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OVERVIEW

Chapter 2 presented an overview of three paradigms and theories derived from these paradigms that can help you explain what is going on in world politics today. This case study about problems in Afghanistan is an excellent opportunity for you to use the paradigms. You may choose a theory from a paradigm to explain what is happening or not happening there, or you may set your analysis within the general framework of a paradigm.

Afghanistan makes a good case study because it raises the traditional security concerns that are of particular interest to realists, the role (or lack thereof) of international organizations, which is of interest to idealists, and the special conditions of women that are often ignored except by the ecological paradigm’s feminism strand.

GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY OF AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan is a landlocked country, 250,000 square miles of forbidding terrain at the crossroads of Central Asia, a highly volatile region with strong competing geopolitical interests driving foreign policies and domestic rule. The country borders on Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and China.

Afghanistan is an extremely poor country where 25 million people struggle to survive. The geography of Afghanistan is harsh and inhospitable—arable land often extends only a few feet from riverbed. Expanding desertification and environmental degradation exacerbate the terrible poverty and broken infrastructure that pervade the country. Ecojustice is an unknown word. The terrain is ideal for guerrilla or tribal war and a perfect defense against foreign invaders: high mountains, deep valleys, and wide plains, full of land mines. None but the local inhabitants know it well.

The population of Afghanistan comprises seven main tribes that historically have fought each other for regional dominance. In the north, toward the border with Tajikistan, are the Tajiks, constituting about 27 percent of the total population. Grouped along the border with Uzbekistan are the Uzbeks (9 percent). These two tribes formed the core of the Northern Alliance, the former Taliban opposition. In the northwest, on the border with Turkmenistan, are the nomadic Turkmens (3 percent). In the southwest are the Aimqaq and Baluchi tribes (6 percent). In the center are the Hazara (9 percent). The largest tribe is the Pashtun, also called the Pathans (42 percent).1 The Taliban leaders and the majority of their supporters belong to this tribe.

All the tribes speak different languages and have kindred beyond the Afghan border. A large percentage of the Pashtuns live in neighboring Pakistan, and they have become a sizable Pakistani political force. The various tribes have yet to form an Afghan identity. Loyalty is to the leader of the tribe.2

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Afghanistan has been a focus of security concerns among Western powers since the nineteenth century, when England and Russia competed for control of Central Asia in what came to be called the Great Game. The British feared that the vigorous expansion of Russia eastward and southward into Central Asia was aimed ultimately at the conquest of British India. The competition led to the First Afghan War (1838–1842), in which the British were roundly defeated by the Afghans.

The Second Afghan War (1878–1880) began when the British learned the Russians had sent an uninvited military mission to Kabul. This time, however, the British succeeded in putting a pro-British ruler on the Afghan throne; he remained there until his death in 1901.

After World War I, the new Afghan emir turned his energies to the modernization of his country. Progress was made throughout the first half of the twentieth century but no ruler was able to unite and control the fiercely independent Afghan tribes.

Afghanistan remained neutral in the Cold War until 1978, when a communist coup murdered the prime minister and installed a communist regime. The tribes rebelled. To shore up the communist government, the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979. They were opposed by anticommu-nist guerrilla forces supplied and trained by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and other countries. Osama bin Laden got his start fighting the Soviet army during this period. The Soviets sustained great losses and finally withdrew in 1989, but the communist regime in Kabul held on until 1992. Between 1992 and 1996, Afghanistan went through a terrible period of civil war in which guerrilla factions supported by one or more of the Afghan tribes fought each other. Out of one such faction, notably from the Pashtun tribe, the Taliban was born.

