

Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan: Patterns old and new

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Journal of Contemporary Iraq and the Arab World, special issue Iraq +20

Parallels between the Afghanistan and Iraq wars include phony victories (bought from local forces), phony aims and claims (train the Afghan army, secure women's rights, rebuild Iraq), shifts of alliances (allies become outcasts), creating 'homeless Sunnis' (who later join IS). If we view Iraq and Afghanistan on a wider canvas alongside Pakistan, do wider parallels emerge? The Iraq and Afghanistan wars are profoundly tragic but are they exceptional? If we view Iraq and Afghanistan as extensions of and variations on the cold war, do different patterns emerge? Would they help us understand problems of regime change more clearly? This paper views the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of a series and reflects on what this series tells us.

This paper discusses the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and then turns to Pakistan. It then takes up two questions. What are the continuities of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars with the cold war? What can we learn from these continuities about the transformations of American hegemony over time? ¹

Iraq+20

Twenty years after the start of the Iraq war a New York Times article asks, 'Two decades later, a question remains: Why did the U.S. invade?' Max Fisher goes over many considerations but an upshot is, 'A decision was not made. A decision happened, and you can't say when or how' (Richard Haass, in Fisher 2023). This idea itself isn't new. Years earlier Paul Wolfowitz noted that weapons of mass destruction as the reason for war was a 'compromise for bureaucratic reasons'.

The article delves a bit deeper, to the rise of neoconservatives, according to whom the US 'should wield its now mostly unchallenged power to enforce an era of "global benevolent hegemony".' This is a polite choice of words; a more familiar and more accurate précis of neoconservative aspirations is to pursue a 'new American Century'. Robert Keohane (1984) presented 'benevolent hegemony' as an approach that could enable the United States to overcome the Vietnam War trauma, i.e. a therapy for American guilt, at least for American political scientists.

¹ With thanks to Jahan Ahmed, University of California Santa Barbara and Abdul Ghaffar, University of Peshawar.

Some obvious questions come to mind. If the reason for going to war isn't clear, the purpose isn't clear, how can one decide how to wage war and whether the war is won? At the time and also 20 years after were there questions about this quandary, not just general but also practical questions? If this quandary didn't lead to major questioning and a big pause, what does it signal? Does it indicate that the war itself isn't as important as it is presented, or that its importance lies elsewhere? If the mission isn't articulated how does one know whether it is 'accomplished'? If the mission is just to 'remove Saddam Hussein', as Madeleine Albright and others have said, i.e. regime change, what then did the US plan to put in his place? This is the sore spot of the long history of cold war regime change and after.

In March 2006 a bipartisan *Iraq Study Group* was formed with James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton as co-chairs. The group conducted 8 months of meetings 'with military officers, regional experts, academics, journalists, and high-level government officials from America and abroad. Participants included George W. Bush and members of his cabinet; Bill Clinton; Jalal Talabani; Nouri Kamal-al-Maliki; Generals John Abizaid, George Casey, and Anthony Zinni; Colin Powell; Thomas Friedman; George Packer; and many others' (back cover text). *The Iraq Study Group* involves much the same people and the same mindset that produced the decision making that led to the war. The approach is US-centric in personnel, language, assumptions and objectives. Washington assumptions are reiterated, not questioned. Beltway narcissism is a taken-for-granted ambience.²

I have met several US veterans of the Iraq war and other operations simply in the course of everyday life. A driver in Kokomo, Indiana told me enthusiastically about his time in Iraq. He had a swell time with fellow service members, enjoyed the comradeship and enjoyed the time in Iraq, much more than Indiana, which is just boring. Of his own accord he adds, we had no idea why we were there, no clue for what purpose. Otherwise we had a great time. This was much like other conversations with vets. In other words, the lack of or unclarity of purpose of the war was an everyday public circumstance, not something distant or remote.

Reading the report is like taking a tour of the dreamscapes of Beltway policy makers. The Recommendations it presents are a wish list of policy makers. The problem is they exist just on paper; they make sense in the abstract. The missing ingredient is research and knowledge, including on the ground knowledge and experience, which is reminiscent of a White House outlook during the GW Bush years: 'we don't follow reality, we create reality'.

Let's compare development studies and security studies. In the nineties the World Bank did self-corrections. One was 'bringing the state back in' after a long period of market

² According to the report's back cover, 'A portion of the proceeds from the purchase of this book will be donated to the National Military Family Association, which supports families of all ranks and services, including those of the deployed, wounded, and fallen (www.nmfa.org)'. Of course, there is not a word about Iraqi military families.

fundamentalism. Another was hiring anthropologists, not just economists, which led to work such as *Voices of the Poor* (Narayan et al 2000). Development policies are continually put to the test, are publicly accountable, subject to constant monitoring by wide publics, rely on public funding, local, national and international, are fashion sensitive (paradigm waves) and failure prone (Nederveen Pieterse 2010).

