

# **US Policy towards Afghanistan, 1979-2014: A Case Study of Constructivism in International Relations**

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Relations**

**Declaration**

'I, Anthony Teitler confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.'

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## **Abstract**

A case study of US policy towards Afghanistan from the Soviet intervention of 1979 to the exit of US/ISAF combat troops in 2014, this thesis examines how the United States' discursive construction of its interests and identity have moulded its long-term involvement with that country. It demonstrates how Washington used language to justify, represent and normalise its foreign policy practices. In this way, the intertwining of language and social practices provided policymakers' with shared meanings and tools for how to operate. This sets it apart from the existing literature, which predominantly argues that the US has been motivated by its own self-interest in its dealings with Afghanistan. Whilst it does not entirely reject the importance of both realist and neo-realist assumptions, this thesis mainly deploys a constructivist theoretical approach to achieve its objectives.

A relatively new framework in the field of international relations, constructivism provides a more nuanced and well-rounded perspective around which a nation's foreign policy can be understood. It contends that collectively shared beliefs about a nation's character and identity, rooted in its history, institutions, and its people explain both how it interprets and why it engages in the foreign policies that it does. In the case of Afghanistan, Washington believed that it is the only nation capable of positively effecting change. This sense of US exceptionalism has continuously informed America's policies towards that country, whether that was during the Cold War when it constructed the 'freedom fighters' struggle against

the Soviet Union's occupation or of a noble US helping Afghanistan fight against transnational terrorism in the post 9/11 context.

Thus, although this thesis acknowledges how America's self-interest has played an important role in shaping its policies towards Afghanistan, the author seeks to explain Washington's long-term involvement with that country by focusing primarily upon America's narratives, values and beliefs. This will enrich our understanding of US policy towards Afghanistan by providing a new perspective through which both nations' continuous, evolving and complex relationship can be both historically and contemporarily understood. The work also aims to contribute more broadly to international relations and US foreign policy scholarship through its interdisciplinary approach.

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## Introduction

*'And in that same spirit I call on all Americans to observe Afghanistan Day in their thoughts, their prayers, their activities, and in their own renewed dedication to freedom. With the help of those assembled here today, the unanimous backing of the Congress, and the support of the American people, I'm confident that this day will mark a true celebration, and not just for freedom in Afghanistan, but, for freedom wherever it is threatened or suppressed the world over.'*

Ronald Reagan,

Remarks on Signing the Afghanistan Day Proclamation, March 10, 1982

*'There is an old argument between the so-called "realistic" school of foreign affairs and the "idealistic" school. To oversimplify, realists downplay the importance of values and the internal structures of states, emphasizing instead the balance of power as the key to stability and peace. Idealists emphasise the primacy of values, such as freedom and democracy and human rights in ensuring that just political order is obtained. As a professor, I recognize that this debate has won tenure for and sustained the careers of many generations of scholars. As a policymaker, I can tell you that these categories obscure reality. In real life, power and values are married completely.'*

Condoleezza Rice, National Security Advisor to George W Bush, October 1, 2002,

Wriston Lecture: A Balance of Power that Favors Freedom

This study addresses the question of how the United States' discursive construction of its interests and identity have shaped its involvement in Afghanistan since the Soviet intervention of 1979 and, especially, during the post-9/11 milieu.<sup>1</sup> As will be demonstrated, Washington's choice of language and wide

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<sup>1</sup> The author recognises at the outset that the United States' perception of its interests and identity always involves human agency and a multitude of overlapping and conflicting stakeholders, which includes Congress, the mass media, international partners, social movements, interest groups, think tanks, as well as other important domestic and international actors. This will be factored into the overall analysis. However, for the sake of clarity, the emphasis of this study is on the Executive branch and especially the White House. This is on the grounds that these powerful actors directly formulate and implement US foreign policy.

array of social practices interacted to produce collectively shared meanings (Hall, 1992, p. 291). This provided US state officials with a template of what was deemed appropriate and legitimate regarding its evolving Afghan policy. A standard approach to understand the United States' long-term involvement in that country, grounded in (neo-) realist and materialist theoretical assumptions, states that the US has followed its geo-political objectives in order to defeat the Soviet Union during the last stage of the Cold War as well as transnational terrorism in the post-9/11 context. This has relevance to the present study, but it fails to provide a complete overview of US policy towards Afghanistan. An exploration of the ways in which its identity and ideals, commonly considered ideational factors, contribute to Washington's understanding and justification of its Afghan policy is also important.

This is not least because a sense of exceptionalism has continuously shaped America's attitude towards Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> US foreign policy elites have consistently maintained – throughout the republic's existence – that America is the world's leading progressive force, which can be observed in their understanding and justification of its Afghan policy.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as argued in this thesis, whether this was

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<sup>2</sup> The author uses the term 'America' interchangeably with the 'United States' in this work. 'American' refers to citizens of the United States. It is appreciated that America, or the Americas, is the Western Hemisphere, which comprises of a wide range of nation-states and two continents. These terms are solely used for word variation.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this study, the author acknowledges the complexity of processes, institutions, and decision-making in US foreign policy. In this respect, exceptionalism helps to provide a richer understanding of historically relevant ideas that inform how America strategically interprets its identity and interests in the world. American foreign policy is often Janus-faced in its rhetoric and actions. Moreover, the study recognises decision makers nearly always have mixed motives in how they think about and operationalise foreign policy. Nonetheless, Washington justifies its approach to domestic and international opinion through a normative framework, which abides by commonly held norms, expectations and discursive practices. This is needed to make a policy appear as



in the form of aiding the ‘freedom fighters’ against the Soviet ‘occupiers’ in the 1980s, or attempting to reduce the perceived threat of terrorism in the post-9/11 context, a consistent reason why the United States has involved itself in that country is due to Washington’s discursive construction that it is the only nation capable of positively effecting change. This project attempts, therefore, to bring together both of the aforementioned types of explanations by developing a unified understanding of US policy towards Afghanistan which emphasises the dialectical relationship between material and ideational factors.

The United States’ identity and interests and the ways in which they reinforce one another, therefore, are essential to this study (Jackson, 2005; Ruggie, 1997). For example, the Bush administration’s strategic interpretation of the tragic events of 9/11, and the discursive formation of a ‘freedom championing’ United States needing to fight terrorism in a militarised fashion, has combined to form a key narrative that Republican and Democratic administrations, as well as wider US society, have internalised (Jackson, 2011). It is this subsequent institutionalised idea that was instrumental to the formulation of certain policies, which continue to inform policymakers up to the present day. This has also provided the United States with further justification for its self-identified global leadership role (Obama, January 20, 2009).

Washington’s continuation of fighting transnational terrorist actors in a militarised capacity in the post-9/11 world is somewhat akin to the Cold War in which an ‘enemy’ is identifiable. The United States’ responsibility for its own

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appropriate, realistic and legitimate (Finnemore, in Katzenstein ed., 1996, p. 159; Hansen, 2012, p. 101).

security and the well-being of its allies becomes part and parcel of how it sees itself and, simultaneously, of what the right course of action is (Croft, 2006; Leffler, 2007, pp. 62-64; Fousek, 2000).

Each administration's interpretation of its role and interests has varied over time due to the different elements within the US executive and legislative branches, public opinion, the mass media, domestic politics, historical factors, international alliances, interest groups, think tanks, the personalities and objectives of individual leaders, the international social structure, and how it directly relates to an evolving relationship with important actors within Afghanistan. A manifest sense of responsibility – for Republican and Democratic administrations – is one that attempts to ensure a constructive relationship with Afghanistan (Bush, January 31, 2008; Obama, May 12, 2010). Washington has strongly made the case for the bipartisan idea that it is a 'benign' actor, which should lead in world affairs, as it argues that this has the potential to benefit all parties concerned (Carter, January 20, 1977; Bush, February 15, 2001).<sup>4</sup>

A sense of responsibility provides purpose to Washington's actions. As will be explored, US policy towards Afghanistan has varied from 1979 to the end of 2014.

This is due to the social meaning that the United States gives to who it is and what

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<sup>4</sup> The author conducted a number of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with government officials, opinion formers, think tank experts and academics in Washington D.C. throughout April 2014. In a variety of these interviews, there was a genuine underlying assumption that the United States needed to remain engaged as the primary global actor for reasons of both progress and stability.

N.B. They have been recorded and full transcripts are available. The author has also carried out interviews in New York, London, other European cities and Kabul. Please see the full list of on the record interviewees on the final page/s of this thesis. Throughout this work, when the author cites an interviewee for the first time it is accompanied with their relevant biographical details in a footnote.

it wants.<sup>5</sup> In large part, it is through this historically contingent interaction between America and Afghanistan, whether at a more confrontational or complementary level, which has informed what the United States stands for, what its objectives are and how it can achieve them.

Throughout the 1980s, US policymakers discursively constructed the Mujahideen in Afghanistan as 'freedom fighters'. American political leaders and opinion formers referred to these various state actors fighting the Soviet Union in a consistently positive light. Indeed, the policy that emerged was eventually taken for granted, as the United States believed it was responsible for these 'brave' Afghans in their pursuit of defeating the Soviet Union (Reagan, December 26, 1982; Taubman, July 3, 1983; Dupree, April 6, 1981). Partially, this sense of identifying with the Afghans came through an international normative structure, which Moscow had gone against when it directly intervened in Afghanistan at the end of 1979. Moreover, the United States and other actors pointed to the importance of sovereignty in international relations. In light of this, the freedom fighters had the right to overthrow the communist-led Kabul regime and defeat the Soviet Union, in order to achieve the perceived interest of national independence.

Washington's relationship towards Afghanistan shifted in the 1990s to one of major detachment. The aspects realigning US policy meant a greater focus on

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<sup>5</sup> There are other variables that come into play, which include the end of the Cold War, different military technologies, asymmetrical economic relations, and the United States' global hegemonic position in the post-Cold War period. This will be acknowledged throughout the work as a part of the constructivist position because of how actors assign meaning and content to these factors, which are all embedded within a social and historical context.

other parts of the global map, including German reunification, Eastern Europe, Russia, Mexico, the Middle East and East Asia. Afghanistan was not seen as significant on the economic or even security front. With the events of 9/11, though, within the national security establishment there was a clear post hoc rationalisation that Washington should have focused on the transnational terrorist element and where it had originated. However, American policymakers' seemingly myopic approach to Afghanistan was actually due to their sights being elsewhere.

The Bush administration's strategic interpretation of 9/11 helped construct a new path for US national security. This discursive construction of the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT) emerged as the dominant narrative.<sup>6</sup> It paved the way for a set of militarised practices and commonly held beliefs, which have made up the post-9/11 world.<sup>7</sup> In this way, Washington has consistently argued the fight against transnational terrorism as a civilisational and long-term mission, one in which the 'exceptional' United States would take the world's leading role in the cause of 'freedom' and 'sacrifice'. As George W Bush stated on September 14, 2001 at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance Service:

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<sup>6</sup> A nation-state has a repertoire of national security options. The most obvious and direct one is to declare war. This suited key Bush administration officials who believed in the efficacy of force in maintaining US primacy in the Greater Middle East.

<sup>7</sup> Prior to this, hardliners in the Reagan administration attempted to establish and institutionalise a global counterterrorist approach, which emphasised pre-emptive self-defence via targeted killings (this subsequently involved the development of drone technology). Due to a whole host of factors this did not take off, and it was only later on, in the post-Cold War context and especially the events of 9/11 that the Bush administration could fully operationalise these ideas (Toaldo, 2013). Furthermore, in the case of drone attacks and targeted killings the Obama administration went much further than its predecessor (Fuller, 2015, pp. 769-792).

*'America is a nation full of good fortune, with so much to be grateful for. But we are not spared from suffering. In every generation, the world has produced enemies of human freedom. They have attacked America because we are freedom's home and defender. And the commitment of our fathers is now the calling of our time.'*

(Bush, September 14, 2001)

The United States did not expect to have such a complex trajectory vis-à-vis Afghanistan in the post-9/11 context. An attempt to root out the Taliban and destroy Al-Qaeda was the initial reason for intervening in that country. The Bush and Obama administrations attempted to capture, arrest and annihilate key Al-Qaeda figures with the purpose of preventing this transnational entity from launching attacks on the US and its allies. It was this overarching factor that remained in place. But the original 'light footprint' strategy was incorporated within a much broader state-building and counter-terrorist campaign, which has – as its central aim – sought to prevent Afghanistan from becoming an ungoverned or lightly governed space in which transnational militant groups can successfully operate. In this regard, US policymakers have also perceived the stability of Afghanistan as relevant for the stability of nuclear-armed Pakistan. As two-time Pulitzer Prize winning author Steve Coll explained:

*'Well, the declared purpose has been to prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming the ungoverned or lightly governed sanctuary for international violent groups that have the desire and capacity to strike at the United States directly or at its allies and interests. So, really Afghanistan's stability has been one objective. The declared narrative has been to destroy, dismantle, disable Al-Qaeda, but rather quickly after 2001, Al-Qaeda wasn't in Afghanistan in a meaningful way, so then the purpose*

*became more directed in an undeveloped way, in a self-contradictory way, but the purpose was more directed to Afghanistan's stability and the prevention of Afghanistan's return to the country it had been in the late 1990s.*

*And I would just identify one other kind of unstated rationale. It occasionally surfaces in the official discourse, in which there was an assumption driving policy that Afghanistan's stability implicated Pakistan's stability and that Pakistan's stability was an enduring American interest.'*<sup>8</sup>

In view of these principal factors, the United States and the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) attempted to build up the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and the Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF) in order to facilitate improved Afghan institutions and to enable an independent nation-state. However, the ability to pacify elements within Afghan society, which were militantly opposed to Washington, made the Afghanistan conflict seemingly intractable. The US/ISAF civil-military nexus promoted development, security and good governance to bring about a clearer strategy and more favourable outcome. As this study explores, the challenge of operating in Afghanistan in the historical and contemporary context has meant engaging with a complexity of factors that are not easily reconciled.

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<sup>8</sup> Author's interview with Professor Steve Coll on April 4, 2014 at his office. He is currently Dean of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Coll was President and CEO of New America Foundation (a leading public policy institute in Washington D.C.), Managing Editor of the Washington Post and is a New Yorker staff writer. His book *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Non-Fiction.

