

**Jump TO Article**



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# *Afghanistan and the AfPak theatre of operations*

**Air Vice-Marshal B. H. Short, AM, RFD (Ret'd)<sup>1</sup>**



*Bruce Short traces the recent history of warfare in Afghanistan from 1839 to the present day, putting the current conflict there into its historic perspective. He concludes that there is little prospect of stability in the country or in adjacent Pakistan after the scheduled withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force in 2014.*

**Key words:** Afghanistan, Pakistan, Taliban, al-Qa'ida, International Security Assistance Force, Australian Army.

Today, the International Security Assistance Force's strategic thinking has moved from the overly restricted stance of fighting in an Afghan theatre to the more realistic concept of a so-called AfPak theatre of operations (Leahy 2011, 9). Once again, contemporary invading forces of Afghanistan have re-learned the overriding importance of the immutable geo-political relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan's North-West Frontier.

## **The Country and the People**

Afghanistan is a large land-locked area of approximately 650,000 square kilometres. It is bigger than the combined land areas of France, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Its population is also large – 32 million (2008 census). There are a further 12 or so million Afghanis living in the historical Afghan territory of the North-West Frontier. The eastern border of Afghanistan was delineated by a British surveyor, Sir Henry Durand, who ignored ethnic, cultural, linguistic as well as geographic divides. The Durand Line, which was not surveyed in full, was imposed on the Emir of Afghanistan in 1893. It is the basis of much of the modern conflicts within the AfPak Region. The line remains the current eastern territorial boundary of the country.

The south and west of Afghanistan are deserts, but the remainder is mountainous, along with many fertile plains and valleys supporting most of the population. A long mountain range known as the Hindu Kush, with numerous passes and a maximum peak at 7700 meters (25,250 feet) runs north-east into Pakistan (Merriam-Webster 1997, 9 – 10). There are four chief towns: Kabul, the capital, in the east; Kandahar, the second city, in the south; Herat in the west; and Mazar-i-Sharif, near the Uzbekistan border in the north.

Afghan society is based upon strong clan and tribal links: the tribal units are fiercely independent and are commonly in conflict with neighbours. The major ethnic group is the Pashtuns – known in colonial times as

Pathans. In a 2011 census, Pashtuns accounted for 40 per cent of the Afghan population. The Pashtuns are distributed in the centre and south of the country and form a majority of much of the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan. Pashtuns dominate modern Afghan society, whilst historically, they reaped great financial rewards and power from those areas along the old trading routes. Other Afghani ethnic groups include the Hazara, who are spread throughout the land, and two small groups in the northern zones, the Uzbeks and Tajiks.

There are two major languages spoken in Afghanistan: Persian Dari and Pashto. Both are Indo-European in origin. In addition, there are numerous ethno-linguistic groups across the region and multilingualism is common.

Religion is a strong influential force within Afghanistan and 99 per cent of the people are Muslim. Sunni Muslims account for about 80 per cent and the rest are of the Shi'a sect. The Muslim local preachers, mullahs, periodically declare holy wars. If killed, the mujahideen ('warriors of God') are promised unimaginable religious advantages.

## **Anglo-Afghanistan Conflicts of the 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

Baker (2011) describes no fewer than eighty armed clashes in the last 172 years between 1839 and 2011, some of them major wars lasting for years and involving battles with thousands of casualties on either side. The year 1839 is arbitrarily chosen for the start of the modern discourse. This was the year of the First Anglo-Afghanistan War which ended in 1842. This major conflict is a stand-out in the annals of the British profession of arms. In mid-winter 1842, 16,000 persons under British protection, of whom 5000 were under arms, were forced to quit Kabul. Their route was to be via Jalalabad and the Khyber Pass in the north-east to Peshawar. The disordered column was attacked and rapidly defeated in detail in seven days, well before it reached Jalalabad. The Pathans systematically sniped with jezails (hand-made, long-barrelled brass-bound muskets) and hacked with tulwars (curved swords) the entire column. A wounded Surgeon Brydon with a handful of sepoy's reached the British-held fort at

<sup>1</sup>Bruce Short is a vice-president of the Institute and associate editor of *United Service*. These are his personal views. E-Mail: shortb7j@bigpond.com.

Jalalabad, the only survivors of the carnage. In another episode, the rearguard of the 44<sup>th</sup> (East Essex) Regiment of Foot lost one officer and three soldiers were liquidated at Gandamak. A relief force was raised immediately by The Honourable East India Company. It re-entered Afghanistan a few months later and retook Kabul. It withdrew in October 1842 (Macrory 1966, 206 – 231).