Security policies, too, are failure prone but they are not accountable; for security reasons (classified, top secret, security clearance) they are closed-door green rooms. The actual customer is not the public or the people involved but the 'national interest' as defined by crafty patriots. The public and people are dealt with through media reports and smokescreen narratives. Because it involves international standing and prestige, budget decisions are made at different levels, with different criteria. The impression of power is power. Impression management and matters of rank, prestige and secrecy loom so large that there is little room left for product quality control. Subcontracting to private military contractors (from Blackwater to Wagner) is a slippery slope and doesn't improve the product. The actual security product therefore, in Afghanistan, Iraq or the 'war on terror', tends to match a low budget movie.

On Saturday 15 February 2003 huge peace demonstrations took place in towns and cities across the world. I took part in the one in London; I share some notes. Ken Livingstone from the stage in Hyde Park: 'As Mayor of London I am proud to welcome you on the largest demonstration in 2000 years of British history'. Among speakers were Harold Pinter ('American barbarism will destroy the world'), Bianca Jagger (preventive war is illegal in international law), Tony Benn ('If there are inspectors in Iraq I want to see inspectors in Israel, inspectors in Britain and inspectors in America'), George Galloway, Tariq Ali, Jesse Jackson, Ken Livingstone ('Let us watch the Security Council like hawks. Some countries are for sale. They can be bought with debt cancellation or grants'). Tony Blair's approval rating sank to 9 percent. Giant platform screens showed live communication with demonstration podiums in Rome and New York. The turnout across the world was so huge, it ranked and probably still does as 'the largest expression of collective will in human history', a self-conscious demonstration of collective will (Nederveen Pieterse 2003).

How the war unfolded, one debacle after another, has been extensively discussed. Dismantling the armed forces and the state apparatus in one sweep set a whole new standard.

The American and British occupation of Iraq is a highly unusual episode in the annals of conquest. I know of no other occasion in history where a conquering force did not merely purge the top leadership but shut down the entire country. Iraq's entire government and civil service, armed forces, police, firefighters, hospital staff, teachers and faculty were sent home and all production facilities stopped. Governance at all levels was shut down on the assumption that the Baath party

penetrated everywhere; which might be true but doesn't carry the demonic meaning that US officials attribute to it. The invaders came with a minutely detailed war plan but without a peace plan other than protecting oil and other critical facilities. For the people of Iraq the outcome was unprecedented chaos, total breakdown of governance, security, services, production, employment and wages. What forestalled total disaster is that before the onset of war the UN Oil for Food program had distributed basic food supplies to the population to last for several months. (Nederveen Pieterse 2004: 52)

In Iraq the US experimented with a novel approach to governance that can be characterized as 'osmosis of neoliberalism and empire' or 'neoliberal empire' (Nederveen Pieterse 2004, chapter 4). Unlike the Gulf War it was shared only by a small 'coalition of the willing', mostly the UK.

Thus dismantling the Iraqi state is cast as an American hearts-and-minds triumph. These proposals suggest an Iraq without a state other than for law-and-order and security purposes. This would stunt the Iraqi government regardless of which political forces would emerge from the occupation. It is an Iraq without a collective purpose or identity and with minimal infrastructure, a caricature of the economies that the IMF and World Bank have sought to implement in developing countries and the transition economies of Eastern Europe. The experience of post-communist Europe suggests that if a one-party controlled economy is instantly opened up to unregulated capitalism, patronage networks rapidly turn into organized crime. The attempt to keep senior Baath party members from holding office recalls a cautionary lesson from the experience of developing countries: it doesn't work to first eliminate a country's social, political and cultural capital (by imposing modernization as westernization) and then to count on people's 'entrepreneurial spirit' to take over from scratch and create a middle-class society. The reason this has failed everywhere is that it is based on an ideological misreading of the experience of the West and the US itself. (ibid. 55)

The Recommendations of *The Iraq Study Group Report* did not change the course. David Petraeus' surge of forces bought time. By 2010 the Iraqi parliament withdrew its permission for the American troops, the liberators, to stay and only a small force remained. Predictably the political influence of Shia parties and forces increased further, Iranian influence increased as well and Sunni forces, their patron gone, became homeless and many flocked to a new patron, ISIS, which opened another Pandora's box, interacting with the Syrian civil war and Turkey's border concerns.