The Taliban was organized by a group of students (the word Taliban means student) who had studied Islam in Pakistan. The movement received strong Muslim support from
Saudi Arabia, which sent many of its disaffected youth to train and fight in Afghanistan. By 1996, the Taliban had gained control of most of Afghanistan outside of the Tajik tribal area in the northeast dominated by the Northern Alliance. The Taliban instituted a strict Muslim regime, ending all the advances made by women in the previous century and demanding that everyone adhere totally to Shari’ah, or Islamic law. The Taliban gave safe haven to bin Laden and allowed him to recruit and organize members for the al Qaeda movement. In 2001, following 9/11, U.S., allied, and Northern Alliance military action toppled the Taliban regime. To date, no one has been able to capture either bin Laden or the leaders of the Taliban organization, who are widely believed to have taken refuge across the border in the remote vastness of Pashtun Pakistan.

In December 2001, major leaders from the Afghan opposition groups met in Bonn, Germany, and agreed on a plan for the formulation of a new government structure and to the inauguration of Hamid Karzai as chairman of the Afghan Interim Authority (AIA). The transitional Islamic state convened a Constitutional Loya Jirga or grand council from December 14, 2003, until January 4, 2004, and ended with a new constitution, approved on January 16, 2004. Afghan presidential elections were held in October 2004, and as expected, Hamid Karzai was elected president. Parliamentary elections were held in September 2005. Former warlords and their followers gained the majority of seats in both houses of the legislature. The problem is that while the pro-American Karzai may be the ostensible head of the Afghan state, his real power does not extend much beyond the capital city of Kabul. In the provinces, he is opposed by the Afghan tribal warlords, whose legislative victories have made them increasingly proactive.

FOREIGN INTEREST IN AFGHANISTAN

Realists studying the political impasse, might well ask: Why would anyone want to take over this poor, forbidding country, with its history of tribal conflict and resistance to invaders? Several reasons could be given from the realist perspective:

1. Afghanistan lies at the center of Central Asia, strategically located between Russia, the oil-rich states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, the Middle East with its oil reserves and India and China. Afghanistan is the key to the possible construction of many oil and gas pipelines to the east and south.
2. Afghanistan is the home and birthplace of Islamist terrorist groups. The United States had an overriding national security interest to attack al Qaeda and the Taliban in their home base.
3. Stability in Afghanistan would help stabilize the new oil-rich Central Asian states that came into being after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

An idealist might suggest:

1. A democratic Afghanistan could serve as an example of the possible to the people of the Middle East.
2. The Afghan economy is in ruins, its people impoverished and at the mercy of warlords. Sheer humanitarian concerns demand remedies for these conditions.

AFGHANISTAN TODAY

The United States and its allies went into Afghanistan in 2001 with the idealist hope of creating a democratic, economically prosperous, and stable country on the neoliberal model. History, however, has a way of repeating itself. Like the British before them, the allies experienced a quick victory, a victorious entry into Kabul, and the installation of a pro-Western head of state. Two years later, the warlords who fought the civil war in the 1990s returned. The reason for their return lies in the need of the United States for a quick victory over the Taliban. To ensure victory, the Americans teamed up with some unsavory characters in the Northern Alliance. During the bargaining for positions in the interim government in 2002, three of the top posts, the ministries of foreign affairs, defense, and interior, were given to members of an ethnic Tajik faction of the Northern Alliance led by the Tajik warlord named Rabbani, who had granted passports to 600 Arab Islamic militants between 1992 and 1996. The chiefs of the Northern Alliance agreed to accept Karzai, a Pashtun, as head of state, because he had no army of his own. He thus had no power, a fact not only the Tajiks but all the other warlords well knew. Time did not bring Karzai more power, but it did enable the warlords to regroup and return full force to the political scene. The United States could not force them to keep the agreement signed at Bonn in 2001, because it needed the assistance of the warlords for the capture of al Qaeda militants. When a resurgent Taliban returned to Afghanistan in 2005, the United States needed the warlords more than ever to oppose them.

