

The Nature of the State in Afghanistan and Its Relations with Neighboring Countries

著者	Suzuki Hitoshi
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Hitoshi Suzuki**
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Abstract

Since the formation of Afghanistan, its nature as a Pashtun state has affected all its international relations. On the other hand, the fact that it was originally established as a buffer state between Britain and Russia still governs its national integration. In this article I examine Afghanistan's relations with its neighbors through an investigation of its history and the present conditions of its borders with its southern, western and northern neighbors. My aim is to obtain an overall perspective of Afghanistan's relations with its neighbors, historically decisive elements, and the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Keywords: Afghanistan, bordering countries, Durand Line, September 11

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**Assistant Director, International Relations and Conflict Studies Group, Inter-Disciplinary Studies Center, IDE (suzukihi@ide.go.jp)

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INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPING ECONOMIES (IDE), JETRO
3-2-2, WAKABA, MIHAMA-KU, CHIBA-SHI
CHIBA 261-8545, JAPAN

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1. The Nature of State in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's name tells us much about its unique historical circumstances. As is generally known, the "-stan" at the end of the name indicates a place or country in Persian, as can be seen with other names such as Pakistan and Uzbekistan. The focus of the discussion is the first half, namely "Afghan."

On the assumption that "Afghanistan means land of Afghans," Louis Dupree in the introduction of his classic book *Afghanistan* argues that "Afghan" corresponds to the Persian word, *faghan*, meaning "grieve," and was used as a name to a specific race for the first time in documents of the Sassanian dynasty in the third century A.D. (Dupree 1980: p.xvii).

In his book *The Pathans*, which discusses this point, Olaf Caroe introduces the inscription of the first Shapur in Naqsh-i-Rustam, as the "only reference to a race in the eastern frontier in Sassanian dynasty" (Caroe, p.79). It was clear that the name "Afghan" was used by others, not themselves.

In addition, Vogelsang writes as follows about "Afghans" in his *History and Culture of Afghanistan*: "The name perhaps occurs in Varaha Mihira's *Brhat-Samhita*, a Sanskrit work from the Indian subcontinent of the early sixth century, under the ethnic appellation of the *Avaganas* (Vogelsang, p.17)."

It is safe to say that this ethnic group was recognized by this name in Iran (Persia) and the Indian subcontinent at that time, even if it was used only by others.

Another question is to what extent the historical Afghans overlap with the current Pashtuns. Nonetheless, it is generally accepted that the "Afghans" were one of the dominant races in the region.

Therefore, the name of this country, meaning "land/country of the Afghans/Pashtuns," gives some justification to the idea that the Pashtuns were the

dominant ethnic group in this land.

At this point we change our perspective, and take a general view of the ethnic composition of present Afghanistan. The only census ever taken was an imperfect one, implemented in 1979, and the current estimation is based on it. Therefore the available data on ethnic composition, which is important for the formation of a democratic system, is extremely insufficient.

According to the CIA World Factbook, which is freely accessible on the Internet, the Pashtun, the largest ethnic group in the country, account for 42% of the population, but do not form an absolute majority. Afghanistan's population is about 30 million, according to estimates made in 2005, meaning that there are 12 to 13 million Pashtun people. On the other hand, Pashtu speakers constitute about 8% of Pakistan's population of 152 million in 2004, next to Punjabi, Sindi and Siraike speakers.

Thus, the 25 million Pashtuns are almost evenly divided between Afghanistan and Pakistan. But they constitute a minority within the large population of Pakistan, whereas they form a relative majority in Afghanistan.

In a sense, the 1893 Durand Line, which divided the Pashtuns between Afghanistan and Pakistan, made the relations of these two countries a very complex one, as if they were Siamese twins.

Another important fact for understanding Afghanistan is that this region was never an independent kingdom except during the reign of the Ghaznavi Dynasty (977-1150), and was integrated after a revolt in 1709 by Mir Weis, who was from Dorrani, a Pashtun family.

