

# STATE-BUILDING IN “THE GRAVEYARD OF EMPIRES”: WHY THE SOVIET AND UNITED STATES INTERVENTIONS FAILED TO ESTABLISH STABLE REGIMES IN AFGHANISTAN

## CONSTRUCCIÓN DE ESTADO EN “EL CEMENTERIO DE LOS IMPERIOS”: POR QUÉ LA INTERVENCIÓN SOVIÉTICA Y ESTADOUNIDENSE NO LOGRARON ESTABLECER RÉGIMENES ESTABLES EN AFGANISTÁN

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**Resumen:** Tanto la intervención militar soviética como la de Estados Unidos fracasaron en sus respectivos esfuerzos por establecer regímenes estables en Afganistán, cuya reputación de resistencia a la ocupación extranjera y las operaciones de construcción de estado le han valido un apodo casi mítico: “el cementerio de los imperios”. Este estudio examina la historia del desarrollo del régimen en Afganistán con un enfoque en el desafío perenne de encontrar un equilibrio entre el grado de poder centralizado necesario para mantener la seguridad y desempeñar funciones estatales, por un lado, y el umbral de tolerancia para el poder centralizado entre la población tribal del país, por otro. El análisis muestra como el régimen comunista altamente centralizado establecido a través de la intervención soviética, así como el régimen democrático excesivamente descentralizado establecido a través de la intervención de los Estados Unidos, representan solo dos capítulos en la lucha histórica de Afganistán para establecer fuentes legítimas y duraderas de poder estatal centralizado.

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**Abstract:** Both the Soviet and United States military interventions failed in their respective efforts to establish stable regimes in Afghanistan, whose reputation for resistance to foreign occupation and state-building operations has earned it a near-mythical moniker: “the graveyard of empires”. This study examines the history

of regime development in Afghanistan with a focus on the perennial challenge of finding a balance between the degree of centralized power necessary to maintain security and perform state functions, on the one hand, and the threshold of tolerance for centralized power among the country's tribal population, on the other. The analysis shows how the highly centralized communist regime established through the Soviet intervention as well as the excessively decentralized democratic regime established through the United States intervention represent just two chapters in Afghanistan's historical struggle to establish legitimate and enduring sources of centralized state power.

like the Taliban? Significant as the United States' failure to establish a stable regime in Afghanistan may have been, it alone was not enough to qualify Afghanistan as the near-mythical "graveyard of empires". Indeed, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 had very similar objectives to that of the United States: to establish a stable and independent regime that would be conducive to Soviet interests in the region. However, despite a decade of military and economic commitments from Moscow, the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 left behind a fragile regime that was unable to maintain independent rule. After three more years of civil war, mujahideen fighters finally took Kabul, only to be replaced themselves by the recently formed Taliban in 1996.

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## I. Introduction

Initially, the United States intervention in Afghanistan was by most measures a military and political success. Within just two months of the invasion, the Taliban regime had been deposed and a new regime was established to lead the country on a path towards democracy and development. For the next twenty years, United States forces provided the new regime with both military training and economic support to help it consolidate power in preparation for independent rule. However, following the United States withdrawal in 2021, a resurgent Taliban retook Kabul and returned to power in Afghanistan. How could a regime that had received two decades of support from the world's strongest military and funding from the world's most advanced economy have been defeated and deposed almost immediately by an irregular insurgent force

Given the propensity of both the United States and the former Soviet Union to pursue foreign policies of state-building through military intervention as a means of creating favorable political conditions abroad, the significance of their failures to establish stable regimes in Afghanistan cannot be understated. Though the reasons for these failures have been the subject of much debate in the scholarly literature, this article argues that state-building through intervention in Afghanistan has failed primarily due to the inability of both the United States and the Soviet Union to accurately assess the level of centralized power necessary for a regime to be legitimized by the Afghan nation. What follows first is a review of the scholarly literature relevant not only to the two cases of military intervention examined in this study, but also to the study of nation-building and state-building in a broader sense. Secondly, the article proceeds to outline a theoretical framework of regime stability that underlies the hypothesis of

the primacy of centralization in the case of Afghanistan. Thirdly, a qualitative historical analysis of the formation and development of the Afghan state is conducted in order to examine the role that tensions over the centralization of political power have played in the establishment of stable regimes. Finally, the study ends with a few concluding remarks to address its limitations as well as areas for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

As the aim of the study is to examine the complex and multi-faceted issue of pursuing foreign military intervention to establish stable regimes in a target state, this article draws on a broad literature that bridges the fields of International Relations and Comparative Politics. Though not exhaustive, the following review aims to address the corpus of research that is pertinent to the case of Afghanistan and that has had a particular influence on the subsequent theoretical framework. First, however, it is important to address a common source of confusion in the relevant literature. Some scholars make no distinction between the terms “nation-building” and “state-building”. According to Berger (2006), for instance, “nation-building (or state-building) is [...] an externally driven, or facilitated, attempt to form or consolidate a stable, and sometimes democratic, government over an internationally recognised national territory” (6). He adds that “nation-building and state-building can encompass formal military occupation, counter-insurgency, peacekeeping, national reconstruction, foreign aid and the use of stabilisation forces” (6). Other scholars, however, do not use the terms

interchangeably. For example, Hussaini (2021) explains that “nation-building is used in line with creating and developing [...] sustainable national identity, pride, integrity, and national solidarity” as well as “links among ethnic and linguistic groupings” in a given society while “state-building has some fundamental components such as increasing and developing political potentials [...], developing national and functional potentials [...], and developing the institutional and bureaucratic potentials” of a given state (530-531).