Twenty years later an appraisal is 'Lost hopes haunt Iraqis, 2 decades after invasion. Society is far freer, but many feel unsafe and left out as corruption reigns' (Rubin 2023).

According to Iraq's planning ministry, 25 percent of the population now lives below the poverty line (Ackerman 2023) and according to an Iraqi journalist, Iraq is now a fractured country ruled by death squads (Abdul-Ahad 2023).

In 2003 the Iraq war was described as an 'American tragedy': 'The decision to attack Iraq marks a peak in the rise within the United States of a massive concentration of unaccountable power that represents the biggest threat to the American constitutional system since Watergate' (Schell 2003). By a recent assessment, 'Iraq was easily the most controversial war fought by a western state in the past half-century' (Ganesh 2023). However, these points gloss over forty years of cold war regime changes, all unaccountable and part of 'permanent war' (Vine 2020). Certainly, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are profoundly tragic, but they are *not exceptional*. Rather than viewing Iraq and Afghanistan as exceptional it is important to view them as part of a series and reflect on what this series tells us.

Afghanistan +20

The usual story is that after the USSR took control in Afghanistan in December 1979, the US began to sponsor and send in Mujahideen from Peshawar. In Pankaj Mishra's telling, 'Peshawar was the frontline city for the jihad sponsored by the United States and its allies, the time when European and American journalists cosied up to their favourite 'Muj' (Mujahideen) and had photos taken of themselves lugging rocket-launchers or huge sacks of heroin—this degraded infatuation with danger at other people's expense wasn't for me' (Mishra 2011: 26).

The account that came out later is that the CIA supported and sent Mujahideen fighters into Afghanistan already in *July 1979*, at the behest of Brzezinski, president Carter's national security adviser. This set a trap for the Soviets to enter Afghanistan in support of the Marxist leader Najibullah's government, which they did in December 1979. Right after, Brzezinski wrote a memo to president Carter: 'we have given them their Vietnam' (Haslam 2020). Once the Soviets occupied Afghanistan they became the target of US-organized Mujahideen for the next ten years.

Part of the wider context was the fall of the Shah government in Iran and Khomeini's return to Tehran in February 1979. Also in the background was Brzezinski's affection for Mackinder's heartland theory— 'he who controls the heartland controls the world' (discussed in Brzezinski 1997: 38). (The heartland, or the 'world island', is variously placed in Eastern Europe, Central Asia or Eurasia.) Geostrategic real estate was part of the horizon.

This episode has come up in relation to Ukraine. In February 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine, committing war crimes, tens of thousands of deaths, devastating the country. Afghanistan's ambassador to Italy, Helena Malikyar noted a parallel: 'Some elements of Russia's invasion of Ukraine appear eerily similar to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, including Moscow's flagrant infringement of a neighbouring country's territorial integrity

and national sovereignty, and Nato's circumspect response. Is the US replaying the Brzezinski strategy, with Russia falling into the Ukrainian "trap"?' (Malikyar 2022).

Divides between nomads and cultivators run through Afghanistan and Pakistan and through the 'heartland' and is overlooked or underestimated in many scripts. Nomadic peoples and warriors often fall outside and go against the scripts of civilization, modernization and development. In Pakistan the mountains of Northwest Frontier Province, the autonomous regions, the Hindu Kush and the mountains of Baluchistan, stand in contrast to the agricultural cradle of the Punjab and yield differences in cultural styles between Pashtuns, Baluchis and Punjabis. In Afghanistan seven different tribes of Pashtuns in the south make up the Taliban while Tadjik and Uzbek warlords rule in the north (Rashid 2001, 2008). Pashtun Mujahideen controlled the south and Tajik and Uzbek warlords controlled the north. The US teamed up with the Northern Alliance of warlords and helicopters delivered, literally, bags of dollars. The battleground was Kabul and central Afghanistan (Ahmed 2001, Malik 2008).

The dismay in urban Afghanistan over the Taliban taking over is not just about the Taliban per se but about mountain people with conservative values and customs ruling Afghan's valleys and cities. This isn't what international NGOs in Kabul prepared for; hence, their contributions turned out to consist of 'imaginary institutions' (Bijlert 2009).