The Dorrani clan is also known by the name of its founder, Abdali. The fourth master of the clan, Zirak, who lived for more than 100 years, gave his position to his youngest son Popal, because the first three, led by his eldest son Baraq, had abused him harshly (Hayat Khan, p.57f). This story involves the divergence of the Baraqzai family

and Porpalzai family, which continues up until the present. As is generally known, former king Zahir Shah, who returned to his country in 2002, is Baraqzai, and President Karzai is originally Popalzai.

The Dorrani clan is thus divided into the Zirak group and Panjpai group, and it is assumed that the social position of former is higher. Today, however, neither functions as a unified group. The Zirac group consists of four families (Popalzai, Alakzai, Baraqzai, and Musazai) and the Panjpai group is composed of five (Nurza, Alizai, Ishaqzai, Haqwani, and Maku).

Of them, the Popalzai family is the most famous, as kings have belonged to it since Ahmad Shah, and because it unified the Abdali clan. It is said that they have handed down an order (farman) from the first Safavie' king Ismail, as a proof of their position. Most of them now live around Kandahar and are engaged in agriculture and pasturing. They are proud of their nobility and bravery.

The Baraqzai family, who reside in the Helmand valley in the southern part of Kandahar (this can be the reason of Mitsuo Ozaki's travels in this area with Davood Khan in 1937), have a greater population than the Porpalzai, but are said to be inferior in bravery. They have held the leading position among the Pashtuns since Dust Mohammad Khan (1818-38; 1842-63)(Hayat Khan,64f).

In a sense, tracing the detailed genealogy centered on the royal family is looking back at the history of Afghanistan. Doing so may help us to concretely understand the principle of legitimacy and integration in this country. However when we raise the question why genealogy plays such a central role in Afghanistan history, it becomes an issue of the characteristics of Afghanistan as a nation.

In Afghanistan, people generally had a very limited consciousness of the king, and the king also had little awareness of the people as citizens.

Mitsuo Ozaki's diary contains good references about this issue. Attending a full

dress ceremony at Salamkhaneh palace, he was surprised by the noisiness of the court, and writes "the attitude toward the king is quite different from ours, and it seems that the king is only an executioner of power."

While the king (Zahir Shah) was from a prestigious Pashtun family and was respected for it, for Ozaki, comparing him with the prewar emperor (Tenno) of Japan, it was evident that the king was no more than a politically powerful personage.

A landlocked nation that is divided by the Hidukush mountain, Afghanistan's geographical conditions produce a strong wall of tribalism that blocks all ruling systems from effectively covering the whole country.

One of the defining elements of Afghanistan as a nation is the presence of Pashtunic tribalism at the national scale. Afghanistan clearly consists of an extreme diversity of racial and linguistic groups. But it is also certain that after the 18th century, the country symbolically maintained a "democratic" system of consensus building between the different ethnic groups. This model was adopted from the Pashtun's consensus building system.

Dupree described Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion as a classical Asian-African "peasant-tribal society." In his study, written just after Davood Khan's 1973 coup, Dupree presents an alternative model for Afghanistan as a nation based on a "contract between state and tribes" instead of a modern model of "contract between state and individuals".

As for the idea of an application of such a substitute model, it may be said that it was kept alive in the form of Loya-Jirga for example by the Kabul government after the Taliban. However, it must also be said that the shape that the central power will take in the future will depend on its relations with local warlords, a problem that has not been addressed yet.

The main reason why rule by a "military clique" creates difficulties for the

integration of Afghanistan is not that such groups derive their rule from military power or lack of legitimacy in a democratic system. Rather, it is because such groups can easily become representatives of foreign interests (neighboring countries and superpowers). Of course it is also a fact that the current government itself exists thanks only to the strong support of foreign powers.

It is sometimes argued that as long as the Durand Line exists as a border, the transformation of Afghanistan into a modern homogeneous state will be nearly impossible. However, considering the Pashtunistan movement, which arose several times in the 1960s and 70s but brought no result, rebuilding the Afghanistan state with the current borders remains the only realistic choice.