Making a clear distinction between “nation” and “state” in the nation/state-building literature is critical for developing a coherent conception of state formation. As Wimmer and Feinstein (2010) note, traditional theories of nation-state formation are either bottom-up, positing that nascent “nationalism leads to nation-building and eventually a nation-state” is formed, or top-down, positing that “nationalists form nation-states that then build their nations” through institutional programs like civic education (767). Similarly, Wendt (1999) distinguishes between two prevailing conceptions of the state: “state-as-society” and “state-as-actor” (199-200). The first corresponds to the bottom-up view of state formation and holds that the state is ontologically dependent on the nation. Therefore, the state is nothing more than a collection of all the individuals and interest groups that govern themselves domestically and represent themselves internationally. The second corresponds to the top-down view of state formation and holds that the state is ontologically independent of the nation. This means that the state is an organizational actor with anthropomorphic characteristics like interests and preferences that performs functions for the nation domestically and

acts on behalf of the nation internationally. Wendt's constructivist theory challenges the traditional dichotomy and proposes an alternative conception of the state, which he calls "state-as-structure" (202). This view of state formation is neither bottom-up nor top-down but rather constitutive. Reasoning by analogy, Wendt explains that "masters and slaves are caused by the contingent interactions of human beings; they are constituted by the social structure known as slavery" (25). In other words, "masters do not cause slaves because without slaves they cannot be masters in the first place" and vice versa (25). In this view, therefore, the state is the structure that binds the organizational actor and the society into a constitutive whole. Ontologically inseparable from either the actor or society, the state performs functions for itself domestically and acts on behalf of itself internationally.

Another debate in the nation/state-building literature addresses the sources of state weakness and instability. In their analysis of state formation in the developing world, Verkoren and Kamphuis (2013) juxtapose relatively strong "developmental states" like Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia with weak "rentier states" like Afghanistan. They claim that "to finance their aspirations, developmental states relied upon agriculture, high savings and, as industrialization advanced, manufactured exports" (506). They add that "the state was relatively strong in relation to society, while harsh suppression of organized labour and the outside threat from Asian communism ensured social compliance with a centralized state" (507). Conversely, rentier states "derive most of their income from external rents that are the prerogative of the state [...] rather than taxes" (508). The fact that funds are not

owned by the state but rather by foreign donors leads to a lack of legitimacy, often resulting in networks of corruption as governments try to use foreign funding to buy popular support. Identifying similar issues to those of Verkoren and Kamphuis' rentier state, Hess (2010) claims that the Soviet and United States interventions in Afghanistan led to the development of chronic neopatrimonialism. Following the definition of Bratton and van de Walle (1994), Hess defines the neopatrimonial state as one in which "the chief executive maintains authority through personal patronage, rather than through ideology or law, [while] relationships of loyalty and dependence pervade a formal political and administrative system and leaders occupy bureaucratic offices less to perform public service than to acquire personal wealth and status" (458; 175).

The lack of legitimacy that undermines the stability of both rentier and neopatrimonial states is a recurring theme in the nation/state-building literature. Ghani, Lockhart, and Carnahan (2006) claim that "loss of legitimacy is the primary cause of the fragility and failure of states", noting that "some of the markers coincident with loss of legitimacy are an increase in illegality, informality, and criminality in the economy; ineffective delivery of basic services; failure to expand essential infrastructure; increase in corruption; and appropriation of public assets for private gain" (1). However, the authors conclude that "the ultimate marker is the loss of legitimate use of violence by the state and emergence of armed groups that openly mock the authority of the state and gain control of various areas of the country" (2). Rubin (2006) agrees that "almost by definition international state-building operations begin under conditions where states lack

not only capacities to provide security and services but also legitimacy”, meaning that the effectiveness of state-building interventions like those in Afghanistan are to be judged by the new regime’s ability to meet these criteria (183). Finally, following Beetham’s (1991) conceptualization of legitimacy, Minatti and Duyvesteyn (2020) argue that for international state-building efforts in Afghanistan to be successful, the new regime’s legitimacy must be based on legality, justifiability, and consent. Legality means that “power has to rest on certain established rules”, justifiability indicates that “these rules have to be justifiable in terms of the beliefs of the ruled”, and consent requires that “the power relationship has to be confirmed by the subordinates through public actions” (5-6).

### 3. Theoretical Framework

State-building through military intervention is necessarily a top-down effort on the part of the intervening power. Once a new regime is established, it must be supported militarily and economically by the intervening power until it is able to consolidate enough legitimacy for independent rule. Thus, whether the new regime is granted the legitimacy of the nation will be decided by the effectiveness of its state-building effort. This fact makes state-building a very delicate operation of political engineering, as the intervening power must negotiate a stable balance in creating an organizational actor that will be both conducive to its national interests and legitimized by the target nation within a relatively short period of time. In order to further their national interests in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union and the United States sought to create versions of communist and democratic states that

would be easily influenced from Moscow and Washington, respectively, yet simultaneously legitimized by the Afghan nation.

This study employs an adaptation of the constitutive conception of state formation to measure regime stability. While the actor and society—here, regime and nation—are still considered ontologically inseparable in their mutual constitution of the state structure, the study focuses on examining the effects of regime action on national legitimacy in order to determine causes of instability. This top-down focus is permissible due to the exogenous nature of the regime-nation relationship in cases of state-building through intervention. Wendt’s avoidance of either a top-down or bottom-up approach when examining regime-nation relationships is appropriate in cases of endogenously established regimes whose relationships with their respective nations are the products of historical reciprocity between the two constituent parts. For example, in Russia and the United States, where the regime-nation relationship is the historical product of mutual reciprocity, it would be inappropriate to focus primarily on the effects of regime action on national legitimacy because the nation is equally responsible for developing the regime as the regime is responsible for developing the nation. However, in cases of exogenously established regimes, like in post-intervention Afghanistan, the natural evolutionary process of historical reciprocity between the regime and the nation is disrupted and effectively reset when a new regime is artificially introduced and supported by an intervening power. Such a situation makes top-down actions on the part of the regime critical in producing legitimacy on the part of the nation in order to reconstitute the state structure and maintain stability.