Deeper in the background lies a divide between nomadic peoples and settled cultivators, between mountains and valleys (and between rural and urban) that runs through much of Asia. Nomadic peoples don't own land, many are also warriors, such as the peoples against whom Qin and Han China erected the Great Wall, Huns (Xiongnu), Mongols and Manchus. Ibn Khaldun wrote about the differences in outlook and customs between mobile nomads and settled agriculturalists in North Africa and the Arab world (Alatas 2013). In Europe mountain peoples served as paid soldiers because land is scarce. From the middle ages onward in Europe going to war meant 'paying the Swiss'. Hence, the Swiss Guard in the Vatican. The Janjaweed in Darfur, also a mobilization of nomadic warriors, has been a bane in Sudan and has led to the battle in Khartoum (2023) between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, who stem from nomadic warriors.

In Afghanistan because of the involvement of 'a bewildering number of actors'—civilian, military commands, 39 countries, a total of 62 countries and institutions, donors with different motivations (Bijlert 2009: 163)—the approach was and is very different than in Iraq. Here 'fixing Afghanistan' has 'largely become an intellectual exercise' with project designs that 'have very little relation to the realities on the ground... This is in essence a form of modern magical thinking' (ibid. 166). The approach relies on 'imaginary institutions'—such as the assumption of the existence of a state and a functioning bureaucracy. This use of magic wands overlaps with practices in development cooperation; in the words of Pritchett and Woolcock,

Donor activity often amounts to sending “experts” who operate institutions in “Denmark” to design institutions in “Djibouti”. At best this would be like sending a cab driver to design a car. But it is worse, because institutions come with their own foundational myths that deliberately obscure the social conflict the institution was designed to solve (quoted in Bijlert 2009: 168).

From the 1990s with the neoliberal retreat of the state came the increase of nonstate actors such as development NGOs, which Mark Duffield refers to as a ‘fantastic invasion’ (Duffield 2019).

During 10 years in Afghanistan the Soviets built with concrete; during 20 years in Afghanistan the American built with plywood (Ackerman 2022). During the cold war Americans focused on regime change and security and generally didn’t contribute to development infrastructure projects. Also in Afghanistan, Americans did not build roads, railroads or an electricity grid. They focused on security and training the Afghan army—which turned out to be a *fata morgana*, an imaginary institution. Why then did the Americans stay for twenty years and what did they do for so long? Afghanistan is not a rewarding arena for lucrative advanced weaponry; it was rather a target poor area (Ackerman 2022). Afghanistan shares a border with China and by one account, American forces in Afghanistan helped to destabilize China. Americans used their bases in Afghanistan to train and arm Uyghur extremist Jihadists, who were then smuggled back into Xinyang from where they undertook violent attacks in China (Abrams 2023: chapter 10; Coll 2018). While this awaits further confirmation it does shed some light on what the US was doing for twenty years in Afghanistan.

Pakistan+120

I add Pakistan to the equation for several reasons. In China a treatment of feet may start with a shoulder massage. Zooming out from a familiar focus helps to break up conventional thinking. Pakistan has been an American beachhead in the region since the 1950s and decades of US intervention display patterns that help us understand US operations. Because Pakistan is a neighbor it has been part of operations in Afghanistan all along. Relations between the US and Pakistan long precede US relations with Iraq and Afghanistan. Relations with Pakistan were a launchpad for US cold war strategies—support the military as modernizing agents and as bulwarks against ‘traditional’ forces, and also build alliances with Islamic forces against godless communism. Over time US-Pakistan relations became the launchpad for American ‘heartland’ engagements. Besides, Pakistan is a logistical and historical hub. Babur trekked through the Khyber Pass and Pakistan’s valleys on his way to establish Mughal India (1505, 1524). The Khyber Pass on the way from Kabul to Peshawar is the key site of the nineteenth century Great Game. The idea of a replay of the Great Game is common in the region (Dutkiewicz et al 2018).

First, let's consider the cold war. Building on extensive archival research Lindsey O'Rourke presents a 'data set of all US-backed regime changes during the Cold War' which includes 64 covert and 6 overt regime changes (O'Rourke 2018: 2). He finds that 'The United States supported authoritarian forces in forty-four out of sixty-four covert regime changes, including at least six operations that sought to replace liberal democratic governments with illiberal authoritarian regimes' (7). 'Throughout the Cold War, Washington backed authoritarian leaders in its covert regime changes more than 70 percent of the time... the United States not only failed to promote liberalism during most covert operations, but it actively worked against liberal regimes at times' (30). This generally matches historical and investigative accounts of the cold war period (such as the volume of Suchoples and James 2024).

Examine the cold war record and Iraq and Afghanistan are part of a pattern. The cold war pattern is the emphasis on security and the armed forces—with the difference that in Iraq the army was first dismissed, and then between 2003 and 2011 the US spent \$20 billion to rebuild the army. Yet when ISIS did a blitz attack in 2014 the army melted away.