One key aspect to understanding foreign policy is the 'national interest'. In this regard, (neo-) realist, liberal institutionalist and structural Marxist scholars define the national interest in a wide variety of ways. However, one important component that unifies these disparate approaches is the idea of a United States that achieves its national interests – economic, political and security goals – as the result of purely material forces. This is based on the assumption that the international structure is exogenous of the actors operating within it and that a state's interests and identity remain fixed. Moreover, this means that policymakers or researchers can treat the social and natural world the same way, as there are objective laws that the United States or any other social actor has to abide by (Smith, 1996, pp. 22-23).

As stated in the title and abstract, this study aims to demonstrate the relevance of a *socially constructed* approach to foreign policy and international relations theory. Constructivism makes the case that actors are always embedded within a historical context and social structure, which is premised on a continual process of practices, interactions and human agreement (Wendt, 1995, pp. 71-81; Adler, 2005; Adler and Pouliot, 2011). It is through these social practices, interactions, norms and web of meanings that actors come to understand their identities and interests (Finnemore, 1996; Katzenstein, 1996). Since nothing in the social world is entirely self-evident, the relevance of interpretation is always acknowledged to be important in both academic circles and the policy-making world. As the senior British diplomat Sir Christopher Mallaby stated: *'there has to be interpretation. I mean there may be a very, very obvious case. 9/11 is a very obvious case. If you've got a country from which that kind of terrorism is coming, but even if you have a very obvious case like that you should still think about it. Because there are many, many*

*chances along the way and you might actually end up with a situation, which I think we are doing in Afghanistan, which is not notably better or certainly not lastingly better from the point of view of stopping terrorism.”<sup>9</sup>*

Constructivism aims to broaden out and provide a richer contextual understanding in order to illustrate how the perception of interests plays an important role in the construction and reconstruction of what those interests actually are, and how this, in turn, impacts upon identity, i.e. who ‘we’ are and who ‘they’ are. This is especially significant in understanding US relations with other actors, and how these relationships evolve and change. The connection between two nation-states, for instance, is not solely based on their respective Gross Domestic Product (GDP), military expenditure, or any other relevant comparative indicator, for how they perceive and relate to one another also matters and heavily influences their interactions.

In light of this observation, a militarily powerful Great Britain is acceptable, and even desirable to the United States, because of Washington’s perception of the UK as a valued ally and fellow member of NATO. However, the defence expenditures of Iran, North Korea, and China are a cause for concern. It is these interactions, practices and processes that provide a shared understanding and expectation of who or what an actor is, and how it is likely to respond within a given circumstance. This helps reproduce, reform or (in a rare case such as the end of the Cold War) transform the social structure. Alexander Wendt usefully explicates on how

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<sup>9</sup> Author’s interview with Sir Christopher Mallaby – a former senior British diplomat who served as Ambassador to Germany (1988-1992) and France (1993-1996) – at his personal residence on March 24, 2014. This quote comes ad verbatim from our in-depth discussion.



material resources only acquire meaning for human action via the structure of intersubjective understanding:

*'Social structures include material resources like gold and tanks. In contrast to neorealist' desocialized view of such capabilities, constructivists argue that material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded. For example, 500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons, because the British are friends of the United States and the North Koreans are not, and amity or enmity is a function of shared understandings.'* (Wendt, 1995, p. 73)

As this study contends, interpretation is vital for state officials who respond to the perception of threats and opportunities. There is fallibility to knowledge that illustrates the impossibility of an official having unmediated access to truth in the social world. Objects and events are not entirely transparent to the observer (Weldes and Rowley, 2008, p. 185; Weldes, 1996, pp. 275-318; Kratochwil, 2008, pp. 444-461; Ninkovich, 1999, pp. 1-16). State officials strategically interpret the specific historical, social and political context – this is crucial in *defining* what the 'national interest' is and how it is obtainable (Katzenstein, 1996, p. 2; Finnemore, 1996, p. ix). This *interpretation* becomes one in which a shared language is used to validate a 'correct' and 'legitimate' way of proceeding, as Jutta Weldes elucidates:

*'Drawing on constructivist assumptions, I argue that before state officials can act for the state, they need to engage in the process of interpretation in order to understand both what situation the state faces and how they should respond to it. This process of interpretation, in turn, presupposes a language shared, at least, by those state*

*officials involved in determining state action and by the audience for whom state action must be legitimate. This shared language is that of the 'national interest' (Weldes, 1996, pp. 276-277).*

Washington supports the notion that the interlinkage of American values and interests shapes US foreign policy (Bacevich, 2005, p. 2). Therefore, it is this dynamic that gives a sense of legitimacy and political support for any policy that an administration pursues. The administration in question has to generate support for a policy and to rhetorically justify a certain course of action (Weldes and Rowley, 2008, p. 186). This objective needs to be shared or persuasive to those who constitute the audience, whether it is the political elites or the wider US (or even international) public. If there is a source of tension between an administration's rhetoric and actions, this is where a breakdown occurs with its intended audience. In this way, a policy often starts to lose its legitimacy and effectiveness (Hunt, 1987, p. 15; Farrell and Finnemore, 2013, pp. 22-26).

American political leaders use of rhetoric habitually encompasses a binary distinction of 'good' versus 'evil', 'civilised' versus 'barbaric', 'us' versus 'them', which helped facilitate and sustain the intervention in Afghanistan, as well as other parts of the Islamic world (Rowley and Weldes, 2008, p. 206; Little, 2003; Burke, 2007, p. 130; Holland, 2014, p. 12).<sup>10</sup> This representation of the other was

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that the critique of these binaries has been a prominent part of the broader post-modern and/or post-structural movements. Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida are two leading lights that have had an important influence on post-structuralist international relations scholars.

effective in gaining the support of the American public, even though the post-9/11 Afghanistan conflict continued to involve terrible levels of violence.

The United States' discursive formation of itself as decent, principled, and benign often feeds on the need for another actor that is malevolent, unscrupulous and dangerous. The use of 'self' and 'other' helps create the possibility for action and certain US foreign policy practices, as it has to defeat these cancerous elements within the international social structure (Jackson, 2005, pp. 73-75; Doty, 1993, pp. 297-320). In this way, as this thesis contends senior US policymakers (successful) discursive construction of a benevolent America supporting the brave Afghan 'freedom fighters' or defeating the scourge of 'terrorism' in the aftermath of 9/11 has institutionalised and normalised certain policy practices. Moreover, as Richard Jackson cogently observes there is a mutually reinforcing element in relation to the language of the 'war on terrorism' and the social practices that this engenders: *'within the confines of this rhetorically constructed reality, or discourse, the 'war on terrorism' appears as a rational and reasonable response; more importantly, to many people it feels like the right thing to do. In this way, the language of the 'war on terrorism' normalises and reifies the practice of the 'war on terrorism'; it comes to be accepted as part of the way things naturally are and should be. Language and practice, in other words, reinforce each other – they co-constitute the reality of counter-terrorism.'* (Jackson, 2005, p. 2)

Washington constantly (re-) constructs the idea of a benign United States, and with this, the logic dictates that America should play the crucial role in preserving the international order. Thus, if the benevolent United States does not lead this would make the world even more dangerous and therefore Washington is

responsible for its own fortunes and those of its allies (Kennedy, September 26, 1963). President Ronald Reagan's speech to a Joint Session of Congress, which aimed to win Congressional support and rouse public opinion for the Contras in Nicaragua, demonstrates this historically contested point:

*'In summation, I say to you that tonight there can be no question: The national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves there, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere. Our credibility would collapse, our alliances would crumble, and the safety of our homeland would be put in jeopardy. We have a vital interest, a moral duty, and a solemn responsibility.'*

(Reagan, April 27, 1983)

In this way, constructivism provides a contextual understanding of what motivates an actor to support others as it gives insight into how meaning is created and the impact this has on interests (Wendt, 1999; Hopf, 2010, pp. 539-563; Weber, 1978; Berger and Luckmann, 1991). For example, during the 1980s, the United States discursively constructed an act in Afghanistan against the Soviet 'invader' as a legitimate response to a foreign occupier and illustrative of a 'proud people', which it fully supported. However, in the post-9/11 context, against the US/NATO led-ISAF Afghanistan mission, Washington saw some of these same actors as 'anti-freedom' due to their mutually shared definition that they were 'enemies'.

In order to win the 'hearts and minds' of the Afghan people in the post-9/11 milieu, the United States deployed an argument within Afghanistan that it wanted to help the Afghan people. Washington argued that it supported the central government and Afghan National Security Forces in order to improve security, development

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and governance. Conversely, insurgent groups, which included the Quetta Shura Taliban, the Haqqani network and Hezb-e-Islami-Gulbuddin, laid claim to the simple but very powerful message they were ‘national liberators’.<sup>11</sup> This proved effective at creating tighter group cohesion and gained them the support of a number of local Afghan leaders, who in turn perceived their central government – and the state apparatus more broadly – as majorly corrupt, violent, and bereft of any will to improve the economic, political and security situation in the country (Torabi, July 2012, pp. 1-18; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, January 2010, pp. 1-46; Aikins, October 2012; pp. 1-26; Rosenberg and Bowley, March 7 2012; Human Rights Watch, September 2011).

As alluded to, a particular focus of this work examines how the United States constructed and implemented its foreign policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan within a dynamic and changing environment. In this respect, the element of US exceptionalism is interlaced throughout. This is to demonstrate its weight in providing a fuller understanding of Washington’s self-identification as a progressive force and how it makes certain actions possible.

Washington argues that the United States is a ‘beacon of freedom’ for the world (Obama, September 11, 2010). In this way, America discursively constructs its

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<sup>11</sup> The Taliban is a very heterogeneous movement that falls under a broad umbrella of different groups. There are overlapping groups and occasionally conflicting ones that make up the movement. Moreover, a group such as the Haqqani network – operating out of Waziristan, in the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) region and orchestrating attacks over the border in provinces such as Paktika, Paktia, Khost, Logar and Ghazni is also part of the Taliban (Dorransoro, 2011). However, for point of clarity, when the author refers to the ‘Taliban’, he is discussing the movement that Mullah Omar led and his ‘Quetta Shura’ based in Quetta, Pakistan. However, this does not mean the actions of a key individual and/or Shura are all-important to the evolution of the movement.

missionary purpose to spread democracy, free markets and human rights (Bush, 2004; Kissinger, 2011). This ideological commitment and exceptionalist mind-set is demonstrated with the use of terms such as 'manifest destiny' or 'leader of the free world'. For instance, at the inception of the Cold War, President Harry Truman strongly made the case that the world's 'freedom' rested on the shoulders of the United States, an idea that continues to exert a strong bipartisan influence in Washington:

*'The seeds of totalitarian regimes are nurtured by misery and want. They spread and grow in the evil soil of poverty and strife. They reach their full growth when the hope of a people for a better life has died. We must keep that hope alive. The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms. If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world – and we shall surely endanger the welfare of this Nation.'* (Truman, March 12, 1947)

To put this notion of US exceptionalism into perspective, it is useful to note the doyen of *realpolitik* in twentieth century international diplomacy – Henry Kissinger – who has reasoned that *'American exceptionalism is universal'* (Kissinger, May 17, 2011). In this way, Kissinger distinguishes between the United States and China. Chinese exceptionalism, the former Secretary of State and National Security Advisor has argued, refers to China as seeing itself as a unique civilisation, whereas US exceptionalism *'is the longstanding notion that the United States has a special or unique place and role among nations, owing to its ideals and history.'* (Ibid.)

The United States' exceptionalist rhetoric was used throughout the War in Afghanistan (2001-2014). This was tied to the perceived threat of terrorism,

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which provided an important reason for continuing to be in that country. In this way, the Bush and Obama administrations attempted to make the case, with Congress and the US electorate, that it was doing the 'right thing'. They reasoned that the United States was the leading actor in taking on an extremely dangerous phenomenon. This meant that the US would provide for both its own security and those of its allies (Bush, December 15, 2008; Obama, December 1, 2009; Obama, May 2010, pp. 19-21).

In conjunction, Washington also argued that it wanted to help Afghan development. As for instance Stephen Biddle has stated: *'And then there's a wider penumbra of aspirations: we would like the nation to be prosperous, we would like it to be democratic, we would like women's rights to be respected, we would like minority rights to be respected, we would like it's children to be educated, we would like that for any country in the international system so surely we would aspire to them for Afghanistan as well.'*<sup>12</sup>

Washington made the geostrategic case for the conflict and, concomitantly, argued it promoted US values. In this way, Afghanistan became largely understood as one of supporting 'oppressed people'. This was in order to take on a transnational militant actor, which a brutal regime had harboured in the run up to 9/11. In this

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<sup>12</sup> Author's interview with Professor Stephen Biddle on April 8, 2014 at his office. Biddle is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the George Washington University. He is also Adjunct Senior Fellow for Defense Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations. Professor Biddle has served on General Petraeus's Joint Strategic Assessment Team in Baghdad, 2007 and General McChrystal's Initial Strategic Assessment Team in Kabul, 2009.

line of reasoning, the United States believed it could achieve its perceived national interest and help other actors in the process.

This study will next turn to the literature review chapter. There is an overview of the significant literature in relation to US foreign policy, international relations theory and scholarship on Afghanistan. This is examined critically and opens up the space for how constructivism is valuable in elucidating on US policy towards Afghanistan.

Chapter three examines various international relations theoretical frameworks in order to explain how constructivism is most relevant for this study. Within this constructivist approach, there is an emphasis placed on discourse. In this way, senior US policymakers discursively construct the world and it is through the intertwining of language and social practices that a policy emerges, becomes institutionalised, taken for granted, and (eventually) loses relevance. A major premise of constructivism is how actors identify socially with who they are and what they want. In this regard, the United States' identification of its interests and how it relates to others through the perspective of 'enmity', 'competition' or 'friend' is important in how proceeds. Within this socio-political point, actors are a part of the structure and either reproduce, reform or transform it depending on the dynamics of the relationships involved. In this chapter constructivism is also useful because of how Washington understands and uses American exceptionalism in its foreign policy.

Chapter four lays out the methodological approach to this study. It contends that interests are not based on some objectively demarcated criteria but are defined through process and social interaction, which are premised on a historical, social

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and normative context. In order to effectively make the claim that the United States' constructs its national interests, the author will examine American foreign policy elites discourse to demonstrate how policymakers succeed in making certain policy choices seem the natural and correct way of proceeding. This is premised on the intertwining relationship between commonly held narratives and practices that help co-constitute US interests and identity. The chapter outlines three policy change moments around which to test the constructivist approach – when discourse shifted from one type to another; 1979-1980; after 9/11; and during Obama's Presidency with a shift from a counterinsurgency approach to a purer counterterrorist one (2010-2011). This provides a solid series of focal points to build the empirical chapters and test claims.