Taking the present conditions as a starting point, it is obvious that the existence of Afghanistan as a state must be conditioned by its relations to its neighbors, particularly Pakistan. In addition, as has already been mentioned, this relationship also characterizes Afghanistan as a state.

To grasp the geopolitical characteristics of Afghanistan, we begin our discussion from its borders. In this case, as has already been said, the Durand Line is the most important issue. This line, which was the *de facto* borderline with India before 1947, has since become the more official borderline with Pakistan and a cultural border with South Asia.

The country's western border with Iran has attracted less attention, except for the long dispute over water from the Helmand River. Finally, the borders with three countries, namely Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, have divided tribes and races between Afghanistan and neighboring countries, bringing about both diversity and weakness to Afghanistan.

I will now examine the related issues with these borders in a sequential manner.

2. A Look at Afghanistan from the Southern Border

The Durand Line, which was drawn in 1893 by Britain, had an important and definite meaning for the existence of an Afghanistan state. Here we will outline only the most basic issues regarding this line.

To begin with, the Durand Line was an agreement between the British Indian foreign secretary, Sir Mortimer Durand and the Afghan King, Amir Abdul Rahman Khan over several items, signed in November 12, 1893. Although there was a somewhat concrete description about particularly problematic areas such as Chaman, other problems such as the Mohmand area in the Peshawar were left for future negotiations. In addition, this agreement was treated as a set with the withdrawal of the Afghan army from the northern part of Oxus river on the Russian border (based on an agreement made by the British and Russians in 1873), which made clear the British and Russian intent to make Afghanistan a buffer state.

According to Adamec, the Britain insisted that this agreement was “a personal” one with Abdul Rahman, but was at the same time a permanent border. The agreement was followed by the 1919 Rawalpindi peace agreement on the India-Afghanistan border and the 1921 Kabul agreement, which is currently valid.

Ozaki describes the actual circumstances of the border as follows: “Understanding it as a wide, belt-shaped border may be more proper than as a single line.”

However, the Line, while being a *de facto* border with India and since 1947 with Pakistan, became the main target of attacks from Pashtun nationalists of the “Pashtunistan” movement.

But what should be pointed out here is that the foundation of “Pashtunistan”

would lead to a dramatic change in the prevailing balance with other minority groups in current Afghanistan for Pashtuns, and would not be welcomed even by Pashtuns themselves. In addition, the penetration of Pashtun tribalism into Afghanistan could possibly bring about a situation similar to the Taliban era (Adamec, 2003, P.405). It could as well be said that the Taliban government in Afghanistan was a changed form of the Pashtunistan movement.

Though the Pashtunistan movement underwent an upsurge in the 1950s and after the 1973 Davood Khan coup, in a sense it always existed as an undercurrent in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations after 1947.

Abdul Ghaffar Khan is one of the symbols of the Pashtunistan movement. He did not insist on the independence of Pashtun areas or deny India-Pakistan separation, but instead aimed to found a united independent country covering a vast area. His espousal of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence earned him the title of the "Frontier Gandhi." He objected to the separation of India and Pakistan, and insisted on the independence of "Patanistan." As a secular thinker, he led many political organizations spiritually, the most famous being the "Volunteers of God." He acquired Pakistani nationality, but was imprisoned for a long time there. Because of his earnest love for Afghanistan, he received a warm reception there. He died in Peshawar in 1988, but according to his will was buried in Jalal Abad in Afghanistan.

His movement lost its vitality without seeing any concrete fruition. In a totally different context, a strategic plan which recognizes the area from India and Pakistan to Central Asia as a single vast region is being promoted by the U.S. government (Chapter 2). President Bush's visit to Afghanistan on March 1 this year and his speech on March 3 in India clearly show that the U.S. government intends to position India as a strategic partner in the region.