In Afghanistan the US spent \$72.7 billion in military aid between 2001 and 2020: 'Despite the USA having provided the ANDSF with equipment, training, services, funding for salaries, infrastructure and more, it took the Taliban a little over four months to take over Afghanistan and control Kabul after the announcement in April 2021 that NATO's Resolute Support Mission would end' (Tian 2023).

The armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan were imaginary institutions too. Much of the funding was imaginary as well; reports indicate that the large majority of the \$3.5 trillion the US spent in Afghanistan and Iraq went to large American companies (Ackerman 2022).

The cold war coincided and overlapped with several struggles of decolonization, which, in turn, built on colonial times. Colonial methods of combat echoed in the cold war. Thus the US adopted the British method of small wars, notably the swift transfer of troops and supplies from continent to continent as a requirement of colonial wars, which prefigured American rapid deployment strategies. The British War Office publication on small wars became also an American source (Nederveen Pieterse 1989, *Continuities of empire*: 288).

The US was an inheritor of British Empire, a matter of Atlantic continuity, discreetly arranged from Chatham House to the Council on Foreign Affairs (Quigley 1966). American Manifest Destiny and conquest 'from coast to coast' sought further expansion across the Pacific. Four US vessels under Commodore Perry appeared in Yokohama Bay (1853) and nine arrived a year later in Tokyo Bay. The US as well as Japan understood Britain's risks of imperial overstretch in the Pacific. Loans and arms from Britain and the US helped Japan to defeat Russia in the Russo-Japanese war (1904-05), a victory that was celebrated throughout Asia and Africa as the first nonwestern country defeating a European country in war. The US colonizing the Philippines was part of pacifying the Pacific. The

US as well as Japan were subcontractors of the British empire in the Pacific (Nederveen Pieterse 1989, chapter 12). Later Japan took a different course with the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

The British hired Pathans and Gurkhas as fighting forces in the subcontinent and in facing Russian forces in the Great Game. A hundred years later Gurkhas, accustomed to military service and with a reputation of valor and trustworthiness are security forces across Southeast and East Asia (Nepal 2020). A hundred or so years later the Americans deployed Pashtuns (Pathans) as Mujahideen facing Soviet forces. The Taliban are their successors, Mujahideen 2.0 (Malik 2008). Again the Khyber Pass and Peshawar are nodal points in the game.

A bronze bust of Winston Churchill looks out to northwest Pakhtunkhwa province on the Pakistan side of Khyber Pass, where he was stationed in 1897 and was part of the Malakand Field Force that countered a Pashtun uprising:

The Pashtun tribesmen... had risen against the British in 1897 due to the division of their tribal territory by the Durand line in 1893, as well as the gradual British occupation of Pashtun lands. They rallied under the leadership of the Pashtun fakir Saidullah, nicknamed “Mad Mullah”, by the British, who declared a “jihad” against British India and rallied more than 10,000 warriors to his cause. (Gady 2015)

This episode combines several features: in the mid-nineteenth the British century hired Pathans to fight for them; in the late-nineteenth when the job was done they occupied and divided their lands. They declared the leader of their uprising mad, a ‘mad mullah’—somehow similar to the ‘Mahdi of Islam’ who led an uprising the British in Sudan (the Mahdist War 1881-1899). They labeled the insurgents ‘savages’, as did Churchill: ‘Churchill would later on sardonically boast in *My Early Life* that luckily for those, like himself, who were fond of war “there were still savages and barbarous peoples. There were Zulus and Afghans, also the Dervishes of the Soudan. Some of them might, if they were well-disposed, ‘put up a show’ someday”’ (Gady 2015).

Not much later Arnold Toynbee presented cities and civic cohabitation as a criterion for civilization, and cities require agricultural surplus production and centralized administration (Toynbee 1972: 71). (Churchill’s *My Early Life* came out in 1930; Toynbee’s *Study of History* was originally published in 1934.) An implication is that those who don’t do agriculture and don’t live in cities are *outside civilization*—savages, barbarians at the gates. According to Qin and Han dynasties Chinese, there was need for a Great Wall to protect China’s fertile cradle against nomadic peoples. According to Thomas Hobbes, because of savages such as in the Americas, humans need powerful authority, a Leviathan. American western movies often cast native American warriors of the Plains, the Apache, Sioux and others in the same light, savages outside the gates of civilization. The poetics of empire have a long and winding history.