Chapter five attempts to understand how and why US policy towards Afghanistan developed in the aftermath of the Soviet intervention and throughout the 1980s. In particular, the Carter and Reagan administration's strategic social construction of the 'freedom fighters' played an important role in the evolution of US policy towards Afghanistan during this period (Reagan, March 1, 1985).<sup>13</sup> The conflict brought some unity to otherwise fractious Presidential-Congressional relations and became a perceived 'success story' in the developing world. Washington's strategic gains against the Kremlin meant the executive and legislative branches gave increasing rhetorical and financial backing towards the 'freedom fighters' via Pakistan's ISI. Furthermore, since the US largely subcontracted its Afghan policy

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<sup>13</sup> Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink use this term 'strategic social construction' in their *International Organization* journal article. Finnemore, M. and Sikkink, K. (1998) International Norm Dynamics and Political Change. *International Organization*, 52 (4), pp. 887-917

to Pakistan (especially in the Reagan administration's first term), whilst encouraging Saudi Arabian funding, this thereby bolstered radical Islamists. As the next chapter demonstrates, this had terrible (but unforeseen) consequences in the post-Cold War context.

Chapter six explores the post-Cold War, 1990s environment in Washington and Afghanistan and especially how the Bush administration strategically shaped the terms of debate following 9/11. The support of Congress and the mass media had a major impact on the United States' collectively shared understanding of the September 11 attacks. It provided the Executive branch with the tools to help discursively construct and advance its own strategic vision vis-à-vis Afghanistan and a wider 'Global War on Terror', as the chapter demonstrates. A major new paradigm came into existence and it was through this lens that subsequent campaigns and foreign policy decisions were taken. The relevance of attempting to destroy Al-Qaeda and routing the Taliban became the accepted wisdom. The chapter also illustrates how a subsequent focus on Iraq diverted attention (and resources) away from Afghanistan. This would have repercussions for the Bush administration's successor.

Chapter seven is an explanation of how and why the Obama administration discursively (re-) constructed the major significance of fighting transnational terrorism; why US national security priorities and resources shifted back to Afghanistan; and how this policy developed. The incoming administration argued that the perceived threat originated in the Pashtun heartland. Thus, Washington reoriented its counterterrorist policy back towards the Afghanistan/Pakistan tribal areas. The Obama administration put an emphasis on a civil-military nexus

– especially a counter-insurgency (COIN) approach – in the initial stages of its tenure in order to reverse Taliban gains and to stabilise the country. Correspondingly, this chapter examines how and why certain decisions were made amongst key actors in order to understand the altering feature of US/Afghan relations up to the end of 2010. It also emphasises that the Obama administration agreed with its predecessor's underlying assumption about the meaning of 9/11 and how this subsequently impacted on its Afghan policy.

Chapter eight examines Washington's evolving perception of Afghanistan as a significant country in the war against terrorism, and demonstrates that the Obama Presidency increasingly saw the global threat as more widespread and decentralised. This meant a further evolution in US policy. The Obama administration's 9/11 'counterterrorism' narrative continued and America's evolving relationship with Afghanistan is largely premised on this. Moreover, Washington's linkage of transnational terrorism with Afghanistan is a further indication that an 'exceptional' and 'selfless' United States is the world leading actor in taking responsibility for its own security and those of its allies. The chapter examines the evolving aspect of a purer form of counterterrorism (CT) and the changing nature of US policy towards Afghanistan with the exit of US/ISAF combat troops at the end of 2014.

The concluding part of the thesis aims to understand what can be learnt from the United States' involvement in Afghanistan over a thirty-five-year period and, in particular, it will argue that Afghanistan has gradually become central to America's national security not just because of Washington's perception of its interests but also because of certain ideational factors that have consistently

underwritten its policy. Indeed, it will be argued that US policymakers consistently invoked the notion that America has had an exceptional, brave and moral role to play in Afghanistan's affairs.

## Literature Review

*'From this fort, which was founded to defend the city of Washington against invasion, you could stand on September 11, 2001, and watch the smoke from the Pentagon billowing up across the Potomac. The attacks of 9/11 signaled the new dangers of the 21st century. And today, our people are still threatened by violent extremists, and we're still at war with terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan who are plotting to do us harm.'*

Barack Obama, Remarks at the National Defense University, March 12, 2009

*'If you think that the rational choice model will explain to you 9/11, you've got another guess coming. 9/11, indeed, the world we live in, is a world that is not perfectly rational. Not only do religions play a dominant part in the world; but superstitions, beliefs are a crucial part of the way human beings make choices... and so a lot of what we're doing in cognitive science today is trying to understand why religions persist; why belief systems take the forms they do, what makes them acceptable and what makes them change over time.'*

Douglass North, Nobel Laureate, Effect of Institutions on Market Performance at the FCC, June 30, 2003

This literature review examines a variety of international relations theoretical approaches and empirical studies in order to generate a richer understanding of US policy towards Afghanistan. It substantiates that a constructivist approach merits serious attention, not least because it can be an important tool that bridges the vast array of theoretical and empirical components.

One key aspect of this thesis connects with the United States' construction of its national security interests. In the post-9/11 world, Washington has had a major concern with the evolving perceived threat of transnational terrorism. In particular, as Obama repeatedly stated and as the above epigraph demonstrates,

the US believed it had to concentrate an important part of its national security efforts in the Afghanistan/Pakistan hinterland. In this regard, the United States' overall intervention in Afghanistan post-9/11 substantially evolved.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the huge costs – financially, diplomatically, and militarily – that the US amounted since intervening in that country demonstrates relevant weaknesses in rational choice theory.

This theory posits that an individual decision maker/entity, especially in an economic context, can always analyse the cost/benefit of any situation and that the individual has access to perfect information (or near perfect). Connected to this point, the actor has a clear hierarchy of preferences and within this an optimal decision can be taken. However, Washington's approach to Afghanistan in the post-9/11 context evolved in a largely muddled way because of the changing dynamics within the country and the perceived threat of transnational terrorism. It was an enormously expensive and complicated venture (Belasco, December 8, 2014). This contradicts the idea that decision makers have access to perfect (or near perfect) information. Moreover rational choice is a paradigm that has been undermined on grounds of lacking historical, cultural, sociological, psychological and even economic validity (Sen, 1977, pp. 317-344). For example, it assumes people, regardless of their background, would respond in an identical fashion when presented with the same alternatives (Barfield, 2010, p. 17).

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<sup>14</sup> The Cold War chapter examines the key literature related to the events of that time period. Therefore, in this literature review section, the author will largely focus on the post-9/11 context regarding US policy towards Afghanistan. Concomitantly, this chapter also explores a number of important themes that pervade the overall thesis.

It does though largely undergird (neo-) realism and liberal institutionalism, two prominent IR theoretical approaches, which argue that states are self-interested, asy seeking, rational and utility maximisers. Both these theories expound on the idea that a nation-state wants power and security. This is an astute assumption. However, the idea that nation-states know exactly what they want and have to behave in a very particular way due to an anarchical system is more problematic, as policymakers do not have access to perfect information and their beliefs are predicated on an inherently intersubjective domain. Therefore, this study places far more emphasis on how states (and other actors) interpret what they want and who they are. States do aspire for power and security but they only understand their actual interests through social interaction (Finnemore, 1996, p. 2).

In world politics, states and non-state actors are socialised to want certain things. Constructivism examines how a nation-state identifies what its perception of interests are and how it should act within a social context. The interpretation of the 'national interest' and where this leads policymakers depends on the values and expectations they have about the international environment and the other actors operating within it. This can lead to concrete proposals and actions that may be more conflictual or cooperative depending on the context. Indeed, as Emanuel Adler explains, the case of arms control is illustrative of how the 'national interest' becomes established through a process of interaction and institutionalisation:

*'An interest in arms control then becomes a way to organize values and expectations of international security. Arms control becomes a 'searchlight' or 'map' that affects attention, diplomacy, and political actions and reactions. Once the habit of arms*

*control becomes established (i.e. when expectations and values become routinized and are taken for granted), we can say that it has become a national interest for countries x, y, and z to pursue arm control agreements.'* (Adler, 2005, p. 78)

As indicated, a dominant approach to international relations scholarship is realism and, within this, neo-realism. The main unit of analysis to this approach is the nation-state and how it manoeuvres within an international system that is anarchical due to the fact there is no world government or supranational authority to organise and regulate the behaviour of the key actors, i.e. nation-states, operating within it.<sup>15</sup> From a general realist perspective, since a state can never know the intentions of others; it is therefore distrustful, which can lead to a 'security dilemma' (Herz, 1950, pp. 157-180). This means Country 'A' might build up its military capabilities in order to protect itself within an anarchical system. However, Country 'B' may misinterpret this as one of hostile intent and would in turn do the same, leading to a situation spiralling out of control whereby both countries unwittingly bring about war (Jervis, 1976).

An obsession with survival, security and the zero-sum nature of the international system creates a situation where if one country enhances its power, the other loses out. For defensive realists, this lack of knowledge regarding the other's intentions and the possibility of another country becoming too powerful means an adequate

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that realism (like other theoretical approaches), whether of the classical, neo-classical or neo-realist variety, is a large umbrella. Classical realists believe in the relevance of human nature and neo-classical realism allows for elite level perception or misperception of systemic pressures. At the same time, what unifies this realist framework consists of a few key factors: 'Groupism, Egoism/Self-Interest, Anarchy and Power Politics' (Wohlforth, 2008, p. 133).



security arsenal is essential to ensure its own survival (Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1987 and 2005).

From the standpoint of an offensive realist, a country needs to maximise their gains vis-à-vis other nation-states in order to become a hegemon on either a regional or global level (Mearsheimer, 2001). In this regard, John Mearsheimer is pessimistic about US/China future relations, as a rising China will most likely attempt to copy the United States to become a regional hegemon. This would provoke a strong response from Washington that does not want to have any peer competitors in Asia, thereby leading to an increasingly antagonistic relationship with the worst case scenario, an outbreak of war (Mearsheimer, 2010, pp. 88-89). According to neo-realists, distributions of material attributes, which include economic and above all military capability is essential in understanding why nation-states act the way they do. Moreover, if a country becomes overwhelmingly powerful, other countries will act to balance this, in order to be more secure and thereby prevent any one country from becoming hegemonic within the system (Waltz, 1979).

Kenneth Waltz's balance of power thinking traces its historical and intellectual lineage through Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Morgenthau. Amongst policy officials and security experts it was considered a convincing explanatory tool to understand the Cold War. A bipolar world, made up of two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union – that balanced against one another in order to produce an equilibrium within the international system. However, with the end of the Cold War, mainstream theorists struggled to understand and convincingly explain the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Despite this, realism continues to play an important role in the way international security is understood. Indeed, there are some valid arguments made in relation to how nation-states do behave and that they are risk-averse most of the time within the international system. However, the approach is more prescriptive than it purports, as it often explains in bold terms how nation-states and political leaders *ought* to operate in order to harness a more stable order and to achieve the national interest (Reus-Smit and Snidal, 2008, p. 6; Keohane, 2005, p. 337). A largely singular focus on nation-states and their material capabilities does not fully appreciate non-state and transnational actors, intra-state conflicts, as well as how ideas become institutionalised and play a crucial role in the actual operation of global order and foreign policy practices.

Realists subscribe to the relevance of a rational, unitary nation-state. From this, it is extrapolated that a nation-state has objectively defined national interests that need to be followed. Conceptually this has certain difficulties. Firstly, leading (neo-) realists Mearsheimer and Walt have somewhat contradicted their argument of a rational, unified nation-state by emphasising the influence that a particular interest group has on the operation of US policy in the Middle East.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, this discounts how state officials have to strategically interpret and argue for the 'national interest'. Realist thinking plays directly into the idea that these officials have direct access to the 'truth' of a strategic situation. The fact that there is a large amount of contestability to any idea and prioritisation of policy is

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<sup>16</sup> See Mearsheimer and Walt. *The Israel Lobby and the United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). Noam Chomsky's critique *The Israel Lobby?* and Michael Massing's *The Storm over the Israel Lobby* in the New York Review of Books are useful rejoinders.

enough to illustrate that state officials and other relevant actors all vie to make their own 'voice' carry the day. This is important in understanding how US foreign policy is collectively thought about and implemented. For example, as Henry Nau elucidates, the relevance of academia and public policy debates are complementary to the overall evolution and understanding of policy:

*'If truth is evolutionary rather than objective or relative, the academy and policy community may be joined at the hip. Policy-makers create history, and history unfolds in directions that scholars discover and debate. Being in the policy arena, as Theodore Roosevelt urged, is a principal way to seek the truth. Sitting above or outside the policy process, as the academy might do under an objective understanding of truth, is no longer superior to policy-making. The two are complementary. Scholars discover and debate historical patterns, influenced by the social constraints and preferences of their scientific communities, while policy-makers shape events through more explicit partisan engagement.'*

(Nau, 2008, p. 640)

Realists persuasively argued that the United States' post-9/11 Afghanistan intervention was costly in terms of its diplomatic, economic and military resources. These scholars made the case that Washington's overarching aim of preventing the country from becoming a haven for transnational terrorism, which included a clear period of state-building was overly expensive and strategically highly problematic (Mearsheimer, 2010; Jervis, 2009; Walt, 2010). However, this theoretical framework is too singularly focused on the structural dynamics of the international system. There is a failure to account for why and how it was possible

the United States committed so much to a country that many realists would deem insignificant when compared with major actors within the international system.

Still, the factor of why the United States dedicated so many resources to Afghanistan clearly included the perception of needing to steadfastly combat international terrorism. As can be expected there has been a plethora of scholarship looking into two key areas, the evolving situation within Afghanistan in the post 9/11 context, and the ideological underpinnings and actions of transnational terrorist actors. This next section takes up these areas in order to understand the sort of ideas that have been vigorously debated within US public policy circles and academia.