Another reason for the importance of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area is

that an enormous share of the world's opium flows out of Afghanistan onto the international market through the border. Furthermore, even though the U.S. army has carried out repeated operations in this region, it is still a threat to the international order with the so-called "Talibanization" of north-eastern Pakistan after September 11.

The origins of these problems are related to Afghanistan's southern border, the Durand Line, and this tells us that the autonomy of Pashtuns in this area deeply affects Afghanistan-Pakistan relations.

3. A Look at Afghanistan from the Western Border

Afghanistan is bounded in the west by a 936-km border with Iran extending from north to south. The southern part was established by Henry MacMohan in 1905, and is called the McMohan Line. The northern part, the Fafh-ali Line was defined in 1934 after the mediation of Turkish general Altai.

The Iranian side of border includes Mashad, Torbat-e-Heidariye and Birjand in Khorasan province and Sistan in the south, and there is cultural continuity with Herat in Afghanistan. Herat is recognized as a center of Iranian culture inside Afghanistan's borders. In turn, the east edge of Iran, it is known as a region where there are many Sunnis, and the border divides the Iranian Shiah from Sunnis of Afghanistan and the Central Asia.

Until recent years, a dispute between the two countries over the water resources of the Helmand River in Sistan has attracted international attention. According to Abidi, this problem was the main dispute between the two countries until the "Agreement of the Helmand's water supply" in 1973 and its ratification in 1977.

The disagreement was not a constant one, but usually emerged in times of drought. Iran, which is located downstream, was more serious in searching for a

solution, and the two sides gave gropes for a political solution. However, for Iran it was a problem involving a remote region, and so it was not very serious in seeking an international decision. Based on the idea that international relations are more important than the development of the region, Iran's approach was very cautious, though the problem continued for a long time.

Today, the Sistan region is attracting international attention again, this time because Chabahar port on the Oman Sea is being redeveloped as a base for the transportation of goods to Afghanistan via Zabol.

Though this is a long route to Kabul, it provides good access to the main cities of landlocked Afghanistan, such as Herat and Qandahar, and it seems very likely that it will become one of the main arteries.

It seems that after 9/11, Iranian-Afghanistan relations have the potential to develop in an amicable manner, but there are also grounds for rivalry between Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan has already launched the development of Gwadar port, 180 km east of Chabahar. This does not need to be an obstacle for the future development of Chabahar, but it has to be watched. On the other hand, after the collapse of Taliban, which had harsh conflicts with Iran, Iran has always been conscious of the national interests of Pakistan.

Considering the changing situation in Afghanistan and with an eye on India, Iran is working to develop amicable relations in the region. Its plan to build a natural gas pipeline to India through Pakistan, which began to move forward again in June 2005, might be related to this improvement.

Historically it was assumed that the three countries of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan should form a regional union. For instance, Dupree examines the possibility of this federal formation from the cultural context. Saying that it is "out of the question ...because of their disparate governmental systems," he insists, "the idea of an economic

common market of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan (and possibly other Middle Eastern nations and India) may be attractive” (Dupree 1963, p.391; p.397). It is true that one of the big obstacles for this great design was removed when the Cold War ended.

4. A Look at Afghanistan from the Northern Border

Afghanistan's borderline to the north was established by negotiations between Russia, which was carrying out a policy of southern advance throughout the 19th century, and Britain, which basically opposed the policy. Afghanistan could hardly take part in this international process. The circumstances leading to the settlement of the border can be divided into three parts.

The western part, from Iran's border to Khame-ab on Amu Darya's southern bank, first was settled in 1873 under a British-Russia agreement, but after a clash in Panjdeh in the north of Herat, Ridgeline became the borderline. After Britain offered Afghan neutrality towards Russian policy of southern advance in 1869, Amu Darya River was recognized as a borderline of the two countries between Khame-ab and Zoorkul Lake in 1873. The borderline in the area between Zoorkul Lake and Jamin Pass was decided by the British-Russian Pamir committee in 1896.