Yet the poetics of empire are a tad selective. Nomadic peoples too have built civilization (Harl 2023). Without the warriors of Genghis Khan's Golden Horde no Mongol Empire, no land bridge between East and West, no Marco Polo. Mobile peoples, rather than sedentary peoples have of course been vanguards of connectivity. Nomadic peoples of the Asian steppes invented the stirrup and were the first to use carriages on wheels (McNeill 1982). Land-poor Vikings of Norway's fjords, Wenzhou migrants of land-poor Fukien, Bugis of Sulawesi and other seafarers in Asia fared wide and far and interconnected kingdoms and sultanates.

Another angle on civilization, American style, was postwar modernization theory. The cold war overlapped with modernization thinking. According to modernization theory the armed forces are an agent of modernization and deserve support whereas religious groups are 'traditional', oppose modernity and don't deserve support. However, the cold war was an exceptional situation. Religion was an important variable in counterinsurgency and the cold war in Asia and Africa. In Pakistan working with and cultivating Islamic forces and sensibilities have played a part in US policies for many decades. Jahan Ahmed has devoted extensive research to the US government funded Franklin Book Programs that translated English works about Islamic historical figures and heroes into Urdu and published them at low cost, nourishing a conservative religious ideology in Pakistan as part of the cultural cold war (Ahmed 2023). This was part of a wider international approach of the US weaponizing Islam against communism, in the 'Green Belt' stretching from Morocco to Central Asia (Halliday 1995).

The Green Belt of Muslim allies against atheist communism did not survive the fall of the USSR. After cultivating Muslims for decades as valued allies during the cold war when the cold war ended so did American patronage for Muslim forces. Besides, with the enemy of communism gone US intelligentsia soon came up with a new arch enemy—fundamentalist Muslims. Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' (1993) provided a new target, a new global divide and world crisis, one that would also last for decades and inspire wars of its own such as the War on Terrorism, inspire rightwing populist movements, parties and political clashes and crises, in other words, a stroke of genius.

Muslims were declared to be the major danger to 'western civilization' and the frontier in the 'clash of civilizations'. When Muslim Jacobins sought state power, or weaponized jihadists turned against Muslim governments, the US declared a 'war on terror' against the militant jihadists they had cultivated ('the Afghans' in Egypt and Algeria, Al Qaeda, later ISIS), which inspired further layers of authoritarian security.

The 9/11 attack of the twin towers was a response to American imperial expansion in the Middle East and beyond. The US betrayal of the Taliban from close allies to arch enemies probably played a role in Afghanistan's hosting of Al Qaeda. The US war in Afghanistan was payback for the 9/11 attack on the twin towers in New York. The objective was to punish and oust Al Qaeda from the country.

Two questions facing us are a) what do the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have in common with the cold war operations of regime change? b) what light does the overall series, cold war and after, shed on the methodologies and transformations of US hegemony? First, I consider, in brief format continuities of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars with the cold war.

Continuities with the cold war

- ***Phony claims.*** Manufactured or inflated claims of security risks have all along been part of the US repertoire. Abrams' book, *Atrocity fabrication and its consequences* (2023) is a comprehensive cogent overview of US propaganda operations, black ops from the Korean war and Vietnam war onward. Seeing them together is a formidable read. Fabricated or inflated security threats have been a key entry point of American influence. They are often of interest to the country's security forces, elevating their importance, so they also function as security alliance and trust building.
- ***Phony aims.*** Lack of clarity of aims or changing objectives of security and military operations is often a feature rather than a bug; it enables hegemonic flexibility, keeps media busy and distracts the attention from actual operational problems. Strategic ambiguity about objectives, success or failure and what constitutes 'success' is also an asset. Keeping objectives obtuse is an advantage when the actual objectives don't match the lofty standards of official declarations. Lack of clarity matters little when media are acquiescent and policy debate is ritualistic.
- ***Prioritize security and intel.*** Intervening in the armed forces of the target country has long been a method of achieving long-term access (via sharing intel, funding, weapons, training programs, and sharing wavelengths of ideology). Cultivating military and intel links, through arms sales, funding, training, joint exercises and institutions such as the School of the Americas is part of transforming the world into a security arena. Where US influence went the US usually instituted vertical power with military or intelligence chiefs in charge.³ In region after region the US created states with the military in charge, establishing control over institutions, the economy, national resources and land. In Guatemala from the 1950s the military took control over banks and the economy, in league with landlords (McClintock 1985) until the present. Upon the waning of the cold war national security states metamorphosed into regime security states. The wall against the red danger became

³ A sample is Italy 1947-68, France 1947-52, Ukraine 1949-56, Japan 1952-68, Iran 1953, Guatemala 1954, Indonesia 1954-58, 1965, Congo 1960, Guyana 1961-71, Haiti 1963, Brazil 1964, Dominican Republic 1965, Vietnam 1961-64, Angola 1964-72, Mozambique 1964-68, Bolivia 1971, Chile 1973, Portugal 1974-75, Afghanistan 1979-89, Nicaragua 1980-89, Chad 1981-82, Poland 1981-89, Suriname 1982-85, Liberia 1983-88, Philippines 1984-86, Panama 1987-89 etc. The actual record of US operations is much larger (O'Rourke 2018: 3, 103, 109, 117).