Figure 1. Typology of State Strength and Regime Stability in Target State of Intervention

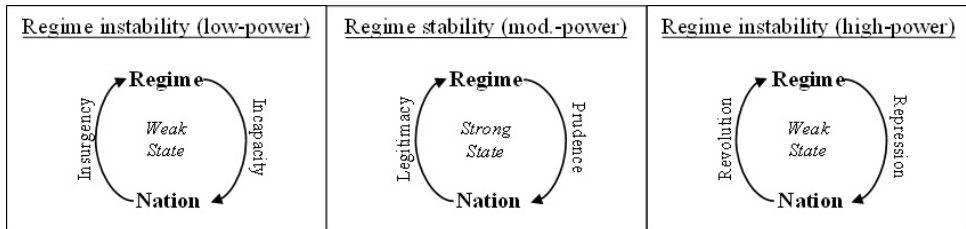


Figure 1 proposes an original typology of state strength based on the stability of the regime-nation relationship in a post-intervention target state. On one extreme, interventions can produce weak target states that result from unstable low-power regimes. Such regimes lack legitimacy due to their incapacity to conduct the organizational and functional actions expected of them by the nation. Fjelde and de Soysa (2009) find that a regime’s capacity to effectively deliver public goods and services, particularly in cooperation with broad sectors of society, is the most significant marker for its stability. They note that “where government is organizationally weak, it invites sub-national actors to use force to further their agendas and challenge state authority through violence” and add that “administratively weak states reduce the relative cost of organizing rebellion” (8). In the framework of this study, rebellions labelled “insurgencies” are defined as vanguard organizations whose aim is to change the status quo by replacing the low-power regime with a higher-power—and more centralized—regime in an effort to restore legitimacy and in so doing strengthen the state. The democratic government established through the United States intervention in Afghanistan was an example of a low-power regime that was challenged by the Taliban insurgency for its incapa-

city to meet the functional expectations of rural Afghans, who constitute a majority of the nation. Following their victory, however, the Taliban shifted to the other extreme in creating a highly centralized and repressive state.

On the other extreme, interventions can also produce weak target states that result from unstable high-power regimes. Such regimes lack legitimacy due to their repression of broad sectors of society or interest groups that play an influential role in the nation. Andersen et al. (2014) observe that “states with high degrees of monopoly on violence can temporarily create public order by containing anti-systemic forces or by enforcing martial law. But if regime stability only hinges on repressive means—rather than on some form of legitimacy—it may trigger mass-based uprisings against the regime” (1307). In the framework of this study, uprisings labelled “revolutions” are defined as broad social movements whose aim is to change the status quo by abolishing a high-power regime and replacing it with a lower-power—and less centralized—regime in an effort to restore legitimacy and in so doing strengthen the state. The communist government established through the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was an example of a high-power regime that was challenged by a broad revolutionary coalition of mujahideen fighters that ul-

timately succeeded in its bid to abolish the regime's centralized authority over the Afghan nation. Following their victory, however, the mujahideen shifted to the other extreme in creating a largely decentralized and ineffective state.

While interventions can produce weak target states by establishing either unstable low-power or high-power regimes, they can also produce strong target states by establishing stable moderate-power regimes. Such regimes earn the nation's legitimacy by acting prudently to fulfill their functional obligations like providing services and maintaining security in a way that is compatible with the national tolerance for centralization. Burnell (2006) argues that the stability of both autocratic and democratic regimes is primarily determined by their ability to earn the legitimacy of the nation. He explains that "many autocracies can—do—enjoy some measure of legitimacy among social groups or strata even while they may possess no legitimacy at all among other subjects, a fact that is conveniently overlooked by much present day talk about democracy as a world value" (548). In other words, regardless of whether the intervening power aims to establish an autocratic or democratic regime in the target state, it must first and foremost preoccupy itself with ensuring that the regime is neither so low-power that it lacks the ability to conduct the organizational and functional actions expected of it by the nation or so high-power that it represses broad sectors of society or interest groups that play an influential role in the nation. Depending on their respective civic and political cultures, nations vary significantly in their tolerance and legitimization of centralized power. For an exogenously established regime to be successfully introduced into a target sta-

te though intervention, its level of power must be adapted to the nation's relative tolerance of centralization in order to be legitimized and maintain stability.

## 4. Historical Analysis

The historical analysis that follows tests the hypothesis that both the Soviet and United States interventions failed to establish stable regimes in Afghanistan due to their inability to accurately assess the level of centralized power necessary for a regime to be legitimized by the Afghan nation. Regime stability in Afghanistan is operationalized by observing the presence of insurgency or revolution during the period of a given regime. The presence of either insurgency or revolution indicates a regime-nation relationship marked by low power and incapacity or high power and repression on the part of the regime and a lack of legitimacy on the part of the nation, while the success of either insurgent or revolutionary actions on the part of the nation inevitably results in regime transition. The historical analysis begins by examining the development of the regime-nation relationship in Afghanistan and domestic efforts of establishing centralized state power during the pre-intervention period. The analysis then continues to examine the Soviet intervention and state-building efforts, intermediary domestic state-building efforts, and the United States intervention and state-building efforts in Afghanistan. Finally, the historical analysis is followed by a discussion of events with a focus on the effect that the centralization of state power had on the legitimacy of each regime and, consequentially, on its stability.