In 1878, Russia's supposed interest in the region re-kindled Britain's sensitivities to the possibility of a Russian threat to the western borders of India. The Second Anglo-Afghanistan War broke out in 1878 and lasted till 1880. Again Britain suffered some military humiliation. This time, the 66<sup>th</sup> (Berkshire) Regiment of Foot was annihilated at Maiwand. But discipline and modern weapons prevailed. Britain placed a highly efficient and pro-British Emir on the throne and again withdrew their forces (Baker 2011, 85 – 90). A satisfactory degree of understanding between the two nations endured thereafter until 1919, when the initial aggressor was Afghanistan. British vulnerabilities on the North-West Frontier tempted Afghanistan to launch an invasion of India. This Third Afghan War lasted barely three months, ending after British biplanes repeatedly bombed Kabul. The Treaty of Rawalpindi in 1919 proclaimed Afghan independence (Short 2010). The Soviet Union, however, continued to occupy Afghanistan's immediate northern neighbour, Turkistan, which the Russians had invaded in 1919.

### **Afghanistan-Soviet Relationships**

Following independence in 1919, Afghanistan immediately established relationships with the Russians. Indeed, Afghanistan was the first country to recognise the new Bolshevik regime and friendly Afghan-Soviet relations were to last until 1979.

A series of civil wars, revolts and rebellions punctuated the period up to 1979. In 1965, the Communist Party, known as the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the PDPA, was formed. In 1978, yet another revolution occurred, but initiated this time by the PDPA-led murder of the government leader and 18 of his family members. The new Communist government dominated by Pashtun tribal members undertook rigorous secular modernisation programmes and radical reforms, which in part involved purging almost the entire professional, business and middle class. As many as half-a-million Afghans left their homeland to seek refuge in neighbouring countries.

Prime Minister Amin, a hard-line Marxist, murdered President Taraki late in 1979. The Soviets became very concerned by the extremes perpetrated by Amin's government. On Christmas Eve 1979, the 40<sup>th</sup> Soviet Army invaded Afghanistan with an elite force landing at Bagram airbase north of Kabul. Amin was murdered by the Soviets who installed another faction of the PDPA led by the more traditional Islamist, Babrak Karmal, as prime minister and president of the Revolutionary Council.

Babrak Karmal, a moderate, gradually failed in government and exacerbated the disintegration of the Afghan army. Local resistance to this new Communist

government strengthened, compounding the international condemnation of the Soviet presence. The resistance, the mujahideen, were rebel tribesmen, villagers and disaffected Afghanistan 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 and large towns, but the mujahideen commanded the countryside. Pakistan became the channel for the financial and military assistance to the resistance movements. This assistance was derived widely from Gaddafi's Libya, Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states (Baker 2011, 172 – 179).

Soviet response to this urban-rural military stalemate was the introduction of more air power, especially helicopters – the Mil-24 Hind armoured helicopter gunship. By 1986, the United States Central Intelligence Agency was supplying shoulder-held anti-aircraft missiles, FIM-92 Stingers and British Blowpipes, to the Afghan resistance groups, who employed them very effectively against the helicopter gunships (Holmes 1999, 7 – 8). Ultimately, after a total of 64,000 Soviet casualties, the last Soviet troops were evacuated in February 1989. The Afghans had suffered perhaps one million dead soldiers and civilians.

The post-Soviet Communist Afghan government was led by President Najibullah. Mujahideen opposition to the government was immediate and the country again plunged into civil war. Najibullah's government fell when Soviet supplies terminated with the collapse of the Soviet Union in August 1991. The United States funded the Mujahideen till 1992, and were followed by Saudi Arabia which became the major source of funds with Pakistan an increasing key supporter.

### **The Rise and Fall of the Taliban Government (1994 – 2001)**

Near the end of 1994, a group of Pashtun resistance fighters around the Kandahar region gathered behind a one-eyed leader, Mullah Omar, who revived a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century religious movement called the Taliban. Taliban is derived from the Pashtun word for 'students'. The Talibs are religious students typically dressed in black turbans. They are disciplined militant fundamentalists who seized Kandahar and readily gained popular support in areas close to Kandahar, namely Oruzgan and Zabul provinces. They were initially heavily armed with tanks and fighter aircraft and ultimately, in September 1996, captured Kabul and Jalalabad. The Taliban first murdered the former president, Najibullah, and then imposed a regime characterised by the strictest interpretation of Sharia law within the Islamic world (Docherty 2007, 226 – 228).