One of the important factors that specifically informed the Obama administration during its major counterinsurgency phase (2009-2010) was the study of local dynamics in Afghanistan. In this regard, Thomas Johnson and M Chris Mason's work was helpful in showing the relevance of understanding the devolved and localised governance structure that was more in tune with Afghan historical and political evolution, rather than the post-9/11 strategy of strengthening the central government and its apparatus. Moreover, they pointed out that particularly in the south and southeast of the country the Pashtun majority tended to associate themselves first and foremost on the district level, and wanted issues of governance, security and even justice carried out on this level, including tribal law (Johnson and Mason, 2009).

Johnson and Mason also argued for the Weberian relevance of personal charisma and in the Clausewitzian 'centre of gravity' of one individual – Mullah Omar – the leader of the Taliban movement as the glue. These authors contended that the

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Taliban used Pashtun familial blood feuds, i.e. the US/ISAF killing of a Pashtun guerrilla only led to the radicalisation and recruitment of more fighters in order to 'avenge' the 'original killing', as another major factor in the conflict. Also, Johnson and Mason argued that it was impossible to negotiate with the Taliban as practically all members of this movement were fighting for 'God's will' and not for a political solution, which in this line of reasoning, the United States and ISAF had distinctly failed to understand (Johnson and Mason, 2007, pp. 71-89; Johnson and Mason, 2009, pp. 1-14).

Porter astutely pointed out the limitations and contradictions to this analysis. Firstly, in order for Johnson and Mason to explain how the West did not understand this exotic, Eastern 'other', they referenced two Prussian origin thinkers – Carl von Clausewitz and Max Weber – to make their case (Porter, 2009, pp. 151-153). It was also well established that the Taliban was heterogeneous movement, which had many different layers to it (Coll, 2012). The Taliban had elements of pragmatism and was adaptive. Therefore, it was misleading to understand any socio-political movement in a static context and this was demonstrated by the unpredictability of the War in Afghanistan (2001-2014) (Porter, 2009, p. 170).

The Taliban even managed to gain a limited and partial control of important northern provinces – Kunduz and Baghlan – by gaining support of local leaders and when needed the various insurgent groups exploited certain inter-ethnic or inter-tribal divisions (Giustozzi and Reuter, April 2011). However, it was not entirely clear that this instrumentalist take on how actors behave can explain why certain actors fought back against the Taliban, GIROA/ANSF, US/ISAF led forces,

or any other group that it believed was infringing on its level of autonomy. The local dynamic was also therefore important in understanding the variation of actions that took place throughout the country.

Giustozzi usefully pointed out the Taliban became far more flexible in its strategic operations than compared to 1996-2001 when it controlled vast swathes of the country.<sup>17</sup> The ideological dogmatism and deeply puritanical approach was still somewhat in place but there was an evolution in Taliban thought and practice. This was done in order to win over certain groups and villagers who were opportunistic, displaced, angered at state corruption, the levels of violence, and a general lack of legal retribution. The Quetta Shura Taliban took on a new dimension, which attempted to present itself as a vastly disparate movement that wanted to transcend tribal or ethnic considerations (Giustozzi, 2008). In this way, the Taliban used issues of supporting education (girls are now included), technology, benefited from the opium trade, as well as its occasional association with international jihadist elements to strategically fight against the counter-insurgency. All sides in the conflict continued to demonstrate flexibility with varying degrees of success.

Despite the constantly changing scene in Afghanistan, the greatest level of violence and challenge for the government and coalition forces remained in the southern and eastern part of the country. Ruttig and Dorronsoro both highlighted issues of poor governance, the continuing 'occupation' of the country, and increased Afghan

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<sup>17</sup> In his work, Giustozzi uses the term 'neo-Taliban' to differentiate the movement from a pre- and post-9/11 context.

perception that the insurgency would outlast the current conflict, as relevant factors (Ruttig, July 2009; Dorronsoro, June 15, 2011). However, this was not to suggest the Taliban was a de facto popular movement. It received support largely because of law and order factors, as well as deeply conservative social issues in various southern and eastern tribal areas of the country.

In this post-9/11 environment, the United States' key concern has been that Afghanistan does not harbour or give sanctuary to any transnational terrorist actor. Along these lines, Hassan and Hammond usefully explore the role of the 'freedom agenda' in how the Bush administration came to adopt democracy promotion vis-à-vis Operation Enduring Freedom. It would though often play second fiddle to counterterrorism in moments of heightened tension (Hassan and Hammond, May, 2011, pp. 532–551).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, it also had an impact on the incoming Obama administration, which had to seriously consider the relevance and degree of counter-insurgency and state building needed before fully handing back the reins to the Afghan central government.

This also translated into fully resourcing and training the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) – military and police – that provided for the country after the US/ISAF combat troops left at the end of 2014. Nau and Schonberg have persuasively argued that US attempts to create institutions in its own self-image,

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<sup>18</sup> Oz Hassan's enriching study *Constructing America's Freedom Agenda for the Middle East: Democracy or Domination* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013) further elucidates on these themes. Moreover, Andrew Hammond's monograph *Struggles for Freedom: Afghanistan and US Foreign Policy since 1979* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017) compares and contrasts US narratives of 'freedom' vis-à-vis Afghanistan during the Cold War and the Global War on Terror. Hammond's emphasis on the idea of freedom is highly relevant to the United States.

whilst concomitantly achieving its security and economic interests, are all relevant determinants in US foreign policy thinking and actions (Nau, 2002; Schonberg, 2007).

The United States sees its role in world affairs as benign. In this way, Washington argued it was selfless in helping Afghanistan 'get on its feet' and that because of this generosity Afghanistan was now in a much better place than it was prior to 9/11 (Dobbins, 2013, p. 8). At the same time, though, the United States stated that the Afghans needed to take the mantle of responsibility in order to be fully independent (Obama, May 13, 2012).

Serious levels of mistrust often characterised the relationship between the United States and leading Afghan actors during the post-9/11 conflict (Landler and Cooper, February 25, 2014). It is also characteristic of the United States' relationship with a wide amount of the Islamic world. In this way, Samuel Huntington and Daniel Pipes have argued the US has a great challenge on its hands and needs to directly confront the 'Islamic threat' (Huntington, 1996; Pipes, 1995). On the other hand, Edward Said, John Esposito and Fred Halliday have in their various ways sharply criticised this false emphasis on 'a dialectical struggle of Islam against the West' (Bokhari, 1998, p. 19; Said, 2000; Esposito, 2011; Halliday, 2002). They argue that such an alarmist and ethnocentric way of viewing the world has a great deal of negative repercussions and that the 'Islamic world' is infinitely complex, which needs to be understood as a mosaic rather than a monolithic bloc.

Olivier Roy makes the salient point about how neo-fundamentalist groups – whether the Taliban or Al-Qaeda – are in many ways responding to what

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globalisation and westernisation has already dictated. Roy defines neo-fundamentalism as a 'true Muslim's' self-definition of how Islam should be part and parcel the only element in one's life. This fundamentalist belief system also connects with a very tiny minority of second and third generation Muslims in Europe and the US, who perceive their grandparents as having lived – whether in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Somalia, Morocco and Pakistan – in an uncorrupted and idealised way (Roy, 2004). Various neo-fundamentalists see this as a clear indication that Islam needs to return to its unspoiled roots.

Al-Qaeda has manipulated and attempted to create a specific impression regarding the concept of global ummah – a supranational entity encompassing the collective community of Muslims – in order to attract recruits for transnational Jihadism. However, the neo-fundamentalist Taliban, does not come into this category as it is an evolving nationalist group that wants to implement its own brand of Islam on its 'community of believers', rather than being a transnational movement.

In contrast, there is the case of varying Islamist movements in Afghanistan, Egypt, Tunisia, Indonesia, or Turkey, as often having a connection with educated, urban individuals who are involved in setting up a political framework and institutions in order to achieve its objectives. There is always the acknowledgement of the state and fundamental centrality of the political system in terms of achieving religious goals (Burke, 2011, pp. 512-513). According to Roy, this is why political Islam – the creation of an Islamic state – as a movement is not a threat to western ideals. Quite simply because these groups have become 'normalised' due to the aspect of having to become national political parties/entities and accepting the

ideas of democracy and economic development in order to achieve support from their constituencies (Roy, 1994).

US policymakers' primary focus vis-à-vis Afghanistan has been due to the perceived threat of transnational terrorism. In this regard, Robert Pape's research on suicide terrorism has won widespread praise across much of the political spectrum as it also takes a critical view of foreign military occupations. In *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (2005) and *The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (2010), co-authored with James K Feldman, Pape collected a wide range of data from conflict zones that include Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan from 1980 to 2009, where suicide terrorism has occurred. His key finding is the positive correlation between suicide terrorism and foreign military occupations (or the imminent threat of one), and this has also been an important motivational factor for a transnational terrorist actor such as Al-Qaeda (Pape and Feldman, 2010).

Pape's finding supports the hypothesis of how a US-led military intervention increases the likelihood of political violence in a country. The study, however, only examines suicide terrorism. In turn, Pape's research is premised on a rationalist individualist model. It does not include any major historical and socio-political understanding of the various countries involved, which are other important elements in understanding how and why violence may take place.

With regard to the final part of this literature review, there is an exploration of international relations theory and US foreign policy. This aims to further demonstrate the relevance of these theoretical approaches and particularly the use of constructivism in understanding the multidimensional aspect of US policy

towards Afghanistan. Indeed, sharply differing opinions in Washington regarding the Islamic world, and specifically Afghanistan, have repercussions for how policy is formulated and justified. Interest groups, epistemic communities, significant political and business decision makers, and civil society all feed into a general policy that is deemed acceptable and appropriate. In particular, these variety of actors include the individual characteristics of Presidents, the President's political advisors, the National Security Council, the Department of Defense, the State Department, Congress, the mass media, US society and public opinion mean that a single source of causality – that liberal institutionalists and (especially) neo-realists/realists largely subscribe to – is strongly challenged on the basis that there is not a unified goal all these actors share. Therefore, the formulation and practice of policy is often a far more complex and multi-causal affair (Wittkopf et al., 2008, pp. 17-25; Rosenau, 1980).

Michael Mann provides a neo-Weberian/historical sociological approach in order to argue that there is not one single variant of power that explains why the United States operates the way it does. Mann's IEMP model examines Ideological, Economic, Military and Political Power. It is a useful analytical device in understanding how and why the United States forms and successfully implements its policies on a multidimensional level (Mann, 2003, pp. 1-17). In keeping with Mann's line of argument, for the United States to be successful in Afghanistan it would have needed to have a clear balance between these four areas of social power. Conversely, because it was out of kilter, with an overemphasis on the military aspect, this created an unbalanced situation and made it more difficult for the United States to achieve its objective of having a stable Afghanistan.

Historical sociologists – Mann, Halliday, Tilly, Rosenberg and Skocpol – have all argued the nation-state is a complex and historically contingent entity that more positivistic approaches fail to take into account (Tilly, 1985). Afghanistan is a relevant example of a country that has struggled due to the many differing ethnic and tribal groups, its localised governance structure, and also because of its geopolitical location as a ‘pawn’ in superpower struggles. So whether it is the British Empire in the nineteenth century as a buffer against Tsarist Russia, or the Soviet-Afghan War of the 1980s, or even the War in Afghanistan (2001-2014), Afghanistan’s identity has often been formed as a ‘response’ to outside powers rather than as a coherent and unified whole.

In a different vein to Mann’s IEMP model, Joseph Nye has perceptively argued the importance of ‘soft power’ for the United States to achieve its national interests in a more effective way. The stress that Nye puts on achieving its aims includes diplomatic and cultural means. It thereby attempts to attract and co-opt other actors rather than rely upon economic and military coercion, which can achieve a far more powerful result (Nye, 2004). Also, according to Nye, this is not solely a nation-state doing this, as it can come from other actors – Multinational Corporations, NGOs, grassroots movements, social media activists and even Hollywood films.

Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye are significant liberal institutionalist/neo-liberal scholars who argue that ‘complex interdependence’ – which includes multiple channels of connections between state and non-state actors increasingly on a transnational scale – can lead to a reduction in conflict in the world, especially when major powers start to rely more heavily on international institutions

(Keohane and Nye, 2001). In this way, Keohane and Nye emphasise economic interdependence because the more countries trade with one another the less likely they are to go to war, as it becomes too costly for both sides. Furthermore, the importance of interdependence means the actors in question have a greater level of contact that largely facilitates further exchanges and levels of trust (Keohane and Martin, Summer 1995, pp. 43-46).

This also becomes important for powerful actors as institutions or regimes allow states to act in mutually beneficial ways. In this line of reasoning, there is an incentive for major powers to establish and stick with important institutions and the rules that are embedded within them, as it makes the behaviour of other actors in the system more predictable. This can lead to absolute gains for all states concerned (Keohane and Nye, 2001; Keohane 1998, pp. 82-96).

Even though Keohane and Nye use the term 'asymmetrical relations', between a strong and weak state, this is not explored in enough detail, as it is often the case that one side is clearly more dependent on the other. Structural Marxists/World Systems Theorists take a macro approach to world history and argue that there is an inherent difference in power relations due to the international division of labour, which consists of the rich, highly industrialised 'core' countries, the middle income 'semi-periphery' states that provide raw materials and cheap labour for the core, and the 'periphery' countries that provide similar functions for the core economies, but additionally are deeply impoverished and mostly left out of the global economy (Wallerstein, 2004). This would mean in the case of Afghanistan, it is very much dependent on the United States for military, economic and political support.

In a different capacity, the doyen of structural realism, Kenneth Waltz, makes a similar point arguing that because Keohane and Nye fail to use the terms 'dependence' and 'independence', their analysis excludes the possibility of understanding that if Country A depends more on the relatively independent Country B, it is Country B that is going to be able to 'call the shots'. There is a clear difference in power relations between the two countries in question and in the case of the United States, as Waltz argues, this idea of 'interdependence' is just an ideological camouflage that sustains the United States' influence over another country (Waltz, Summer 2002, pp. 15-16).

There are though flaws in both the structural Marxist and neo-realist approaches to these points. In the case of Afghanistan, it is not entirely clear that it is being exploited in the traditional sense that a Marxist analysis would subscribe to (Teschke, 2008, pp. 163-187). The United States has overthrown a number of governments, such as Iran (1953) and Chile (1973), and Washington has supported regimes for largely economic gains, but this is not exactly the situation regarding Afghanistan. Even though that country has mineral resources it does not compare favourably with other states in the region or especially for that matter in the Persian Gulf. In this way, Afghanistan's geo-political location and (especially) America's perceived security concerns are more convincing explanatory factors.