## 4.1 Pre-Intervention Domestic State-Building

The Emirate of Afghanistan emerged as a sovereign state in 1919 after its victory in the Third Anglo-Afghan War, putting an end to a forty-year period during which it was ruled as a semi-colonial British protectorate. As the first ruler of a sovereign Afghan state, Emir Amanullah Khan embarked on a process of centralizing state power by passing the Constitution of 1923, which officially rebranded the “Emirate of Afghanistan” as “Kingdom” but “offered no institutions or process for the impeachment of the King” and so “virtually left the King’s power unchecked” (Sherman, 2006, 36). Amanullah established Islam as the state religion and the primary basis of the legal code in an effort to legitimize centralized power and reformed the military draft into a system of conscription by lottery, thus limiting the influence of tribal leaders in deciding who to designate for military service. Moreover, he “banned child marriage and inter-kin marriages, made the registration of marriage compulsory, and gave women the right to divorce”, which meant that “family problems formerly dealt by local mullahs would now come under the responsibility of the state” (Sungur, 2016, 449). Furthermore, besides instituting a government budget and reorganizing the tax system, Amanullah also established a customs tariff, “which brought him into further confrontation with frontier tribes [...] who were in control of border trade as well as smuggling” (449). Believing that the centralization of state power had become repressive and intolerable, rural mullahs and tribal leaders organized a broad coalition of disgruntled Afghans to rebel against Amanullah, resulting in his ouster and a general

breakdown of centralized order across Afghanistan in 1928.

Instability in Afghanistan ensued until Mohammed Nadir, Amanullah’s former minister of war, was able to organize a force strong enough to retake Kabul from the rebels. The conflict ended with the execution of rebel leaders and Nadir’s assumption of power as King of Afghanistan in 1929. Two years later, Nadir’s government passed the Constitution of 1931, which was “a considerably vague and ambivalent document” that “formed a façade of parliamentary government yet left control in the hands of the royal family, kept the judiciary primarily under the religious leaders, created a semi-socialist economic framework with the principle of free enterprise, and accepted and guaranteed theoretical individual equality” (Pasarlay, 2018, 293-294). Unlike Amanullah’s constitution, which explicitly codified his vision for the country’s legal framework and left very little open to interpretation, the Constitution of 1931 “instructed the legislature through the adoption of by-law clauses to define the scope of the protected rights and freedoms and then enact laws that would clarify the relationship between basic rights and the sharia and define the powers of the institutions that would protect them” (297). The deferral of legislative powers to the Loya Jirga, or Grand Council, was notable for its decentralization of state authority, as it gave tribal representatives more influence in shaping social policies. Instead, Nadir showed greater assertiveness in utilizing the powers of the state to modernize Afghanistan’s underdeveloped infrastructure.

Despite the general popularity of his development program, Nadir was assassinated in 1933 and succeeded by his son Mohammed Zahir. For the first three de-



cedes of his rule, Zahir continued under the constitution of his father before setting a new course for Afghan politics. The Constitution of 1964 was intended to put Afghanistan on a path towards democracy by introducing a system of checks and balances that separated the executive, legislative, and judicial branches and granted “protections for fundamental freedoms of speech, press, and association [as well as] for due process” (Vafai, 2004, 8). In practice, however, the introduction of democracy resulted in a period of political instability in Afghanistan, and having ceded much of his centralized power to a frequently changing parliament, Zahir was unable to exercise the same prudence that his father had in promoting popular projects like infrastructure development. In 1973, with support from the moderate Parcham faction of the communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), Zahir and the democratic government were deposed in a military coup under the leadership of Mohammed Daoud.

In an effort to strengthen the Afghan state, Daoud began a program of political centralization. His Constitution of 1977 formally established the Republic of Afghanistan and “invested enormous powers in Daoud as the head of state, chief executive, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and leader of the sole political party” (Vafai, 2004, 9). The new constitution also replaced “the uncodified Sharia law and the ad hoc secular legislation which had earlier prevailed” (9). This legal turn away from Islamic law, which “interfered with the ethnic and traditional customs of the countryside, created further radicalization of Islamist groups seeking to regain control of political power” (Sherman, 2006, 57). Despite his efforts to create a stable and centralized regime, Daoud greatly miscal-

culated the domestic consequences of his foreign policy. Although he “favored a state-centered economy and launched a seven-year economic plan that included major schemes and would have required a major influx of foreign aid, Daoud’s turn away from the left in domestic politics was matched by moving away from the steadily increasing reliance on the Soviet Union for military and economic support” (Vafai, 2004, 9).

In 1978, Daoud was deposed and executed in a coup that was staged by a group of Soviet-trained army officers who were backed by the radical Khalq faction of the PDPA. Though the army officers wanted to retain control through military dictatorship, they were soon purged by the communists, who established the Revolutionary Council of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan under the leadership of Nur Muhammad Taraki. In 1979, however, Taraki was seen as too moderate to implement the Khalqs’ revolutionary program and was replaced by Hafizullah Amin. Under Amin, the new regime “embarked on a program of scientific socialism which included land reform, compulsory education, and further emancipation of women” (Vafai, 2004, 10). In response to the Khalqs’ radical centralization of state power, which exceeded even that of Daoud’s regime, “the Islamist movement was elevated to a popular resistance and nationwide struggle supported by the traditionalist Muslims throughout Afghanistan” (10). With support from the United States and Pakistan, these Islamist groups—as well as military defectors and other political opponents of the PDPA—formed the broad mujahideen resistance that, by 1979, controlled much of the Afghan countryside.