In May 1996, Osama bin Laden, a friend of Mullah Omar, forced to flee from Saudi Arabia to escape pursuit by Western intelligence agencies, arrived at Jalalabad airport. The Taliban provided sanctuary for Osama's group, the al-Qa'ida, who set up training bases in Afghanistan. Taliban militancy was invigorated by Osama's policies. In 1998, al-Qa'ida terrorists bombed

the United States embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. The United States responded with cruise missile attacks on suspected terrorist camps in Afghanistan and demanded the Taliban government surrender the leaders of al-Qa'ida to United States authorities, but it was refused.

On 9 September 2001, the Taliban assassinated Ahmad Massoud, a popular anti-Taliban warlord and resistance leader, in his northern stronghold near Mazar-i-Sharif. Two days later, al-Qa'ida destroyed the World Trade Centre in New York and part of the Pentagon in Washington. A further United States demand for the Taliban to deliver up the leaders of al-Qa'ida again was refused. A military invasion of Afghanistan, authorised by the United Nations Security Council, followed on 7 October 2001. Four days later Prime Minister John Howard announced that Australia would deploy a modest tri-service contingent as her part of Operation Enduring Freedom.

By December 2001, this United States-led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) force, assisted by the anti-Taliban Afghan Northern Alliance, had driven the Taliban out of Afghanistan. Yet neither Osama bin Laden nor the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, were captured. Groups of al-Qa'ida, still led by bin Laden, and Taliban withdrew south from Jalalabad into the Tora Bora mountains and resisted NATO forces. Other Taliban forces took refuge further south-west, just across the border in the Pakistani city of Quetta.

### **Karzai Government and the Taliban Insurgency**

During December 2001, a conference in Germany and a subsequent *loya jirga* (a meeting of tribal groups) in Afghanistan, elected a Pashtun named Hamid Karzai as interim president of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. He took office in June 2002. From mid-2003, an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) of 4500 troops was deployed to Kabul. By August 2003, the ISAF passed to the operational command of NATO. The ISAF, operating in Afghanistan under a new code name, Operation Anaconda, commenced sweeps against Taliban insurgents.

On 20 March 2003, the hostilities of Gulf War II were commenced by members of the Coalition of the Willing – primarily American, British and Australian forces – finally triggered by the failure by Iraq to demonstrate to international satisfaction that it no longer held weapons of mass destruction (Bodansky 2004, 4, 54). The focus of the United States military effort and resources now swung away from Afghanistan. Some NATO forces remained, as part of the ISAF, but not all were fighting the Taliban. Mullah Omar successfully reorganised the Taliban command and stimulated a renewed insurgency. Gradually, over two years, the Pashtun Taliban insurgency became centred in the south-east of the country, bunkered in mountainous areas along the blurred border with Pakistan.

An analysis of the Karzai government showed it to be “corrupt, dysfunctional and nepotistic ..... filled with ethnic entrepreneurs and incompetent policymakers”

(Saikal 2010). At the end of his first 5-year term, Karzai's re-election in August 2009 was marked by seriously flawed voting procedures. Corrupt practices were similarly employed in the 2010 election of the lower house of the Afghan parliament.

### **Australia's Role in Afghanistan**

In August 2006, a Dutch contingent took a leading role, along with 300 Australians, in Oruzgan province, which adjoins Kandahar and Helmand province (Yeaman 2009). In 2009, an additional 450 Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel were deployed to Afghanistan including a 400-man Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force. Oruzgan's provincial capital is Tarin Kowt and the province is a major Taliban stronghold and the source of a major opium-poppy crop. In mid-2008, United States troops in Afghanistan were heavily reinforced. Insurgency in the south and east began to overflow into Pakistan. These AfPak areas were increasingly targeted by ISAF unmanned MQ-9 Reaper drone aircraft. A separate faction of the Taliban became established in Pakistan and commenced an insurgency similar to that of the Afghan Taliban. The unity of the Pakistani Taliban was strong and rapidly challenged the Pakistani military. The Pakistani Taliban moved into the Swat Valley, only 100 kilometres from Islamabad. This was a new development, since the Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Bureau had previously actively supported the Afghan Taliban, perhaps in an attempt to provide later for a Pakistan-friendly government to replace the Karzai government after 2014 when the ISAF is scheduled to withdraw. Furthermore, in the event of a conventional war with India, Pakistan would want the option to withdraw into eastern Afghanistan (Pashtunistan) to gain strategic depth west of the Indus valley<sup>2</sup>.