Waltz's argument is a cogent one but it does not place enough emphasis on the power of agency a smaller country such as Afghanistan can actually muster.<sup>19</sup> For

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<sup>19</sup> Structural Marxism is similar to neo-realism in that it takes an overly reductionist approach to world politics, with an emphasis on stability within a system. It struggles to account for the role of agency and change (Cox, 1981; Wendt, 1987).

example, during the post 9/11 intervention, the Afghan government managed to extract a great deal of support – financially, diplomatically and militarily – and was not especially supportive of US/ISAF objectives. By the same token it continued to engage in corruption and cronyism. This was historically pertinent. Afghan political leaders have shrewdly guaranteed support from major powers whether it was quietly receiving long standing British subsidies during ‘The Great Game’ or during the course of the Cold War managing to extract economic support from both the United States and the Soviet Union (Barfield, 2010).

There is also the relevant factor that a major power, which intervenes militarily and provides long-term guarantees to the central government, can make the situation potentially worse. The case of Afghanistan in the post-9/11 conflict was illustrative of this tendency. The US/ISAF heavily supported the security and economic aspects of the country and ‘guaranteed’ Hamid Karzai’s survival. This meant Karzai’s regime and its ‘patronage networks’ could more fully follow their perceived interests, which eventually became institutionalised (Elias, June 27, 2014).

A critical theory approach to the study of international relations gives a clear understanding of how the state and civil society are independent spheres that often overlap and mutually reinforce prevailing power relations and values. There are two main strands regarding this area of thought: one that the Frankfurt School has had an important impact on through the scholarship of Ken Booth and Andrew Linklater. The other strand is Antonio Gramsci’s work, which has had an influence on Robert W. Cox, Kees van der Pijl, Inderjeet Parmar and Mark Rupert. In this approach, Cox’s clear statement ‘*theory is always for someone and for some purpose*’

(Cox, 1981, p. 128) expresses a point that if certain ideas and values are indicative of social relations and can be transformed given the appropriate socio-economic circumstances then this demonstrates a certain historical contingency to commonly accepted ideas. It therefore greatly challenges the idea that knowledge – especially in the social world – is objective and timeless (Hobden and Wyn Jones, 2005, p. 237; Linklater, 1996, pp. 279-280; Cox, 2008, pp. 84-93).

Cox's statement also illustrates that values and facts are inextricably linked and that there cannot be a complete break between subject and object. Cox makes the point that in the case of neo-realism, this theory helps to serve the prevailing world order and make it seem natural and incontestable (Cox, 1981, pp. 128-132; Cox, 2008, pp. 84-85). It is therefore an inherently conservative theory because it justifies the prevailing norms. On the other hand, as Cox explains, critical theory has an emancipatory framework: *'[it] stands apart from the prevailing order and asks how that order came about. Critical theory, unlike problem-solving theory, does not take institutions and social and power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing.'* (Cox, 1981, p. 129)

It is this issue of calling into question the prevailing global order of social and power relations, which unifies a very disparate body of thought including critical theory, feminism, post-structuralism, cosmopolitanism, post-colonialism, the English School, historical sociology and constructivism. Some important aspects of these various theories challenge a state-centric approach that is heavily involved in replicating the same sort of order that it is comfortable with (Tickner, 1997, pp. 619-620; Booth, 2007; Linklater, 1998; Enloe, 1989; Der Derian and



Shapiro, 1989; Held and McGrew, 2005; Said, Op. cit.; Hurrell, 2007; Mann, 2005; Adler, 2005; Finnemore, 1996). So in the case of the United States, whether it is through military or economic prowess, a number of realist/neo-realist and liberal institutionalist IR theorists, contrary to their claims of neutrality and objective reasoning, also prescribe normative solutions. Whether, as in realist thought, this is urging the United States vis-à-vis Afghanistan to settle for a balancing, regional solution, or in the case of liberal institutionalism/neo-liberalism trying to create and sustain institutions in Kabul that are mutually beneficial for the US and Afghanistan.

Constructivism plays a valuable role in understanding the multifarious dimension of nation-states and their identity, as well as taking a critical approach in terms of understanding that nation-states (like other units of analysis) are entities that are informed by their interaction with others. The international normative structure both shapes and is shaped by the actors within it (Wendt, 1987, pp. 335-370; Barnett, 2011, p. 152; Finnemore, 1996). Identities and interests are inextricably bound into this and the role of the United States in how it forms and is formed by both its domestic structure and the international one is indicative of how it operates vis-à-vis any global issue.

Afghanistan has played an important role for the United States in terms of how Washington sees itself. American political leaders, military officials, aid workers and diplomats have taken into large consideration, *'the collective understanding of its own identity'* (Dodge, 2008, p. 221; Ruggie, 1998, p. 14). The United States' perception was one of supporting Afghanistan in the economic, security and political realms. This thinking connected with US values of individual rights,

democratic government and a free market system. Unfortunately, from the United States' perspective, Afghanistan did not get Washington's 'good intentions' and the levels of violence and corruption, was perhaps evidence of a country that was 'fundamentally backward'.

On the other hand, Afghanistan's militant groups, elements within the governmental apparatus, and a sizable number of Afghans were vehemently against US/ISAF military operations in the country (Dorransoro, May 5, 2011). They saw the US as culturally insensitive, hypocritical, whilst having a very negative and destabilising effect on the country (Ibid.). It was this level of mistrust on both sides that played into a further polarisation of beliefs and meant the US saw itself as 'civilised' and Afghanistan as 'uncivilised', prompting further confrontation and 'difference' (Rowley and Weldes, 2008, p. 206; Little, 2003).

Presidential leadership played an important role in motivating public opinion in terms of how Washington was fighting the 'terrorist' phenomenon in Afghanistan and concomitantly was committed to a more secure Kabul (Obama, March 27, 2009). The Bush and Obama administrations promoted the idea of sacrifice in how and why the United States played an important role in Afghanistan. They reasoned that it advanced US national interests whilst helping Afghanistan in the realms of development, security and governance (Obama, June 22, 2011). As Bush argued:

*'Part of that cause was to liberate the Afghan people from terrorist occupation, and we did so. Next week, the schools reopen in Afghanistan. They will be open to all, and many young girls will go to school for the first time in their young lives. Afghanistan has many difficult challenges ahead, and yet we've averted mass starvation, begun clearing minefields, rebuilding roads, and improving health care. In Kabul, a friendly*

*government is now an essential member of the coalition against terror.'* (Bush, March 11, 2002)

Richard Jackson argues that the Washington's strategic construction and narrative of fighting transnational terrorism in a militarised capacity has become the conventional wisdom in how America should act in the post 9/11 context. This makes any change of direction extremely difficult (although not impossible) because this 'global war on terror' and the overall paradigm of 9/11 is a seemingly natural part of US identity, which in turn, provides a clear motivational tool for a robust course of action. As Jackson elucidates:

*'the war on terror, like the cold war and other militarised interventions before it, has become institutionalised and normalised in policy practices and institutions as well as in American culture; it has in the years since 9/11 become a powerful social structure (a hegemonic discourse) that both expresses and simultaneously co-constructs US interests and identity.'* (Jackson, 2011, p. 392)

In this regard, the Obama administration's difference with its predecessor was largely a question of tactics as opposed to actually questioning the United States' underlying assumptions regarding transnational terrorism and its connection with Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) (Parmar, 2009, pp. 203-204; McCrisken, 2011, pp. 781-801; Lynch, 2011, pp. 335-356). In large part, Obama strongly denounced the 2003 Iraq invasion because of its potential negative impact on US perceived interests in the Middle East and the wider Islamic world. The Obama Presidency also argued the 'real' source of threat regarding transnational terrorist actors emanated from Afghanistan with an emphasis on the

Afghanistan/Pakistan tribal areas (Obama, 2006, pp. 291-292; Johnson and Mason, 2008, p. 42; Hoffman and Jones, August, 2008, pp. 42-51).<sup>20</sup>

The Obama administration expended an enormous amount of resources on Afghanistan, as the US continued to see its role as a defender of regional and global security. Moreover, according to McCricken, Obama's strategy whilst bereft of the Bush Presidency's Manichean rhetoric had commonly shared assumptions. Bush articulated a vision of how the United States – the epitome of 'civilisation' and 'freedom' – faced a major terrorist 'threat' and this had to be dealt with on a global level (McCricken, 2011, p. 786). Nothing about the Obama administration's approach seemed to contradict or challenge this particular narrative and this reproduced certain US policy practices.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration's highly muscular Wilsonianism was powerfully implemented vis-à-vis the Middle East and wider Islamic world. However, this was not solely the case of a conservative Republican administration taking these ideas fully on board. The Clinton and Obama administrations also saw democracy promotion as a useful way of spreading US influence and prestige whenever it was in its capability and interest to do so.

This bipartisan consensus on democracy promotion and free markets has played an important role in the evolution of ideas that puts the United States as the central

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<sup>20</sup> During and after Obama's Presidential election win of November 2008, Washington largely used the neologism Af/Pak, arguing that fighting transnational militancy meant viewing Afghanistan and Pakistan as inextricably linked. However, this term was dropped from the government's lexicon in 2010, and whilst the border regions were still a considerable source of concern for the US, the approach subsequently put Afghanistan and Pakistan on a separate footing, with Afghanistan being given (as from the outset) a more central focus.

and 'benign' actor in international affairs. It is also one that America believes other countries can learn from in their own domestic realm. This is due to the fact that the United States is democratic; pluralistic; believes in limited government; defends inalienable rights; supports majority rule whilst respecting minority rights; has a clear separation of powers; and a widely held consensus in the importance of the market economy (Wittkopf and McCormick, 2004, p. 7).

These characteristics, though, which make up US political institutions and ideas are not something that can be readily transferred to another society. On this premise, a number of scholars critique the general consensus amongst US elites on how to implement its foreign policy in a successful and principled manner. Chomsky (2000),<sup>21</sup> Kolko (2006) and other left-wing critics argue that US policy blatantly behaves in an extremely violent and hypocritical fashion whilst stringently promoting its form of capitalism, making it the world's 'rogue state'. At the same time, more mainstream scholars such as Stephen Walt contend the United States actually constitutes a far greater 'threat' to certain regimes it does not like rather than the other way round (Walt, October 11, 2012). Accordingly, realists and left-wing scholars criticise the double standards of US foreign policy. Moreover, realists condemn Washington for taking actions that are counter-productive in terms of achieving the national interest. These observations have a

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<sup>21</sup> In an email exchange with Professor Noam Chomsky, the author asked why Washington defines certain nation-states as rogue states, whereas others that share the same characteristics are deemed allies. Chomsky's response: *'The term "rogue states" has less to do with policy than unwillingness to bow to US demands. The US and Israel, are extreme cases of state sponsorship of terrorism, and have of course acquired WMD's. Both have horrible human rights records. And it's easy to continue. Noam Chomsky.'* N, A, Chomsky, 2009. ([Chomsky@mit.edu](mailto:Chomsky@mit.edu)) Sent *US foreign policy and rogue states*. [Email] Message to A, L, Teitler ([anthonyteitler@hotmail.com](mailto:anthonyteitler@hotmail.com)) Thursday, June 25, 2009. 19:11:28 -0400

clear element of historical validity but they are often wrongly premised on the idea of an omnipotent US. In another regard, even neo-realists (including Walt) have internalised the idea that US power if used properly is a positive thing.

In the context of Afghanistan, the Bush and Obama administrations continually articulated how a 'benign' US fought a terrorist threat and that this threat had major security implications for Afghanistan, the region and the world at large. However, the idea of any actor that took up arms against the US in Afghanistan as being an insurgent and connected to the Taliban, or especially for that matter Al-Qaeda was analytically problematic. Atran perceptively argued that the case of various Pashtun tribes, in the south and east of the country, taking up arms against external powers did not necessarily mean an inherent linkage with the neo-fundamentalist Quetta Shura Taliban. In this way, local Afghans have generally insisted on living in an independent way whilst following their norms, rules and rituals (Atran, 2010, pp. 241-265). Indeed, the conflict in Afghanistan was of a rather fluid nature due to actors on the ground constantly adapting their goals and affiliations.

This complexity reinforces the point of how the United States' often binary thinking misunderstood the Afghan environment. At the same time, the United States' interpretation of its interests and 'who' it identified as an 'ally' or 'enemy' was relevant in understanding how and why Washington's policy has evolved vis-à-vis Afghanistan in the latter stages of the Cold War, and especially in the 2001-2014 conflict. The next chapter examines how constructivism is pertinent to this study, both as an overarching theoretical framework and in expounding upon US policy towards Afghanistan.

### Constructing World Politics and US Foreign Policy

*'Meaning is socially, historically, and rhetorically constructed.'*

Clifford Geertz, *Journal of Advanced Composition*, 1991

Constructivism elucidates on the relevance of social meaning to the way in which actors understand who they are and what they want. As this study demonstrates, the United States' discursive formation of the Afghan 'freedom fighters' during the Cold War or 'terrorists' in the 9/11 context has provided the United States with a reaffirmation of its identity and interest as a 'benevolent' actor supporting the independence of Afghanistan. In this chapter, the author will argue for the utility of constructivism in explaining the thesis case study and other relevant cases in world politics. There is pride of place given to the discursive aspect of constructivism, as this is the approach that senior US policymakers use to articulate and construct a reality that deems certain social practices as legitimate. In connection with this, the chapter will further argue how the United States' historically constructed sense of self as an exceptional country that helps other countries is an important factor in representing and justifying US foreign policy. Finally, the chapter reemphasises the relevance of constructivism as a theoretical framework for this study.

The discursive element is central to how we understand the world. This is due to our relation to the world, self and nature as never being immediate but mediated (relational), by the very fact that we are responsive beings with rational capacities,

who relate to the material of our existence and experience in a symbolic manner (through ideas and representations). We can therefore understand why ideas are not just concepts placed on top of the meaning of material things but often shape and constitute the meaning of material factors as such. Ideas are our meaning-bestowing/meaning-creating responses to the material content of the world. Our ideas are responses to our own material content (as beings in the world), the relation between material factors and ideas is therefore a dynamic and fluid one.