## 4.2 Soviet Intervention and State-Building

As instability in Afghanistan grew and the Revolutionary Council proved increasingly ineffective in suppressing the mujahideen resistance, the Soviet Union tried to put pressure on Amin to resign in favor of a less ideologically zealous and more prudent leader. The Soviets feared that, if successful in overthrowing the communist government, the mujahideen “might then install a conservative Islamic government in Kabul not unlike the one in Islamabad” and that “the revolt against communism and Soviet power in Afghanistan could exert a destabilizing influence on their own Central Asian republics” (Goldman, 1984, 389). Finally, in December 1979, the Soviets airlifted 5,000 troops into Kabul and a further 85,000 were deployed by January 1980 (Derleth 1988, 39). The regular Afghan army, which numbered about 80,000 troops, surrendered with minimal resistance, and many soldiers defected to join the mujahideen fighters in the countryside (Hartman, 1985, 58). Upon taking control of Kabul, the Soviets executed Amin and replaced him with Babrak Karmal of the Parcham faction of the PDPA. As the Soviet armed forces led the military effort against the mujahideen, Soviet advisors worked with Karmal to draft a constitution with the aim of legitimizing the communist regime.

Given that a broad sector of Afghanistan’s tribal population was in open rebellion against Karmal’s government, the Loya Jirga could not be called upon to ratify the Constitution of 1980, which was instead passed on an interim basis as the Provisional Basic Principles of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. The constitution “formally

recognized the PDPA as the single political party”, whose Revolutionary Council “sets the guidelines for domestic and foreign policies, refers matters to a referendum, elects members of the Grand National Assembly, declares war, and approves or cancels international agreements” (Vafai, 2004, 34). Furthermore, instead of following legal tradition and establishing Islam as the state religion, the constitution was vaguer in that it merely called for the respect and protection of Islam. Finally, in an unprecedented demonstration of centralized power, the constitution “declared all mineral, agricultural, and energy resources” as well as “banks, insurance companies, heavy industries, and communication networks to be state property” (35).

Meanwhile, Soviet and Afghan forces conducted over 100 military operations against resistance fighters, who by 1981 controlled approximately 90 percent of the country (Derleth, 1988, 41-43). Until 1984, “the Soviet strategy was oriented toward holding the major communications centers, limiting infiltration, and destroying ‘accessible’ guerrilla bases at minimum cost to its own forces” (42). However, by 1985, the Soviets had altered their strategy in favor of large-scale operations such as the Kunar Valley offensive in eastern Afghanistan, which involved more than 10,000 Soviet troops (5). Though Soviet deployment in Afghanistan never exceeded 104,000 troops at any given time, a total of 620,000 Soviets served in Afghanistan over the course of the intervention, resulting in a total of about 13,800 casualties and over 69,600 wounded (Shaw & Spencer, 2003, 177). Besides the human cost, the unexpectedly extensive nature of the intervention—which was originally projected to last only a few months

following the ouster of Amin—also put an annual burden of \$2-4 billion on the Soviet budget (Derleth, 1988, 21). As the military and political situation deteriorated, the Soviets began to insist that Karmal “radically change party policy, abandon communism, and form a broad-based government that included elements of the opposition” (Kalinovsky, 2008, 382).

Karmal’s resistance to Soviet pressure for political reform ultimately led to his removal and replacement with fellow Parcham Mohammed Najibullah in 1987. While the Soviets were negotiating the terms of their withdrawal with the United States and Pakistan at the United Nations office in Geneva, Najibullah launched the Policy of National Reconciliation, a broad political program intended to open the communist regime to the mujahideen opposition (Kalinovsky, 2008, 383). One of the cornerstones of Najibullah’s policy was the drafting of a new constitution to be ratified by the Loya Jirga. The resulting Constitution of 1987 “attempted to establish revised economic and political rules that the majority of Afghans, including the armed [mujahideen] opposition, might be willing to accept” (Pasarlay, 2018, 291). Najibullah’s constitution made explicit concessions to conservative Muslims by declaring Islam as the official religion of Afghanistan and the family as the basic unit of Afghan society. It also sought to legitimize the regime in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal by rebranding the state as the Republic of Afghanistan and declaring it “a nonaligned country which does not join any military bloc and does not allow establishment of foreign military bases on its territory” (Republic of Afghanistan, 1987).

The Geneva Accords of 1988 prohibited both the Soviet Union from conducting further military operations in support of

the PDPA regime as well as the United States and Pakistan from funding the mujahideen resistance. Left to his own devices following the withdrawal of the last remaining Soviet troops in 1989, Najibullah attempted to further appease the mujahideen by passing yet another constitution. Thus, the Constitution of 1990 practically relinquished the PDPA of its power and terminated the communist regime. In an attempt to establish democratic rule, the constitution declared that “political pluralism is the basis of the political system of the Republic of Afghanistan” and that a “party formed in accordance with the provisions of the law cannot be dissolved without a legal cause” (Republic of Afghanistan, 1990). Despite the liberalization of the political system, Najibullah nevertheless believed that he could retain power and lead Afghanistan through a period of post-conflict reconstruction. The preamble to the constitution stated that “at the present stage the State of the Republic of Afghanistan is actively carrying on the policy of national reconciliation, relying upon the support of national, political and patriotic forces” (Republic of Afghanistan, 1990). Both Najibullah and his constitutions, however, ultimately failed to convince the mujahideen that he would permit broad political participation. In 1991, following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and its failed state-building intervention in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union was formally dissolved and the independent states of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan were established on Afghanistan’s northern border. Without Soviet patronage, Najibullah finally succumbed to mujahideen pressure and was removed from power in 1992.