In early 2010, the ISAF of 60,000 was grossly under-strength. By the end of 2010, the United States deployed three additional combat brigades, some 10,000 troops, with a further 20,000 in 2011. The 60,000 Afghan National Army, too, was under-strength and under-developed, compounding the ineffectiveness of the Afghan National Police (Molan 2009).

At present there are 1550 ADF personnel based in Afghanistan as part of Operation Slipper, the Australian military contribution to the international campaign against terrorism.

Up to August this year, there have been 29 Australian servicemen killed-in-action in Afghanistan. However, with the benefit of rapid retrieval and resuscitation by dedicated combat surgical facilities, low mortality and higher survival figures continue to be a feature of this conflict. Indeed, the risk of death today from military wounding has never been lower and more severely injured are surviving with wounds that were likely to have been fatal in previous conflicts (Gawande 2004). The casualty

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<sup>2</sup>David Leece, personal communication, July 2011



retrieval pathway for ADF personnel commences with forward medical evacuation to the Forward Hospital at Tarin Kowt, then a tactical evacuation south to the Combat Support Hospital at Kandahar. Strategic aero-medical evacuation may be mounted to the large United States hospital at the Landstuhl Army Regional Medical Centre, south-west Germany, before aero-medical evacuation by RAAF C-17 aircraft to Australia (Smart *et al.* 2007).

### Looking Forward

The former ISAF commander, General David Petraeus, reported in the *Washington Post* on 20 October 2010 that “the international and Afghan forces have regained the momentum after years of losing ground to the Taliban”. The year 2014 is planned for the withdrawal of NATO troops leaving only support and training forces there subsequently. By 2014, the Afghan government will probably be no less corrupt, or no more competent and secure in their duties. In July 2011, Hamid Karzai lost his half-brother, a powerful yet corrupt drug dealer, to an assassin’s bullet (Doherty 2011). A week later, Karzai lost another key ally and political supporter through the assassination of a former governor of Oruzgan province. The Afghan security forces cannot yet guarantee security within the country; nor will the Taliban insurgency, with its retained strong leadership and ethos, be weaker or less determined to retake the initiative and overwhelm the Afghan government after 2014. Despite unconfirmed reports of Mullah Omar’s death as late as 20 July 2011, the Taliban movement remains an immediate and overriding threat.

May 2011 witnessed three significant and related events in the AfPak Theatre. On 2 May, the United States killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan, within throwing distance of a large Pakistani defence installation. Almost immediately, Pakistan declared that Gwadar, on the Baluchi coast, was to undergo a very major upgrade of its port facilities by China to allow trans-continental movement of oil to China’s Xinjiang province. On 23 May, with seeming great ease, Pakistani Taliban insurgents raided a major Pakistani Naval Station, *Mehran*, at Karachi with devastating effect.

Indian strategic analyst, Vice-Admiral A K Singh (Ret’d), observed in May that the potential failure of Afghanistan after 2014 will have, as a knock-on effect, the potential of destabilising and fragmenting Pakistan (Singh 2011). He forecasted a split into four Pakistani groupings made up of the Pakistan Punjab, Baluchistan, the Sind and North-West Frontier Province. Of these, the largest and most powerful are the Islamic fundamentalists of the Pakistan Punjab. They lead the most extreme anti-Indian mind-set and could gain control of Pakistan’s nuclear assets. The minority Baluchi (5 per cent of the population), live in the barren province of Baluchistan based around the city of Quetta. Their fate will be to suffer further isolation. The Sind in the south of Pakistan, with a short coast-line, has mainly a commercially orientated community with apparently few

political aspirations. The Pashtun of the North-West Frontier Province would blend with those of Afghanistan and form a loose conglomerate (perhaps named Pashunistan) and continue to make war against themselves and everyone else. A fragmented Pakistan would be the very last thing India needed. Any thought of an imploded Pakistan joining with India would cause India to “fall back a 100 years”. Pakistan fragmentation would probably give rise to another Somalia-like ‘failed-state’, but on a much larger scale.

### Conclusion

The outlook for a stable and independent Afghanistan appears bleak. A successful conclusion to the current international endeavour to provide a peaceful, stable, productive and self-supporting nation is far from certain and may indeed ultimately prove to be unattainable.

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