In this study, it is argued that senior US policymakers make use of a constructed political discourse, which is heavily laden with assumptions, historical analogies, and belief systems, in order to achieve political goals (Jackson, 2005, p. 2). Language is intertwined with power and interest, as it is the discursive condition that constitutes what becomes taken for granted (Wendt, 1999, pp. 135-136). As for example Richard Jackson states, there is the important dialectical element to the constitution of the 'war on terror', which through the use of language and practices helped reify a discursive construction:

*'These two elements – the languages and practices of the war on terror – are interdependent and co-constitutive to the extent that language and narrative gives meaning to, and therefore 'makes possible', the material practices. For example, the articulation of the 9/11 attacks as an 'act of war' and the necessity to prevent its recurrence provides the logic and rationale for – and thus makes possible – the launching an actual war against terrorists. Language and practice thus shape each other in an ongoing dialectical manner and together form or constitute the 'war on terror' discourse'. (Jackson, 2011, p. 393)*



Constructivism states that there is an open-ended and contingent aspect to the social world. There are certain 'brute physical facts' that include rocks, minerals, trees, evolution, oceans and atoms, which exist whether we believe in them or not (Searle, 1995, pp. 1-2). However, what defines oneself in the social context is how we relate to one another and collectively give meaning to those objects around us (Blumer, 1969, p.2; Mead, 1982). It is because of human agreement, practices and institutions that 'social facts' exist (Searle, 1995, Op. cit.; Durkheim, 1982, pp. 50-60, Flockhart, 2011, p. 83). Social facts such as money, terrorism, marriage, refugees and sovereignty are taken for granted and only exist as long as this agreement remains in place (Barnett, 2011, pp. 155-156).

As an approach, constructivism is operative in many fields of the social sciences and humanities and covers a whole range of social, political and ethical issues, as well as questions and enquiries. It is, therefore, not solely an international relations theory. Rather it is an ontology, i.e. a social theory that conceptualises the relationship between agency and structure, the dialectical aspect of ideas and material factors, and examines what motivates state and non-state actors as they operate within an international normative structure (Adler, 1997, p. 323; Barnett, 2011, p. 152; Onuf, 1989, p. 1; Klotz and Lynch, 2007; Slaughter, 2011). In this regard, it is the dominant paradigmatic alternative to a rationalistic approach that undergirds (neo-) realism and liberal institutionalism.

A rationalistic/rational choice method is a way of formally modelling how actors behave in a social and economic sphere. This methodologically deductive approach is based on a micro-economic one in which an actor has fixed

preferences that seeks to maximise gains.<sup>22</sup> This assumes that an actor can always know what their hierarchy of preferences are and that there is an optimal choice. The actor in question undertakes a relevant cost/benefit analysis before taking a decision.

Whilst this approach informs (neo-) realism and liberal institutionalism in IR theory, one crucial difference between these two theories is the relative gain versus absolute gain dichotomy. Neo-realists argue that within an anarchical international system, a nation-state operates through the idea of relative gains, which means that for every interaction, a state has to be concerned with how much it benefits compared to the other country (Waltz, 1979; Stein, 2008, pp. 209-210). In contrast, liberal institutionalists argue that there are (or at least can be) absolute gains, so that trading with one another or creating certain institutions that promote a pooling of resources benefits both sides (Keohane, 1995, pp. 63-87).

Constructivism also examines the relationship between agency and structure. However, contrary to an individualist, utility maximisation ontology, constructivism demonstrates that an actor is always part of a historical process and is embedded within a social context. How an actor learns and adapts is premised on its interactions with others. This socially ontological approach is more comprehensive in understanding processes and practices because it

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<sup>22</sup> This actor could be an individual, a firm or a nation-state. The premise of this approach is one of an individualist ontology, in that the basic unit of analysis is the individual entity. It is asocial and believes that individuals (or any other entity) have a fixed and pre-existing set of preferences coming into any social context.

emphasises the importance of the historical, cultural, socio-economic factors and how actors impact on one another. It also stresses that reflective actors can in the right circumstances change the structure.

A constructivist approach maintains that the environment and what we learn in an intersubjective way is essential to understanding how the world fits together. Indeed, practitioners interpret and discover what the relevant historical and socio-political context is, and how it can effectively respond to its perceived strategic challenges. Via the discursive construction of the 'national interest' this helps orient policymakers in the direction of 'common sense' policy. Jutta Weldes exemplifies on the relevance and construction of *social meaning* for state officials in the pursuit of its foreign policy goals:

*'In contrast to the realist conception of the national interest as an objective category, I contend that national interests are social constructions created as meaningful objects out of the intersubjective and culturally established meanings within which the world, particularly the international system and the place of the state in it, is understood. The categories of common sense for foreign policy, the intersubjective and culturally established meanings on the basis of which state officials make decisions and act, are provided by the security imaginaries of states. A security imaginary is, quite simply, a structure of well-established meanings and social relations out of which representations of the world of international relations are created.'* (Weldes, 1999, p. 10)

The 'national interest' is important in understanding the context and motivation of state action. It provides an important guideline on the formulation of policy and whether a government is successful in achieving a perceived interest. The

strategic interpretation of the national interest is inextricably bound up with shared ideas and social relations. In line with this, the United States, France and Great Britain all have a large nuclear arsenal and amongst these nation-states, this is deemed acceptable. In contrast, Iran does not currently possess a sole nuclear weapon, but the possibility of it eventually obtaining one is something that seriously concentrates the minds in Washington, Paris and London, including the caveat from various US administrations that 'all options remain on the table'. Why this discrepancy? After all, a nuclear weapon is a nuclear weapon. It can potentially cause enormous, widespread environmental damage and human suffering.

Indeed nuclear weapons are a constant reminder of the capacity for total destruction. On the other hand, it can arguably have the benefit of deterring other actors/nation-states from military adventurism, thus creating more security for a country and the overall international system (Waltz, July/August, 2012). The idea of who has a nuclear weapon, what it can be used for and perhaps most importantly whether this other actor is an ally, competitor or nemesis, is crucial in understanding (and often reinforcing) a relationship. It is the perception of threat that an actor responds to (Wendt, 1995 and 1999; Hurd, 2008, pp. 298-316; Lebow, 2008; Hay, 2002, p. 25).

This intersubjective element holds at a micro as well as at a macro level, from interpersonal relations to the relations between states or other actors (international organisations, non-governmental organisations, transnational actors). Relationality does not, of course, guarantee recognition and understanding (more often than not the opposite is true). One may relate to others

through bonds of friendship but equally through competition, antagonism or hostile action (Wendt, 1999, pp. 246-312; Wight, 2005).

Social structures are embedded in shared understandings, knowledge and expectations about a particular issue (Wendt, 1995, p. 73). This helps feed into how an actor is likely respond to a certain situation and define whether a relationship is more conflictual or cooperative. This can produce a level of stability and continuity as both sides' reactions are premised on its interaction and shared understanding. However, there is the possibility for change as the relevant actor in question can adjust its own underlying assumptions and act differently, which in turn impacts on the structure (Wendt, 1995; Giddens, Op. cit.).

### *Washington, Moscow and Global Change*

The Reagan Presidency exemplified American exceptionalism and among its supporters this fed into a sense of US triumphalism in the aftermath of the Cold War. However, during the latter stages of the Cold War period, the Soviet Union's own evolution in its strategic thinking and practices led to a major change in the international social structure. Mikhail Gorbachev's 'New Thinking' and how this lead to the (inadvertent) fall of the Soviet Union is a clear example of constructivist theory in its elucidation of how change is possible in world politics. This section will therefore demonstrate how Washington and (especially) Moscow managed to end the Cold War in a peaceful way.

During the 1980s, Ronald Reagan constantly argued America should spread freedom on the domestic and international levels. Moreover, the United States was

a 'beacon of hope' for the world. In this way, Reagan was adamant that exceptionalism should play a 'clear role' in what guided US actions. The President made abundant use of terms such as 'freedom' to argue that the US played a key role in shaping a 'greater world order'. Using the term 'evil empire' to describe the Soviet Union was an example of clear binary thinking. Reagan strongly made the case that the United States and its democratic allies, including the United Kingdom, needed to be robust in fighting tyranny orchestrated primarily from Moscow. In this way, the United States would take on the 'crusade for freedom' (Reagan, March 8, 1983; Reagan, June 8, 1982).

Reagan's Manichean and biblically inspired language emphasised how Washington ought to take a clear and firm stance against the Soviet Union. It meant that the United States backed and provided covert and overt aid to some very violent, unsavoury, (largely) anti-communist movements in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Cambodia, Mozambique, Afghanistan and Angola. For supporters of this policy, though, it provided the possibility to 'roll back' the Evil Empire and permitted the United States to focus its energies upon the main battleground for promoting freedom and democratic institutions, which was in Central and Eastern Europe. As Henry Nau, who served on the Reagan administration's National Security Council explained: *'here's what Reagan told us on the Central American thing. "I want to push back wherever Moscow is seeking through proxies to change the balance of forces on the ground." So my guess is he thought about it very much the same way in Afghanistan. In other words "I just want to push back." In fact he even said to us very clearly, "I don't make any case for these fellas who are running the countries we support like El Salvador, but I don't want any saliva test, in terms*

*of their approach to human rights because they're helping us push back 'on the ground' Soviet proxies, while we concentrate on the main battle for freedom, which is in Europe.'"<sup>23</sup>*

In conjunction, the Reagan administration subscribed to an important tenet that the United States would through its strength help create conditions for peace. At the same time, though, Reagan gave steadfast support to the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) (Reagan, March 23, 1983; Fischer, 1997, pp. 77-78; Collins, 2007, pp. 199-204). This was illustrative of his personal belief that global leaders needed to stop relying on Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) – a realist premise – that stated the only thing preventing the two world superpowers from using nuclear weapons was the threat the other side could retaliate in kind.<sup>24</sup>

There was a significant shift in perceptions and practices from both Washington and Moscow after Mikhail Gorbachev came into power on March 11, 1985. Accordingly, President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev rapidly developed a relationship that engendered a large amount of trust and mutual reciprocity, which created the space for a completely new chapter in world history (Reagan and Gorbachev, May 29, 1988; Wilentz, 2008, p. 246; Head, 2008, pp. 81-99; Fischer, 2010, pp. 286-288; Mann, 2009, p. 346; Leffler, 2007, p. 341; Morgan, 2016, pp. 286-314).

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<sup>23</sup> Professor Henry Nau was on President Reagan's National Security Council (NSC) as a senior staff member responsible for international economic affairs (1981-1983). This quote comes from the author's interview with Nau at his George Washington University office on April 15, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> The subsequent Able Archer incident of November 1983 only gave credence to Reagan's belief that MAD was an outdated and dangerous relic of past thinking (Leffler, 2007, p. 354; Reagan, October 10, 1983). This was another shared idea that brought Reagan and Gorbachev together later on (Fischer, 2010, p. 277).

The Gorbachev regime, together with the Soviet Union's economic stagnation and the influence of social movements, all served as important factors in the peaceful ending of the Cold War (Leffler, 2007, p. 448 and pp. 451-467). It is a major illustration of how a reflective and self-critical approach can change a fundamental structure and situation without the need to resort to war or increase its power vis-à-vis other actors within the international system. Gorbachev's administration was cognisant of its own role in upholding and maintaining a certain structure through sustained practices and took the courageous decision to re-evaluate its relationship with the United States (Lebow, 1994, p. 276; Wendt, 1995, p. 80).<sup>25</sup> At the same time, as the former leading British diplomat Sir Christopher Mallaby argued the Foreign Office was aware of the changes taking place within the Kremlin, which was pressed upon and accepted by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Indeed, as Mallaby stated the British position saw the ascendancy of Mikhail Gorbachev as a clear possibility for improved relations between the West and the Soviet Union: *'And then you get Gorbachev, the experimenter, coming along, and experimenting a bit, and then it unravels. Gorbachev before he was party leader was visibly different. That's why Margaret Thatcher cultivated him – because at the Foreign Office, we read his speeches with great care – and it was quite clear from Gorbachev's speeches that he was a bit different... He wasn't like many Soviet people I've known before who held the belief that the only people who could use Marks and*

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<sup>25</sup> This is not to suggest that Gorbachev believed in the end of the Communist Party's hold on power. It is only the case that certain changes in thinking and a commitment to some liberalisation and openness had major unintended consequences leading to the subsequent dissolution and collapse of the Soviet Union. A need to reform and avoid a major tragedy such as Chernobyl provided the original incentive but only to a limited extent. It was this 'half-way house' that ultimately led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and an undermining of Gorbachev's own authority (Judt, 2010; Mann, 2009, pp. 250-251).



*Spencer were Members of the House of Lords. That was what Pravda said and I've seen Soviet groups, I've been there, briefing them in London, and I've heard the KGB leader of the group telling them: "this is a shop (we took them to Marks and Spencer), this is a shop, which is only available to the House of Lords." He [Mikhail Gorbachev] didn't believe that, he knew that it was real. And he wanted to do better.'*<sup>26</sup>

A restructuring of the political and economic system 'Perestroika' to meet the perceived needs of the Soviet people and the idea of a more open and transparent system 'Glasnost' were two key components in changing the trajectory of the Soviet Union. There was a great deal of resistance from those within the Communist Party, the military high command and leaders of its satellite states. Concomitantly, the Department of Defense, the CIA and the National Security Council largely believed the Soviet Union was a monolithic, unchanging and irredeemable 'foe'. They therefore saw these Soviet changes as cosmetic (Gates, November 24, 1987; Mann, 2009; Bush and Scowcroft, 1998, p. 4 and 13; Morgan, 2016, pp. 304-306).

A change in the Gorbachev administration's thinking was partially attributable to an increased awareness of the information revolution and the impact this was having on global politics and societies. The possibility of being able to instantaneously transfer information and financial transactions across the globe was starting to have serious implications for issues of national sovereignty. This was leading to increasing economic interdependence, especially amongst the

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<sup>26</sup> Author's interview with Sir Christopher Mallaby on March 24, 2014.

developed, capitalist economies in North America, Western Europe and East Asia (Mann, 2009, pp. 241-244; Keohane and Nye, 2001; McGrew, 2011, pp. 14-33).