### 4.3 Intermediary Domestic State-Building

The ouster of Najibullah resulted in the disintegration of centralized power in Afghanistan. Although both the Sunni and Shiite mujahideen factions drafted their own constitutions, neither group was able “to provide formal constitutional mechanisms that could generate legitimacy for the state or successfully channel political conflict [...] through formal constitutional institutions” and finally no new constitution was ratified (Pasarlay, 2018, 290). Without a single group powerful enough to replace the communist regime or influential enough to form a ruling coalition, the recently established Islamic State of Afghanistan immediately descended into civil war. Kabul and the northeastern provinces were ruled by the predominately Tajik government of Burhanuddin Rabbani while Herat and the western provinces were controlled by the Tajik warlord Ismael Khan. Dividing the Tajik zones in the east and west were six northern provinces controlled by the Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum as well as the central province of Bamiyan, which was controlled by ethnic Hazara militias. Southern Afghanistan was controlled by Pashtun tribes, although it too was divided between the central provinces controlled by the warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the eastern provinces controlled by a council of mujahideen commanders based in Jalalabad (Vafai, 2004, 14-15). In their efforts to take Kabul, Pashtun warlords “sold off everything [in Kandahar] to Pakistani traders, stripping down telephone wires and poles, cutting trees, and selling off factories and machinery to scrap metal merchants” as well as

“seized homes and farms, threw out their occupants, and handed them over to their supporters” (15).

It was in such a state of anarchy and disorder that the Taliban were formed in 1994. Following a decade of institutionalized secularism under the communist government, “the destruction and breakdown of traditional cultural values and ties made Islam into the central element of the new culture, and the tendency towards radicalization [became] a natural response to the escalation of violence” (Baev, 2012, 252). From their inception, the Taliban “denounced the failure of the mujahideen leaders to establish security” and “accused the former militia commanders of becoming thieves and even rapists” (Ghufran, 2001, 468). As they conquered territory from the mujahideen warlords, the Taliban took care to establish their own legitimacy by refusing to take bribes, abolishing checkpoints that had been established to extort money, and making the roads safe for travel (468). Within just two years from the beginning of their insurgency, the Taliban took Kabul and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Almost immediately after occupying Kabul, “the Taliban imposed the strictest Islamic system in place anywhere in the world” (Vafai, 2004, 19). All women were banned from work and conservative dress codes were imposed, men without beards were arrested, schools and colleges were suspended, and all entertainment media as well as games and sports were prohibited (19). Though these measures greatly limited the freedoms of the relatively small urban population, they were largely applauded by the conservative rural majority that had felt alienated under communist rule.

The Taliban regime was led by Mohammed Omar, who presided over a six-member Supreme Council, which in turn supervised a Council of Ministers. The greatest challenge faced by the new regime was that of restoring centralized power in a way that would not marginalize tribal leaders. The Taliban believed that “with a pure Islamic regime in place, there [would be] no need for any alternative political mechanisms such as a modern party or traditional tribal system” and also emphasized that “with Islam being the legitimizing source of governance, it [would] not need to use ethnic, tribal, or sectarian politics” (Ibrahimi, 2017, 954). Thus, it was by relying on a particular interpretation of Islamic Sharia rather than on a written constitution that the Taliban was able to legitimize the centralization of state power necessary for the reconstruction of post-conflict Afghanistan. However, considering that the Taliban had “inherited a totally collapsed state with its infrastructure destroyed, its wealth looted and its professionals [having] fled the country as a result of the civil war”, the regime’s legitimacy also depended greatly on its ability to improve material conditions in the country (962). Due to the shortage of official revenue, the Taliban was forced to rely on the taxation of poppy plants that were sold for opium production as well as on foreign aid from Pakistan—one of only three countries, along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to formally recognize the Taliban regime—in order to conduct basic state functions like rebuilding infrastructure.

Another obstacle that the Taliban faced in the way of establishing legitimacy was the issue of domestic security. Though Rabbani had successfully been deposed in Kabul, he nevertheless managed to

assemble a coalition of 80,000 loyal fighters into the Northern Alliance, which maintained control over about 10% of Afghanistan’s total territory on the northern border with Tajikistan (Ghufran, 2001). Following the success of its insurgency, the Taliban lacked the resources necessary to maintain a regular army and instead had to rely on a dwindling force of 25,000 to 30,000 fighters who “resembled a traditional tribal militia force” rather than a “military structure with a hierarchy of officers and commanders” (Ibrahimi, 2017, 959). Thus, in exchange for military support, the Taliban agreed to provide safe haven for both Uzbek and Pakistani Islamist groups as well as some Chechen and Uyghur jihadi networks. The most significant source of military support, however, came from Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda, which provided the Taliban with both training as well as a brigade of some 2,000 to 3,000 Arab soldiers (961). Based in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda “carried out simultaneous bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing 224 people and wounding more than 4,000” in 1998 (Lahoud, 2021, 12). In 2000, al-Qaeda “rammed a small boat filled with explosives into the USS *Cole* as it was refueling in the port of Aden, Yemen, killing 17 U.S. Navy personnel” (12). It was after the success of this last attack that bin Laden felt emboldened to execute an operation on United States soil under the assumption that such an attack would frighten the American people into pressuring their government to withdraw from Muslim-majority countries. Though successful in wreaking havoc on United States soil, the 9/11 attacks would prove to be a dire political miscalculation on the part of bin Laden.