- a domestic fortress. In the name of democracy the US created the opposite, authoritarianism. In the name of the free market, the US created kleptocracy oligarch states. In effect, societies that are mirror images of the US with double speak included in the bargain, at a lower level of development. Thailand has no enemies and its 300,000 military serves monarchy-military regime security (Kurlantzick 2022). Pakistan has an army of 500,000 military.
- ***Divide and rule.*** Playing off different ethnic groups, warlords and or religious factions against one another is classic divide-and-rule and is as old as empire. In colonialism it meant sidelining customs and adat that support social cohesion and cooperation while highlighting traces of friction and animosity—which keep overlords out of the picture. The British in India segregated Hindus and Muslims. The Belgians in Rwanda and Burundi separated Tutsis and Hutus, essentializing and hardening differences. Divisions of religion and ethnicity were key in decolonization and the cold war and in Afghanistan and Iraq, with lasting consequences. Divide and rule weaken society and strengthen militias and the security state.

Western policies based on sectarianism became the way forward in Iraq, in effect a system known in Arabic as the Muhassasa (‘quotas’); in the words of a Baghdad journalist, ‘the allocation of state resources and division of the spoils of power along sectarian and ethnic lines’ (Abdul-Ahad 2023).
 - ***Balkanization.*** As part of the collateral damage of divide and rule many countries of cold war intervention ended up divided and fragmented, which also applies to Iraq and Afghanistan.
 - ***Shifts of alliances.*** Ronald Reagan lauded the Mujahideen in their struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan as ‘the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers’. Later the Taliban (who are Mujahideen 2.0) gained control of Afghanistan, hosted Al Qaeda and became the target of an American war (2001). After 20 years of war, the Taliban became diplomatic counterparts. A postwar assessment in Afghanistan was ‘They [the US] sold us to the Taliban’ (Ghafari 2022). Shifts of alliances have played a part also in Iraq and Pakistan.
 - ***Crisis politics.*** Particularly after 1980, economic and financial risks also became levers of American influence, not just security risks. *Combining* security concerns and economic and financial risks as layers and levers of influence are part of a long-term crisis politics that is vintage American (‘Our brand is crisis’).

In Pakistan this involved a lasting alternation of military and civilian-bureaucratic rule (Shoukat 2016). More recently the military and business groups of powerful families have become more interdependent and the contrast between regimes is less marked.
 - ***Lasting destabilization.*** Divide and rule, balkanization and shifts of alliances brought lasting destabilization during and after the cold war. An implicit

- consideration is to foster a weak state but not a failed state—which is too much trouble, certainly if it is also a nuclear state.
- ***Ideology***, a powerful tool of soft power, on the part of the US follows a steady zigzag path. Analysis shows there is no relationship between American ideology and actual US regime changes. American ideology does not match American society nor American foreign policy. Promote liberal democracy yet practice and implement authoritarianism. Advocate democracy yet practice Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay and deem water boarding legal. Support national security states in Israel, Egypt, Jordan and sundry and then claim to ‘bring democracy to the Middle East’ and support the Arab spring. Declare human rights a keynote of foreign policy and of ‘color revolutions’, yet treat major advocacy NGOs such as Human Rights Watch as tools of foreign policy bullying and machinations (Zayas 2023). Oppose industrial policy and government subsidies for industry, insist that it is part of the WTO rules, yet enshrine industrial subsidies in the Inflation Reduction Act, the Chips Act and in a ‘foreign policy for the middle class’ as Biden policy.

American ideology is loud, but how important is it? O’Rourke finds a consistent cold war pattern that the objective of regime change was to effect changes that benefit American security and economic interests, rather than aiming at a regime type: ‘security interests trumped ideological ones’ (O’Rourke 2018: 68).

- ***US relations with Islam***. First, treat Islam as an enemy of modernity, second, support Jihad against the Soviets for forty years, third, declare Islamic Jihad as the main enemy of civilization, fourth, experience the wrath of Al Qaeda on 9/11, fifth, wage war against Al Qaeda for twenty years in Afghanistan and the war on terrorism.