Gorbachev believed in the necessity of evolutionary, incremental change and it was this guiding idea that helped determine the steps needed. One thing deemed essential to this new approach was the relevance of a self-critical mind-set. This involved the Soviet leadership questioning every prior assumption that determined Soviet identity and ideology on the domestic and international front. A process and change of social reality was in operation. As Gorbachev stated:

*'Above all, perestroika would have been simply impossible if there had not been a profound and critical re-examination not only of the problems confronting our country but a rethinking of all realities – both national and international.'* (Gorbachev, 2000, p. 58)

A major shift in Soviet domestic priorities meant a change in its foreign policy. The change of emphasis led the leadership under Gorbachev and his Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze to substantive agreements with the Reagan administration on nuclear disarmament and ending the arms race. The Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) co-drafted by Shevardnadze and Secretary of State George Shultz, and signed by Gorbachev and Reagan on December 8, 1987, in Washington D.C. came into force on June 1, 1988. This was a breakthrough as it allowed Gorbachev and Reagan to translate a willingness to reduce tensions in the European context into something more concrete. For General Secretary Gorbachev, this meant domestic reforms could be pursued with greater vigour. Tony Judt explains:

*'Seen from Washington, Gorbachev's concessions on arms naturally appeared as a victory for Reagan – and thus, in the zero-sum calculus of Cold War strategists a defeat for Moscow. But for Gorbachev, whose priorities were domestic, securing a more stable international environment was a victory in itself. It bought him time and support for his reforms at home.'* (Judt, 2010, pp. 600-601)

This change in domestic thinking and practice led to a subsequent modification in the norms and rules of how the Soviet Union operated within the global system, leading unexpectedly to its imminent demise (Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1994, p. 216). Levels of trust between both sides increased exponentially with Reagan and Gorbachev taking the initiative and starting to perceive each other in a different light, thereby contributing to an ending of what had seemed a permanent feature of international political life (Hunt, 2007, pp. 257-260; Morgan, 2016, p. 316; Mann, 2009, Op. cit.; Leffler, 2007, pp. 448-450). In this regard, Reagan's words at the Brandenburg Gate on June 12, 1987, were prescient:

*'As I looked out a moment ago from the Reichstag, that embodiment of German unity, I noticed words crudely spray-painted upon the wall, perhaps by a young Berliner, "This wall will fall. Beliefs become reality." Yes, across Europe, this wall will fall. For it cannot withstand faith, it cannot withstand truth. The wall cannot withstand freedom.'* (Reagan, June 12, 1987)

(Neo-) realists argue that due to the anarchical aspect of the international system, nation-states need to act according to the notion of self-help. Therefore, a political leader's main responsibility is to follow the objectively understood national interest and to achieve relative gains vis-à-vis other actors. The relevance of what domestic political regime is in place and how this interacts with the international

structure is largely unimportant because this structure is the crucial determinant for a unified nation-state's behaviour. According to neo-realists, the difference between various political leaders (or other relevant actors) in the Soviet Union and how they thought and behaved was largely speaking irrelevant, as it is always the logic of anarchy and an objectively understood threat capability that underpins international relations. As Wendt expounds:

*'What is so important about the Gorbachev regime is that it had the courage to see how the Soviets' own practices sustained the Cold War, and to undertake a reassessment of Western intentions. This is exactly what a constructivist would do, but not a neorealist, who would eschew attention to such social factors as naïve and as mere superstructure. Indeed what is so striking about neorealism is its total neglect of the explanatory role of state practice. It does not seem to matter what states do; Brezhnev, Gorbachev, Zhirinovsky, what difference does it make? The logic of anarchy will always bring us back to square one.'* (Wendt, 1995, p. 80)

Structural realism – and realism in general – recommends *realpolitik* practice, which often therefore becomes an important part of the reason why states do not trust one another (Ibid.). It is the aspect of choice within a social structure that allows a constructivist approach to provide a clearer explanation of how change (and continuity) happens. Indeed, the aspect of shared knowledge, expectations and practices meant the Gorbachev administration directly translated its desire for domestic reform to a new relationship with the United States.

*The Construction of the International Structure*

Waltz examined inter-state relations through the crucial lens of the international structure. However, in order to understand the Cold War and its developments, he used an action-reaction process approach in emphasising how and why the Cold War became institutionalised, thereby illustrating the importance of agency and choice that nation-states have in creating a certain structure. According to Waltz, the action-reaction process meant that the actions and reactions of the United States and the Soviet Union created a bipolar world (Waltz, 1979, p. 171). The collectively shared ideas and actions of Washington and Moscow had about one another helped *construct* this international structure. There was nothing inevitable about it (Leffler, 2007).

In this way, Waltz posited, the action of the communist guerrillas led to the Truman Doctrine, which led to Stalin's increasing grip of East European states, leading to the Marshall plan and the establishment of NATO. A variety of choices and practices throughout the Cold War meant a certain trajectory for the establishment and reestablishment of a particular international structure (Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1994, p. 231).

George Kennan's prescient 'long telegram' emphasised General Secretary Joseph Stalin's objective to obtain and maintain an iron grip on East European satellite states in order to bolster his domestic legitimacy. This was an initial argument in why a bipolar system emerged (Kennan, February 22, 1946). In this line of reasoning, a complete disregard of the norms and rules of sovereignty was fundamental to how Stalin's regime emphasised its approach towards actors within its direct sphere of influence. This had a clear impact on international politics – and a lack of Western response to this constituted norm – indirectly

helped turn an expansionist Soviet Union into an Empire (Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1994, p. 228).<sup>27</sup>

The United States rested its authority and legitimacy on its role as a 'benevolent' leading actor. It would be the security guarantor of Western Europe and thereby help maintain a liberal, democratic and capitalistic order. As far as Washington was concerned, an era of containment came to the fore. A separate normative question of whether US influence was a positive one is somewhat superseded by the idea of a 'common enemy' that wanted to take away 'western style' freedoms. It is this perception that helped allow Washington play a leading role in the formation and development of Western Europe and its institutions in the post-Second World War context.

The relevance of this relates to how the national interest is not an objective, ahistorical phenomenon (Clark, 2012, p. 190). It is a multitude of different actors attempting to gain some sort of influence in the process and outcome. Even so, the President and executive branch has certain institutional and informational advantages in the making of US foreign policy. This increased in the post-Second World War context with Congressional approval of the National Security Act of 1947 in which there was a coordination of foreign and defence policies with the creation of the National Security Council (NSC), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Department of Defence (DoD). The Truman administration and its

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<sup>27</sup> A whole host of distinguished orthodox, revisionist and post-revisionist/synthesis historians have assigned a varying amount of culpability – to Moscow and/or Washington – regarding how and why the Cold War emerged. The author's point in this passage is solely to make the case that an element of contingency and choice – on both sides – led to the start of the Cold War.

construct of Washington as 'leader of the free world' gave a clear definitional role to US foreign policy (Truman, March 12, 1947; Barrett, 1997, p. 59; Leffler, 2007, pp. 62-64; Fousek, 2000). However, even here, the ebbs and flows of historical context mean that other actors, whether they are public opinion, interest groups, the mass media, bureaucratic politics, Congress and key individuals in an administration are going to have a larger or smaller voice depending on the context. This interplay between the different actors has to be understood within an intertwined domestic and international environment.

### *Logic of Consequences and Logic of Appropriateness*

An important difference between these two major paradigms – rationalism and constructivism – relates to the 'logic of consequences' and the 'logic of appropriateness'. The logic of consequences is premised on the idea that the various actors within the international system calculate the cost/benefit of taking a certain action and have the impression that others are doing the same. On the other hand, the logic of appropriateness refers to the importance of norms and rules regarding the decision that an agent takes in a given situation. In turn, this decision has a further impact on the affirmation of identity because the agent perceives its choice as one that is in line with how it sees itself, and therefore what is deemed appropriate becomes an important factor (Risse, 2000, p.4; March and Olson, 1989). As Martha Finnemore elucidates:

*"To say that action may follow a "logic of appropriateness" is not to say it is irrational or stupid. Rules, norms and routines may be followed for carefully considered reasons. They may embody subtle lessons culled from accumulated experience.*

*Furthermore, determining which rules and norms apply in different situations involves sophisticated reasoning processes. It is however, reasoning of a different type than that involved in consequentialist actions, for it involves reasoning by analogy and metaphor rather than reasoning about means and ends. Actors may ask themselves, "What kind of situation is this?" and "What am I supposed to do now?" rather than, "How do I get what I want?" (Finnemore, 1996, p. 29)*

An illustration of this is the Westphalian notion of sovereignty within the inter-state system, which has become particularly sacrosanct in the post-Second World War context. One of the major reasons for so much civilian protest regarding the 2003 invasion of Iraq was the idea of an external power directly occupying another country. It is the case that the United States has had a historical tendency to intervene in other countries (Leffler, 2011, pp. 33-44). However, amongst other factors, the 'occupation' aspect and a sense of instigating a 'war against Islam' especially riled public opinion in the wider Middle East and further afield (Pew Research Global Attitudes Report, March 14, 2007).

Barnett (2011, p. 155) perceptively argues that the logic of consequences and logic of appropriateness are not always mutually exclusive (Flockhart, 2011, p. 86; Barkin, 2010). They can sometimes work in unison, as the example of the run up to the 2003 Iraq War makes clear. If a course of action is 'illegitimate' then it would most likely not be supported and in turn this makes it more costly for the actor involved. Thus, the United States ended up having to go into Iraq with the support of only a few allies and this made the whole enterprise far more costly for Washington in terms of reputation and finances (Mann, 2004; Stiglitz and Bilmes, 2008; Woodward, 2004).



In contrast, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was widely condemned as illegitimate. George H W Bush's administration managed to get the backing of the United Nations Security Council against Iraq. In turn, this explicitly multilateral approach paid off handsomely as Japan, Germany, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States financially contributed to the costs of the war. A number of Arab and Western countries were involved with military and logistical support making the intervention an overall success for the US. This was in terms of its reputation as a 'responsible', rule following international actor, and one that concomitantly helped achieve its economic interest due to a more stable Middle East. Framing the war as one of American leadership and courage played an important role in motivating Congress and US public opinion. As Bush opined:

*'And today, in a rapidly changing world, American leadership is indispensable. Americans know that leadership brings burdens and sacrifices. But we also know why the hopes of humanity turn to us. We are Americans; we have a unique responsibility to do the hard work of freedom. And when we do, freedom works.'*

*The conviction and courage we see in the Persian Gulf today is simply the American character in action.'* (George H W Bush, January 29, 1991)

### *The Question of US Exceptionalism*

As the statement of George H W Bush demonstrates, Washington perceives itself as an exceptional nation and this identity has been a regular feature in the political rhetoric of American foreign policy from the origins of the republic to the present time (Wood, 2011, p. 3; Madsen, 1998, p. 1; McCrisken, 2003, pp. 1-19; Jones, USA

Today/Gallup, December 10 to 12, 2010).<sup>28</sup> This exceptionalist self-image – especially held by the political elite – is one in which internationally promoting ideals of freedom, democracy, the market economy and individual rights are all relevant in achieving US strategic, economic and political objectives. However, any disconnect between the United States’ self-identified ‘universal’ values and the reality on the ground does not invalidate US exceptionalism. Instead it demonstrates the executive branch is not living up to the ideals that the United States believes it historically represents. In view of this, why is this *intersubjective notion* of exceptionalism relevant and how does it make possible a certain course of action?

A major criticism of such a perception is how the US often does not manage to live up to its principles and on numerous occasions has been transparently Janus-faced when operating in the outside world. The United States has intervened in the internal politics of dozens of countries to achieve its perceived national interests by supporting repressive regimes. So whether this was through covert interventions in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Brazil (1964), Zaire (1965), Chile (1973) and Nicaragua (1981-1987), or through more direct involvement in the Philippines (1899-1902), Vietnam (1965-1973) and early twenty-first century Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has pursued a seemingly ruthless foreign

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<sup>28</sup> Please click on the ‘survey methods’ link of this Gallup website page to see the methodological approach and limitations.

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/145358/americans-exceptional-doubt-obama.aspx>

The poll shows that 80% of Americans said ‘yes’ to the question ‘*Because of the United States’ history and its Constitution, do you think the U.S. has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world, or don’t you think so?*’

policy in order to achieve its economic and strategic interests (Walt, 2005; Stokes, 2005; Blum, 2000; Johnson, 2004; Kinzer, 2006; Kolko, 2006).

There are differences between the various cases cited above and it is not always the case that US interventions have a negative one for local people, as the example of the Second World War in Europe attests (Judt, 2010). Nonetheless, Washington often seems to follow a 'realpolitik' approach. Consequently when US political leaders espouse 'exceptionalism', this is often seen as one of rank hypocrisy and arrogance (Walt, 2005; Blum, 2000; Kolko, 2006; Chomsky, 2003).

On the domestic front, the United States emphasises the 'American Dream'. This nationally held ethos strongly promotes the ideals of freedom, opportunity, rights and democracy. According to this rationale, any citizen can obtain upward social mobility through hard work. It is a beguiling and seductive idea. Indeed, there has been a positive historical correlation between social mobility in US society compared to European societies, which have been traditionally far more class bound.<sup>29</sup> Despite this meritocratic ideal, there are those who clearly have not shared in the American Dream. In recent times, levels of prison incarceration, dwindling educational standards, ever weakening infrastructure and economic inequality have led to the increasing belief that the few rather than the many can achieve this American Dream. Moreover, in spite of a more formal class structure existing in Europe, there is now ostensibly more opportunity for a large number

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<sup>29</sup> These historical comparisons do not take into enough consideration gender, labour, LGBT, or race relations. For instance, the abhorrent treatment of African-Americans in US history (and also by European Empires) illustrates the contradictory practices flowing from Enlightenment principles, in which one man's freedom could (quite literally) be another person's slavery.

of Europeans in socio-economic advancement (Stiglitz, 2010; Isaacs, February, 2008, pp. 37-46).

On the other hand, as Seymour Lipset reasons there is a clear basis for US exceptionalism. According to Lipset, exceptionalism is a 'double edged sword', as the beliefs Americans hold simultaneously contribute to both constructive and malignant social outcomes. It is part of this complexity that makes America unique. Indeed, as Lipset strongly argues, on the positive side the United States is world leading on a number of levels: individualism, populism, cultural diversity, equality of opportunity and economic prosperity (Lipset, 1996).

John Ruggie and John Ikenberry both argue for a liberal multilateralism that also connects with the idea of US exceptionalism. According to these authors, the United States has led the post-1945 global order, which promotes and increases American leadership whilst strengthening international organisations and instigating a more interdependent world (Ruggie, 1997; Ikenberry, 2001). As Ruggie contends, the idea of the United States as a diverse and liberal polity feeds heavily into why US foreign policy takes a rather more multilateral path (Ruggie, Op. cit.).