## 4.4 United States Intervention and State-Building

Less than a month after the attacks of 9/11, the United States commenced a series of air strikes against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. On the ground, about 1,000 special operations forces coordinated actions conducted by the Northern Alliance and other anti-Taliban militias. In October 2001, an additional 1,300 Marines were deployed in Kandahar, where Omar and other Taliban leaders were based. Unable to resist the combined pressure of air strikes and coordinated ground operations, the Taliban abandoned Kabul in November and Omar was forced to flee Kandahar a month later (Katzman & Clayton, 2017, 7). The victorious factions convened in Bonn, Germany and “produced a careful, precariously balanced agreement for a transitional government and a postwar future” as well as an “emergency and constitutional Loya Jirga, an interim power-sharing arrangement, and a schedule for new elections” (Vafai, 2004, 51). In accordance with the process arranged through the Bonn Agreement, Hamid Karzai was appointed interim president by the Loya Jirga in 2002 and was formally elected by popular vote in 2004. Almost immediately, the new regime proceeded to legitimize its rule by renaming the country the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and introducing a new constitution that was intended to harmonize the principles of Western democracy with local religious expectations.

The Constitution of 2004 was largely influenced by the United States political system. It established an executive branch headed by the president, an independent judiciary, as well as a bicameral

legislature. The three branches interacted within a system of checks and balances in which the president was granted the right to veto the legislature, which in turn had the power to overrule the presidential veto with a two-thirds majority vote. The legislature was also charged with endorsing presidential appointees to the judiciary, who would then check on both the legislative and executive branches through a process of judicial review (Sherman, 2006, 72). Although “the first three articles of the constitution continued the trend of enshrining Islam”, the document allowed for the general liberalization of Afghan society, particularly with regards to the rights of women, and was notable for being the first to formally codify “the egalitarian treatment of all ethnic tribes” (73-74). Despite its likeness to the United States model, the new constitution faced the perennial problem of balancing effective centralization of state power with respect for local rule. Indeed, although the constitution defined “the role of people as individuals and their relationship to the state, the issue of local governing customs [was] ignored, marginalized, and otherwise missing” from the text (27). In practice, while the new regime sought to establish a strong central government that could delegate some authority to lower administrative units where local action would be more effective, provincial governance was mostly “based on the financial and military strength of local leaders as well as personal and tribal loyalties” (Library of Congress, 2008, 17). In many villages, the Taliban were able to establish parallel governments, and “the rural Afghans [would] prefer to go to the conservative Taliban judges, rather than seeking the help of [a] corrupt police and judiciary” (Shahed, 2018, 2).

The fact that “the Karzai government never succeeded in extending its writ over the entire country” meant that “in many districts, particularly in the southern and eastern provinces, government authority did not exist” (Kleiner, 2014, 711). Such ungoverned spaces gave the Taliban liberty to regroup in the countryside. In 2006, the Taliban was estimated to command between 6,000 and 8,000 troops, a number that rose to between 20,000 and 40,000 by 2014. In 2008, the United States had about 19,000 troops stationed in Afghanistan, and another 30,000 troops were deployed from 2009 to 2012 (Library of Congress, 2008, 22; Kleiner, 2014, 711). Additionally, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force contributed around 43,000 troops from a coalition of 40 countries. Though it played the leading role in fighting the Taliban, the United States had the long-term objective to train and equip an Afghan “army of 70,000 (in five corps), an air force of 8,000, a border guard force of 12,000, and a police force of 82,000” before “a 2008 revision [called] for increasing the army to 120,000 by 2013” (Library of Congress, 2008, 21). In support of the Karzai government’s efforts to maintain security and rebuild Afghanistan’s war-torn infrastructure, the international community invested over \$120 billion in foreign aid from 2002 to 2015, \$104 billion of which was provided by the United States alone (Shahed, 2018, 2).

Despite achieving the milestone of peacefully transferring power from Karzai to Ashraf Ghani in the 2014 elections, the Afghan regime remained entirely dependent on foreign aid and military support for its survival. As the United States intervention approached the end of its second decade, a summit was held in Doha, Qatar

to negotiate the terms of the United States’ withdrawal from Afghanistan. What was notable about the summit, however, was the absence of representatives from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The resulting Doha Agreement (2020) declared:

After the announcement of guarantees for a complete withdrawal of foreign forces and timeline in the presence of international witnesses, and guarantees and the announcement in the presence of international witnesses that Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the United States and its allies, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will start intra-Afghan negotiations with Afghan sides on March 10, 2020.

As the United States completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban took control of Kabul and overthrew the democratic government. The restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was formalized shortly after the takeover, and the Taliban promptly proceeded to dismantle the political system that had been created under the Constitution of 2004. Within months, civil liberties that had been protected under the constitution were reversed and strict measures for enforcing Sharia were re-introduced. Hibatullah Akhundzada, the new leader of the Taliban and head of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, did not make any statements suggesting that a new constitution would be drafted.

## 4.5 Discussion of Historical Findings

What follows is a condensed review of the historical analysis conducted above, which traces the development of both

Figure 2. Historical Overview of Regime Development in Afghanistan, Pre-Intervention

Regime	Period	Constitution	Centralization relative to previous regime	Power (regime action)	Transition (nation action)
<b>Monarchy (absolute)</b>	1919-1929	1923	Centralized	High (repression)	Revolution (tribal uprising)
<b>Monarchy (limited)</b>	1929-1964	1931	Decentralized	Moderate (prudence)	Legitimacy (transition from above)
<b>Democracy</b>	1964-1973	1964	Decentralized	Low (incapacity)	Insurgency (military coup)
<b>Dictatorship (personalistic)</b>	1973-1978	1977	Centralized	Low (incapacity)	Insurgency (military coup)

domestic and foreign state-building in Afghanistan, placing particular emphasis on the centralization of regime power and, therefore, directly addressing the study's hypothesis that state-building through intervention in Afghanistan has failed primarily due to the inability of both the Soviet Union and the United States to accurately assess the level of centralized power necessary for a regime to be legitimized by the Afghan nation.