Today, the northern borderline is divided into a 744 km border with Turkmenistan (Ridgeline and the western part of the Amu Darya River), a 137 km border with Uzbekistan (partly on the Amu Darya River), and a 1,206 km border with Tajikistan (most on the Amu Darya and Pamir Rivers).

The current situation, under which Uzbeks and Tajiks are divided over the border lines between Afghanistan and its neighboring countries, adds an element of complexity to the process of integration and reconstruction of Afghanistan.

According to Natalya Khan, many of the Uzbeks who now reside in

Afghanistan were people who fled in by the aftermath of the Basmachi movement in the 1920s and 1930s. After World War II, the Socialist Republic of Uzbek became deeply engaged in development aid to Afghanistan. After the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a considerable number of Afghan students went to Tashkent University to study.

After the withdrawal of the Soviet army in 1989 and the collapse of the Najibullah regime in 1992, the flow of Afghan refugees into Uzbekistan accelerated. In 1993, about 8,000 Afghans were residing there. Later, the Uzbekistan government did not allow further investigations, and it is impossible to make an accurate assessment of the number of Afghan refugees. But because the border between the two countries has been comparatively far from battlefields and because of Uzbekistan's strict refugee policy, it seems that the number of refugees hasn't increased much.

One may gain the impression that relations between Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries have not developed much since the sweeping away of the Taliban, but in fact they are now waiting to see how regional relations are reorganized and how the dynamic changes deriving from Afghanistan reconstruction will reach them.

It seems that Russian's attitude toward further participation in this region will be a decisive factor. It is not irrelevant in this regard that Russia has played an important part in the recent Iranian nuclear problem. After the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, relations between Russia and Iran have basically become friendly, and have not changed much since. The Putin Administration quickly welcomed the election of hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president, which tells us how much it values its strategic relation with Iran.

5. Conclusions

Our impression based on the above considerations is that after September 11, the retreat of Taliban and the national and international aftermath of those events, the international relations surrounding Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and the central Asian countries became a matter of political tactics based on old geopolitical regional rules, very much like the great game of the 19th century.

This is deeply related to the dismantlement of the Cold War structure of international relations and contains the new element of changes in Iran's international position after the 1979 revolution. On the other hand, the main factor that regulates international relations in the region is the existence of the structure of old confrontations which developed from the dynamics of international politics over borderlines and local tribalism.

There is, in some ways, a resemblance between today's situation and that in the 1950 and 1960s. While many states are trying to expand their influence in Afghanistan through economic assistance, countries like Iran and Pakistan want to form a new cooperative relationship, sometimes in confrontation with the will of powerful states. In addition, considering in the current surge of Japanese interest in Afghanistan and Afghanistan's expanding expectations from Japan, there may be common elements with the late 1930s, when Ozaki was active in Afghanistan.

In closing, I would like to touch on a very serious issue, which was not mentioned in this article: the role of Islam in the integration of the Afghanistan state. The majority of the Afghan people are still peasants, and they generally have strong religious beliefs. This Islamic faith is strongly tied to a mass nationalism (love for the hometown).

Ozaki writes in his long-hidden diary that; "members of the clergy have a dreadful power" (Ozaki 2003, P.224). Adamec expresses almost the same

impression; "Amir (the king) never disregards the opinion of a mollah, even a low-ranking one" (Adamec1967, P.7).

As is generally known, the official name of the country since the enactment of the new constitution in 2004 is "The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan." This means that Islam, which almost all people follow, should be the main principle for the integration of Afghanistan.

It is possible to classify Afghanistan's neighboring countries as follows: Pakistan as a similar Islamic state, Iran as a Shiite state, and the central Asian countries as secular states. But a more important point is that the way in which the existence of native and religious authorities overlaps with the ethnic composition and geographic conditions is closely related to the future process of reconstruction and integration of Afghanistan. I would like to add that for considering Afghanistan in the future, all of the above-mentioned problems are very important.

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