saudi and Iran, Russia and China or the US and China, what may happen needless to say, devastation of the entire region. Having had both tactical and strategic weapons, their application definitely jeopardizes global peace and security. Therefore, they have preferred to launch and lengthen the Afghan proxy war, while they have vested interest and stake in maintaining the status qua in order to uphold their foreign policy objectives. Unfortunately, the underdogs and scapegoats of this bloody war are only Afghans, thus I hesitate to say that Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires; rather it is the graveyard of Afghans themselves.

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