The outcome of many of these policies taken together has been chaos and the devastation of economies and societies. Chaos yields fruits of its own, which is a different discussion.

Thus, much of what relates to Iraq and Afghanistan goes back to decades of cold war past, part of which echoes colonial times. The Atlantic special relationship includes British assumptions and methods of war in Ireland and the colonies. Add Pakistan to the Iraq and Afghanistan picture and we gain a wider view, which helps us to chart transformations of hegemony over time. A tentative précis follows.

Stages of US hegemony

- 1 **Pax Americana** transition from Pax Britannica (1890s>). Steps in this gradual process include the Monroe Doctrine (1823), expansion to Japan (1853) and China (missionaries), war with Spain (1898), colonization of the Philippines (1898-1946)

- and construction of the Panama Canal (1914) (Quigley 1966; Nederveen Pieterse 1989).
- 2 **Cold war** (1947-1989). Counterinsurgency, decolonization struggles, regime changes establishing mostly authoritarian and military-led governments (O'Rourke 2018, Suchoples and James 2024).
 - 3 **Neoliberal turn** (1980>). Rising US interest rates in 1979 triggered a Third World debt crisis, which enabled the IMF to step forward as lender and impose financial conditionalities and discipline: trim government spending, open markets (Gore 2000; Nederveen Pieterse 2004).
 - 4 **Neoliberal empire**. A combination of security-military and economic objectives, notably in Iraq (Ali 2003; Nederveen Pieterse 2004). Failures of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and a series of crises gave way to an epoch of multipolar globalization, the rise of Asia, emerging economies, BRICS, the G20 (2009) and a US 'pivot to Asia' (2010).
 - 5 **Globalization of NATO**. The US response to the Russian war in Ukraine (2022) has been multilateral in tandem with NATO and in consultation with the EU and UN. A NATO turn has been on the cards for some time (Gress 1998, Layne 2000, Nazemroya 2013). The shift to NATO is politically and economically attractive for the US; it diverts attention from the American lead and the policy emphasis on interoperability of member countries' armed forces and investment in advanced weapons boosts the Pentagon-military-industrial-Wall Street complex. NATO represents 59% of world military spending and its share is now growing. With NATO as the likely new avatar of hegemony a problem that becomes salient is the political economy of NATO (Carpenter 2023). Would opening a 'NATO office in Tokyo' be a good idea? What are the implications for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a regional political counterpoint?

The failures of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are massive. Yet, in the US after a brief media surge, they simply vanish, are overtaken by other pressing matters. They don't lead to significant ramifications. Which leads to the question what is the meaning of failure? Does failure matter? Arguably the failures of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are part of a series, a series of defeats in American wars, particularly ground wars, including Vietnam.

US media have been on the sidelines since the Vietnam War and react just briefly. Doing away with the draft since Vietnam means that general American public interest in international conflicts has been limited. Congress is generally on board. Support for the military-industrial complex is bipartisan and deep-rooted. Does winning war no longer matter? Does 'permanent war' include war for war's sake? Yet counterpoints are piling up. Iraq and Afghanistan have undermined both the legality of war and the legitimacy of hegemony. Iraq and Afghanistan have marked the passing of American hyperpower. The

world's mightiest security apparatus lingers at the abyss. Meanwhile what has increasingly becoming manifest are the 'future forms of blowback' that Chalmers Johnson anticipated:

By the turn of the nineteenth century at the height of the 'new imperialism', western colonial powers occupied 97% of the world's landmass. Now if we collate the areas that are targets of American coercion or under different types and degrees of American control, we almost arrive at a similar total. It includes those classified as rogue states (Iraq, Iran, North Korea) or accused of harbouring terrorism (Sudan, Syria, Libya, Somalia), American protectorates and satellite states, failing states and developing countries under the regime of the international financial institutions. But twenty-first century empire differs from past empires precisely because of contemporary accelerated globalization. This is a blowback world and 'All around the world today, it is possible to see the groundwork being laid for future forms of blowback' (Johnson 2000: 19). (Nederveen Pieterse 2004: 59)

The G1 became the G20. The leading states of two hundred years of Atlantic hegemony, the torchbearers of the free market and forty years of neoliberalism caved in to rightwing populism in 2016 with Donald Trump and Boris Johnson. 'Who guards the guardians' is a perennial problem.

In July 2023, Richard Haass, the long-time president of the Council on Foreign Relations resigned. His parting note is 'the enemy is us' (Baker 2023). The remedy he proposes is a return to civility in American politics and on his part, to 'help refocus the country on the core values embodied in the Declaration of Independence'. These are bromides for Americans—what do they tell the world?

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