Figure 2 presents an original chart that outlines the process of regime development in pre-intervention Afghanistan and reveals the historical struggle of encountering a stable balance between an appropriate level of centralized power on the part of a given regime and legitimacy on the part of the Afghan nation. Following its independence, Afghanistan was ruled as an absolute monarchy from 1919 to 1929. Though the regime introduced a constitution in 1923 to legitimize its program of political modernization, state power was excessively centralized and the regime exercised a high degree of power over the Afghan nation, which was accustomed to local rule by tribal leaders. In the end, the regime was deposed by a broad revolutionary coalition with the sole aim of abolishing centralized power

in Kabul. After stability was restored, the new limited monarchy became the longest ruling regime in Afghan history, lasting from 1929 to 1964. In order to avoid its predecessor's mistakes, the limited monarchy passed a new constitution in 1931 that decentralized state power and so earned it the legitimacy of the rural population. Moreover, its rule was prudent in that it used moderate state power to realize popular projects like infrastructure development.

After several decades of stable rule, the limited monarchy instigated the only peaceful regime transition in Afghan history, establishing a democracy that lasted from 1964 to 1973. The constitution that marked the transition in 1964 significantly decentralized state power, resulting in a low-power regime that was widely seen as incapable of acting in the national interest. Growing frustration with the ineffective and unstable parliament led to an insurgency in the form of a military coup that overthrew the nascent democratic regime. Consequently, Afghanistan was ruled by a personalistic dictatorship from 1973 to 1978. The regime's introduction of a new constitution in 1977 was intended to centralize state power, but its efforts to eliminate political



Figure 3. Historical Overview of Regime Development in Afghanistan, Post-Intervention

Regime	Period	Constitution	Centralization relative to previous regime	Power (regime action)	Transition (nation action)
<b>Dictatorship (communist)*</b>	1978-1992	1980	Centralized	High (repression)	Revolution (mujahideen uprising)
		1987			
		1990			
<b>Provisional government</b>	1992-1996	None	Decentralized	Low (incapacity)	Insurgency (Taliban coup)
<b>Dictatorship (Islamist)</b>	1996-2001	None	Centralized	High (prudence)	Intervention (United States invasion)
<b>Democracy*</b>	2001-2021	2004	Decentralized	Low (incapacity)	Insurgency (Taliban coup)

\*Regimes established through foreign military intervention and state-building

opposition made it lose the support of key military officers who were aligned with the communists it had purged from government. Without support from the officers, the centralized but nevertheless low-power regime was overthrown by another insurgent military coup organized by the Soviet-backed communists.

Figure 3 presents an original chart that outlines a continuation of the process of regime development in post-intervention Afghanistan and reveals the difficulties that Soviet and United States state-building efforts faced with regards to establishing regimes whose respective levels of centralized power would be legitimized by the Afghan nation. When the communist dictatorship began its rule in 1978, its further centralization of state power led to an almost immediate revolution by the mujahideen. Fearing that the instability might lead to similar revolutions in its own Muslim-majority republics, the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan in 1979. While playing the primary role in fighting the mujahideen resistance, the Soviets replaced Afghan communist leadership with more moderate figures and oversaw the introduction of a new constitution in 1980. In preparation for their withdrawal, the Soviets restructured the communist regime

once again and liberalized the political system through a subsequent constitution in 1987. Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, a final communist constitution was passed in 1990 but ultimately proved ineffective in reconciling more than a decade of centralized repression. Following the mujahideen's victory in 1992, Afghanistan was decentralized almost to the point of disintegration. The chaos that resulted from a lack of any meaningful centralized power under the provisional government influenced the formation of the Taliban, which earned popular support and legitimacy by promising to restore order through the implementation of Sharia.

After overthrowing the mujahideen in 1996, the Taliban faced no opposition to their rule besides the Northern Alliance, which controlled a small swath of territory on the border with Tajikistan. Though the Taliban's Islamist dictatorship exercised a high degree of power, it nevertheless acted prudently to employ centralized authority in fighting the crime, corruption, and disorder that had become endemic under the mujahideen's provisional government. The United States intervention in 2001 following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, however, quickly resulted in the end of Taliban rule and the establishment of a democratic

regime under a new constitution in 2004. Like in the case of the Soviet Union, the United States took the lead in conducting military operations against rural resistance while simultaneously preparing the new regime for independent rule. Though it attempted to establish centralized power over the whole of Afghanistan, the democratic regime had practically very little influence over the rural provinces, which were largely controlled by the Taliban over the course of the United States intervention. Unable to secure a level of power and legitimacy necessary for independent rule, the democratic regime was overthrown by the Taliban immediately after the United States withdrawal in 2021.

## 5. Conclusion

Both the Soviet and United States interventions failed to establish stable regimes in Afghanistan due to their inability to accurately assess the level of centralized power that would be necessary for a regime to be legitimized by the Afghan nation. Soviet state-building efforts produced a regime whose power was too centralized, resulting in its repression of the conservative tribal population. Instead of granting it legitimacy, the Afghan nation responded by toppling the regime through a revolution that led to the breakdown of centralized power in Afghanistan. United States state-building efforts, on the other hand, produced a regime that was too decentralized, making it unable to fulfill the needs and expectations of the rural population. Instead of granting it legitimacy, the Afghan nation responded by replacing it through an insurgency that installed a significantly more centralized, high-power regime in its place.

Throughout its history as a sovereign state, Afghanistan's limited monarchy, which lasted from 1929 to 1964, was the only regime whose level of centralized power allowed it to rule prudently and, in return, secure the legitimacy of the Afghan nation. Due to its limitations of scope and space, this study is not able to further examine the centralization-decentralization balance that characterizes stable regimes and leads to the creation of strong states. Future studies should examine the regime-nation relationship further in order to develop a better understanding of how legitimate sources of centralized power are created domestically and how—in cases of foreign state-building interventions—they can be recreated to endure.

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