A second reason for the return of the warlords is opium. Before the Soviet invasion, Afghanistan had bountiful orchards and beautiful gardens. All that disappeared in the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal. To support their tribal wars, the warlords planted opium poppies. The Taliban regime forbade the production of opium, but after the U.S.–led invasion and the renewal of tribal warfare, opium cultivation resumed. Afghanistan is now the narco-capital of the world. In 2006, it supplied 90 percent of the world’s heroin. Opium production broke all previous records, largely due to increased planting in the southern provinces where the Taliban are most active. Estimates are that the poppy trade accounts for well over 50 percent of Afghanistan’s gross domestic product, with more money coming in through smuggling.4

The United States and its allies must bear their share of the responsibility for the return of the old status quo.
Realism suggests that a strong military presence is mandatory. However, the 32,000-strong International Security Assistance Force is active mainly in Kabul or on reconstruction projects in stabilized areas in the north and west. Most of the countries with troops in the Force do not allow their soldiers to engage in active fighting. U.S. forces number a mere 12,000 and are concentrated on hunting al Qaeda and the Taliban in the war-torn south. The strong U.S. military presence in the south has created the impression of U.S. support for the tribes in the Northern Alliance at the expense of the 40 percent minority Pashtun people. Even if all the troops were deployed to curtail the activities of the warlords, and defeat the Taliban and al Qaeda, the 32,000-strong Force is not enough to bring about peace.

Liberals make the case that the international community has not been forthcoming with financial aid and investment. According to CARE International, a humanitarian NGO, in 2002 Afghanistan received pledges of only $75 per person in foreign aid and will get only $42 per person over the next five years. By contrast, Kosovo, Rwanda, and Bosnia each received average pledges of $250 per person. Liberals say the humanitarian NGOs have been frustrated in their work by accusations by the Afghan government of corruption and promoting their own agendas. In 2004, Doctors Without Borders (see chapter 6) withdrew its personnel from the country because of its unease over the security situation. A strong humanitarian NGO presence requires a secure, safe environment that to date is far from being achieved. Cooperative liberal theory simply cannot work where death and destruction wait at the turn in every road providing aid.5

International economic aid also fails to meet the needs of a devastated country trying to rebuild. The most visible U.S. economic aid project was the completion of the highway from Kabul to Kandahar that opened in 2003 at a cost of $250 million. The United States is planning to build other highways. In June 2004, the United States pledged $5 million to train people in small business, a substantial part of which will go to train women in the private sector. The World Bank has pledged almost $900 million, the European Union $40 million. At the 2006 London Conference international donors vowed to donate US $10.5 billion to help the Afghan government implement its five-year plans in security, governance, and economic and social development. But increasing complaints about the Karzai government’s mishandling of funds, of crime and corruption in high places, and “lost momentum” in bringing about democracy have kept direct foreign investment at a minimum. In 2007, international criticism of the Afghan government’s record during Karzai’s five-year tenure in office reached its highest point.8

The 2004 and 2005 elections went off relatively smoothly with little direct evidence of voter fraud. The high numbers of voters and ease of the process demonstrated to the world community that the Afghan population at least was ready for change. Elections, however, do not make a democracy. The road ahead lies through the tribal warlords, who must see a benefit for them in the new regime before they sign on to defeat the Taliban and create a modern state.

NOTES
3. For a brief overview of Afghan history since 1978, see CIA Factbook at www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/af.html#Intro. For NGO activity, see Afghanistan Guide, oneworld.net, http://uk.oneworld.net/guides/afghanistan/development?gclid=CNG2gpf6osCFQY3SgodQzItQA.

QUESTIONS
Check Your Understanding
1. According to the case study, why are the Afghans repeatedly involved in civil wars?
2. What reasons are given for international interest in the country? What is the basis of the Great Game?
Analyze the Issues
In analyzing the issues, assume the position of a liberal, a realist, or a proponent of the ecological paradigm.

1. What reasons can you give for the slow pace of progress in Afghanistan today?
2. In your opinion, are the reasons given for international interest in the country valid? Is there any reason, in your view, why the United States should leave Afghanistan alone?
3. Do you think a bigger role for international organizations would improve the situation?
4. What do you predict as the future of Afghanistan?

FURTHER INFORMATION
Books for Background

Websites

Representative Online Articles on the Great Game