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HISTORY NOTE

Afghanistan: a brief history of recent land invasions

The current conflict in Afghanistan needs to be understood against a background of five recent attempts by foreign powers to impose their will on Afghanistan, starting with Britain's invasion of Afghanistan in 1839.

By 1837, The Honourable East India Company had resolved to make Afghanistan the centre of a new Central Asian political system controlled by Britain. Russia formed an alliance with the Afghan king, Dost Muhammad, stimulating Britain to seek a similar agreement. This failed, and Britain resolved to replace Muhammad with its own king. The Army of the Indus assembled at Quetta in 1839, advanced into Afghanistan via Kandahar and occupied Kabul where an unpopular Shah Shujah was installed as king. Erroneously, the Company then reduced the garrisons and failed to keep the Pathan chiefs in the Khyber bribed. Increasing mob agitation in Kabul forced the 16,000 persons under British protection to quit the city mid-winter on 6 January 1842. The Pathans systematically over-whelmed the column in seven days before the British had reached the Khyber Pass. A wounded Surgeon Brydon reached Jalalabad, the only survivor of the First Afghan War. A fresh Company force was immediately assembled – the Army of Retribution – which seized Kabul in May 1842.

An uninvited Russian mission to Kabul in 1878, plus a failure of local tribes to allow British entry to the Khyber Pass, triggered the Second Afghan War. By 1879, Afghanistan sued for peace permitting Britain to control its foreign relations.

British vulnerabilities on the North West Frontier in 1919 tempted Afghanistan to launch an invasion of India. This Third Afghan War lasted three months, ending after British planes bombed Kabul. The 1919 Treaty of Rawalpindi proclaimed Afghan independence. The Soviet Union continued to occupy Afghanistan's immediate northern neighbour, Turkistan, and split the area into five ethnically-based Soviet Socialist Republics in 1924.

The year 1979 was a defining moment in contemporary Middle East history: an Islamic revolution swept away the Shah of Iran, Saddam Hussein seized the presidency of Iraq, and Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan and assassinated its president.

A civil war had earlier broken out in Afghanistan in 1974 leading to a military coup in 1978 bringing to power the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) which embarked on a programme of radical reform. The Soviet Union, initially sympathetic but later concerned with PDPA radicalism, in December 1979 invaded Afghanistan, killed President Amin and installed another faction of the PDPA led by Babrak Karmal. Karmal failed in government and seeded the disintegration of the army.

Local resistance to the new government strengthened. The resistance, the mujahideen, were rebel tribesmen, villagers and soldiers who fought independently in different areas usually under local warlords or tribal chiefs. By the early 1980s, the PDPA government ruled in the main cities of Kabul, Herat and Kandahar and large towns, but the mujahideen commanded the countryside. Soviet response to this stalemate was the introduction of more air power, especially the Mil-24 Hind armoured helicopter gunship.

By 1985, the United States (US) Central Intelligence Agency began covertly arming the mujahideen with weapons that would neutralise the helicopter threat – Blowpipe and Stinger shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles. These were effective and, after suffering a total of 64,000 casualties, the last Soviet troops were evacuated in February 1989.

The years after the Soviet withdrawal were marked by incessant fighting among mujahideen warlords. In response, the Pashtun (Pathan) majority turned to a new force composed of religious 'students', the Taliban – Sunnis, predominantly Durrani Pashtun, from south-eastern Afghanistan. The Taliban seized Kabul in September 1996, murdered President Najibullah and imposed a regime characterised by the strictest interpretation of Sharia law within the Islamic world. The new government provided a sanctuary for the Al-Qa'ida international terrorist organisation led by Osama bin Laden, which bombed the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998. In response, the US attacked suspected terrorist camps within Afghanistan with cruise missiles.

The Al-Qa'ida attack on America on 11 September 2001 precipitated a US demand on the Taliban to deliver the leaders of Al-Qa'ida. Their refusal to do so initiated military action on 7 October 2001. A US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation force, assisted by the anti-Taliban Afghan Northern Alliance, by December 2001 had driven the Taliban from Afghanistan, but neither Osama bin Laden or the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, were captured. Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun tribal leader, in December 2001 became chairman of the new Afghan Transitional Administration.

From Pakistani sanctuaries, the Taliban have regrouped and retrained and in the past three years have launched an increasingly successful insurgency war in southern and eastern Afghanistan. The insurgency is opposed by an International Security Assistance Force (including some 1550 Australian troops) which is supporting the Karzai government, training its army and police force, providing security and reconstruction in the provinces, and taking the battle to Al-Qa'ida and the Taliban, including their safe havens in Pakistan. The conflict currently is in the balance and its outcome unpredictable.

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