### *Washington's Historically Grounded Belief in US Exceptionalism*

In this thesis, US exceptionalism is based on Washington's *belief* that it is the world's benign actor. This is often necessarily subjective and has certain normative assumptions, with the United States' idea of spreading its values and interests as beneficial for all parties concerned. At the same time, in terms of a

comparative approach, this exceptionalist mind-set is flawed. So for instance, it is the case that the United States has a prosperous and developed economy but this would not exactly differentiate it from Germany. US per capita income is very high but not as high as that of Norway, Lichtenstein or Qatar. Of course, these are small countries. On the other hand, Japan is not and here the comparison in standards of living shows the United States is by no means exceptional in purely economic terms.

The United States has a rich cultural history that involves a strong musical, theatrical and cinematic lineage over the twentieth century, as does Italy, Great Britain and France (and a whole host of other countries across the globe). America has been constantly innovative in a number of sectors and it is world leading in the information technology, military and service-oriented industries. However, even this would not in and of itself make the US exceptional. Why then is there a widespread belief in American exceptionalism?

US political leaders, media outlets, opinion formers, and educators all loudly proclaim the unique and benign aspect of the United States. This has fed heavily into American social life with the daily rituals helping reinforce this sense of nationalism. This aspect of exceptionalism is not an uncontested idea but Americans largely subscribe to the belief that the US is a 'source of light for the world', which can spread progress, freedom, a market economy, and democracy (NSC-68, April 14, 1950; McCrisken, 2003; Lieven, 2004; Obama, May, 2010). Therefore, the United States' mission is to establish its values internationally and

concomitantly achieve its perceived interests.<sup>30</sup> In this way, perhaps it is only 'natural' that the world's most powerful country should also be the most benevolent. Godfrey Hodgson expounds upon this widespread belief in American exceptionalism and universalism:

*'It is more accurately called American Exceptionalism. The core of that belief is the idea that the United States is not just the richest and most powerful of the world's more than two hundred states but is also politically and morally exceptional. Exceptionalists minimize the contributions of other nations and cultures to the rule of law and to the evolution of political democracy. Especially since Woodrow Wilson, exceptionalists have proclaimed that the United States has a destiny and a duty to expand its power and the influence of its institutions and its beliefs until they dominate the world.'* (Hodgson, 2009, p. 10)

There has traditionally been a variety of dichotomous reasoning in how the 'exceptional' United States has approached and acted in the world. For example, a binary distinction is often made between isolationism and internationalism. In this way, isolationism refers to how the United States was isolationist at least until the 1898 Spanish-American war. Indeed, from this perspective, only Pearl Harbour onwards has the United States become truly global and internationalist in its approach.

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<sup>30</sup> The Obama administration's Asian 'pivot' is illustrative of a concerted attempt to shape this particular region in political, economic, and humanitarian terms so that, when it develops into the world's most prosperous place, it is coherent with US interests. Washington attempts to export its exceptional values to the region that many believe will define the history of the twenty-first century.

US isolationism refers to America's potential to play a substantial role on its continent after its birth as a republic, or later on globally, but choosing not to pursue this course of action. This meant economic protectionism, building up of its own security and avoiding entanglements in Europe or other parts of the world. There is an element of truth to the claim the United States has been more 'isolationist' in certain parts of its history. However, it should be noted that America was founded in the maelstrom of international developments that it could not ignore. Indeed, the United States has throughout its history had to work out its domestic arrangements within an intertwined international context.

In response to the early republic's developments, therefore, the United States has had an internationalist impulse, and has strived for a preeminent role. As early as the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, America saw certain parts of the world as rightfully under its leadership. Therefore, Monroe's administration argued that the various European empires had to respect the 'territorial sovereignty' and 'independence' of Latin American countries. Direct European interference in any of these countries would have meant a 'declaration of war' (Monroe, December 2, 1823).<sup>31</sup>

An isolationist approach stems from an exemplar identity in which the United States would remain an exceptional country providing it did not become embroiled in foreign entanglements and alliances. Indeed, as a new world country it would be a different kind of actor, one free from the trappings of balance of power politics that had plagued the various European powers and with its

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<sup>31</sup> It was though initially the British Navy that could enforce this Doctrine (Hobsbawm, 1977, p. 132).

institutions and progress it would provide a model for the rest of the world (Ruggie, 1997, p. 89; Washington, September 19, 1776).<sup>32</sup>

Two of the major Founding Fathers, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson had an ambiguous legacy regarding whether they supported a more internationalist or isolationist approach.<sup>33</sup> Washington saw the necessity of the United States establishing and maintaining commercial relations with European powers, but not to the extent that it meant compromising America's new found independence. The first President also backed the Jay Treaty (1794), which stipulated a close relationship between the United States and Great Britain. In this regard, Alexander Hamilton and George Washington had a shared belief in a strong and dynamic United States. This meant the United States would need to have resilient domestic institutions and a strong Navy. The aspect of power and self-interest in international affairs meant America could not remain entirely aloof, but needed to build itself up in order to achieve a major standing in the world and thereby achieve national greatness (Hunt, 1987, p. 24; LaFeber, 2008, pp. 46-47).

Thomas Jefferson has been portrayed as the archetypal isolationist (Caldwell, 2006, p. 77). Indeed, during his time as Secretary of State in George Washington's administration, Jefferson argued for a far more restrained policy. According to this rationale, the United States would have a minimal amount of trade agreements

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<sup>32</sup> George Washington believed in the necessity of the United States establishing and maintaining commercial relations with European powers, but not to the extent that it meant compromising America's new found independence.

<sup>33</sup> The 'Founding Fathers' generally refers to the key individuals who led the American Revolution and the founding of the United States. More specifically, it relates to the signatories of the Declaration of Independence (1776) and/or the delegates of the Constitutional Convention (1787).



and maintain a clear distance from Europe in order to maintain its own exemplary liberties. However, during Jefferson's Presidency, the Louisiana Purchase (1803) was a major enlargement of US territory. This provided the United States with the possibility of developing its agricultural base and concomitantly the increasing realisation it was dependent on international trade for its own prosperity (Hunt, 1987, p. 28).

Jefferson emphasised how the United States should expand continentally. Connected with this, the third President made the 'civilising' argument, in which the US needed to play an active role in reducing and eventually eliminating 'barbarism' in the world (Jefferson, September 6, 1824; Jefferson, April 27, 1809). Many of his Presidential successors have also argued for the 'Empire of Liberty' in which US intervention in different parts of the world is premised on a benign America helping other countries. Due to all these factors, understanding Jefferson as an isolationist is limited and misleading. Indeed, Jefferson's approach took on a combination of internationalism and isolationism with the clear factor that it was in the United States' identity and interest to spread freedom globally. As Tucker and Hendrickson state:

*'If the security and well-being of the United States were inseparable from the prospects of free government everywhere, as Jefferson was so deeply persuaded, it followed that American interests were invested with a sanctity that exempted them from the kind of compromise endemic to diplomacy. If America was the last best hope for the cause of freedom in the world, it was apparent that the justice and rectitude of its diplomatic behavior followed by virtue of this historic role. The combination of*

*universalism and parochialism is the result of a self-consciousness over a role that forms a constant in that nation's history.'*

(Tucker and Hendrickson, 1990, p. 251)

Isolationism explicitly stipulates the importance of remaining detached from international affairs and to allow other nation-states to deal with their own challenges. It can though also be conceptualised and understood as a variant of nationalism wherein the United States sees itself as somehow superior to other countries and that its overseas relations should be kept to a bare minimum. This is to preserve the unique way of American life.

A variety of US conservative thinkers including Samuel Huntington and Pat Buchanan make the ethno-centric and culturally essentialist argument that the uniqueness of the United States solely relates to its Anglo-Saxon, Protestant roots, which established a political system heavily indebted to British thinking. In this line of reasoning, the erosion of this with the intermixing of different cultures, backgrounds and increasing use of the Spanish language only further undermines US identity (Huntington, 2004; Buchanan, 2002). On the other side of the debate, the internationalist approach largely flows from a missionary identity and belief in which the United States ought to spread American values as they are universally applicable and help achieve its strategic objectives in the process.

Not all internationalists would entirely agree with this 'missionary purpose'. Realists and liberal institutionalist scholars – Fareed Zakaria, Stephen Walt, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Joseph Nye – all argue for a smart and restrained United States. However, with this strong caveat, they maintain Washington should

continue to lead the global order as it has qualities that make it an attractive superpower. This approach also constitutes a variant of nationalism.

William Appleman Williams persuasively critiqued this dichotomous conceptualisation of an isolationist or internationalist attitude. In large part, this was because whilst there has been interplay between these two dynamics throughout the republic's existence, the internationalist element was far more prominent. According to Williams, the United States believed in the necessity of expansive and interventionist measures. Indeed, America wanted to spread democracy across the world and it had a '*warm, generous, humanitarian impulse to help other people solve their problems*' (Williams, 1972, p. 13). However, the United States deemed that other countries needed to properly follow its example in order to progress (Ibid.). This paradoxical approach undermined the actual principle of self-determination that America was attempting to support. At the same time, as Williams argued, Washington's interventionist approach aided US strategic and commercial interests that required access to overseas markets (Williams, 1972, pp. 13-16; Restad, Spring 2012, pp. 53-76).

The idea of an isolationist United States until as late as 1898 is misleading on a number of grounds. Firstly, the US was constantly expanding its territories westwards throughout the nineteenth century and these new territories became part of an increasingly large US (Westad, 2007, pp. 9-16; Mead, 2002; McDougall, 1997; Ferguson, 2005). This was not done in a supposedly peaceful, benevolent way but often through aggressive and ruthless methods, uprooting local Indian tribes and overcoming Mexico and European empires in order to achieve its

objectives (Hixson, 2016, pp. 48-70; Restad, Op. cit.; Williams, Op. cit.; Foner, January, 2013).

Secondly, the expansion westwards to the pacific coast meant a distinctive evolution of US identity, creating the idea of the rugged, individualistic, entrepreneurial pioneer who could make a life for himself in difficult conditions (Turner, 1921). This working myth has created two components of US identity formation. To begin with, the idea of an atomised, self-made individual who has to make the most of the circumstances that life, nature and the marketplace has to offer became inviolable for many Americans (Van der Pijl, September 2009, pp. 116-118; Ross, 1991).

In addition, and perhaps unsurprisingly, there was not a perception of the westward expansion as a power grab, more the natural, 'manifest destiny' that the US was supposed to fulfil its role and become a great nation in part by continually expanding its borders (Restad, Op. cit.). The idea of US isolationism and at the same time expansion of its borders – whether that was the Texas Annexation (1845), the Oregon Treaty (1846), the Mexican Cession (1848), or exterminating its own indigenous people in the nineteenth century – may be a contradiction but this time period is often understood along these lines (Hixson, Op. cit.).

In this work, the belief in US exceptionalism is connected with a policy that is outward looking. This means that the United States sees itself as a nation that can benefit the world with its values and qualities, i.e. democratic institutions, social mobility, capitalism, individualism, and prosperity (Mead, 2002; Kagan, 2012). Who in this line of reasoning would not want to have these freedoms the United States enjoys?

### *The 'Benefits' of US Exceptionalism*

This question of the United States spreading freedom is something American citizens and (especially) the foreign policy establishment take seriously. For if another country could benefit from having a freer system whether in the economic, civil or political realm then surely this is what it would want? Accordingly, the United States is a source of aid towards other countries. Thus, whether it is the defeat of Nazi Germany, the implementation of the Marshall Plan, the eventual overcoming of the Soviet Empire, or the modern day challenge of Islamic extremism, the United States sees itself as a beacon of 'freedom' and 'hope' for all those countries that are beset by 'dictatorship', 'poverty' or 'intolerance'. As George W Bush stated:

*'This advance is a consistent theme of American strategy, from the Fourteen Points to the Four Freedoms, to the Marshall plan, to the Reagan doctrine. Yet the success of this approach does not depend on grand strategy alone. We are confident that the desire for freedom, even when repressed for generations is present in every human heart. And that desire can emerge with sudden power to change the course of history.'*  
(Bush, March 8, 2005)

The United States has insisted on its promotion of freedom vis-à-vis other members of the international community. However, there is always an element of cherry picking from US political leaders when describing what events have defined the United States' special role within the global system. George W. Bush's above quotation illustrates how the term 'freedom' is very firmly mentioned in connection to more propitious moments of US political history. This includes

referencing World War One, World War Two and the ending of the Cold War. There is no allusion to other major events such as Vietnam, which are not perceived as a success and so not a part of America's exceptionalist narrative.

The question of historical pattern is important in how US leaders construct and articulate their vision of a US-led global order. Frequently, the significant elements involve the United States' argument that it is anti-imperialistic – in contrast to previous European empires – and that it fights for the spread of democracy, human rights and free markets. On these grounds, the United States reasons its role is to spread 'freedom' whilst steadfastly taking on 'danger'. Washington's rhetoric and belief in 'peace', 'democracy' or 'self-determination' is constantly used even when this does not translate into what happens on the ground.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, Bill Clinton argued for the importance of foresight and long-term US planning. In this line of reasoning, the United States needed to reconstruct a liberal global order that it could continue to lead on a geo-political and (especially) geo-economic front. Clinton referenced America's historical experience to make the case for internationalism. He stated how exemplary and steadfast the United States had been during every administration in the Cold War period to help bring it to a peaceful and successful end: *'Now, thanks to the leadership of every President since the Second World War from Harry Truman to George Bush, the cold war is over.'* (Clinton, February 26, 1993)

American identity is a complex, evolving phenomenon that intertwines with US exceptionalism. In this way, Americans especially identify with the idea of freedom. The contestability of this concept is something that has motivated a whole host of actors on both the domestic and international level. To argue the United States

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supports freedom overseas is highly debatable, not least because of the aforementioned examples of how it has on a number of occasions intervened in other countries in order to install or support an autocratic regime. However, as this term is contestable, it is argued from various vantage points in order to strengthen certain ideals and interests over others.

In this way, Eric Foner elucidates in *The Story of American Freedom* (1998) on the centrality of 'freedom' for a wide range of social actors who have strongly contested the meaning of this term, throughout the republic's existence. Moreover, Foner examines the role of government in the articulation and implementation of 'freedom'. Negative liberty is one in which the individual should have the right to live one's life how one sees fit without government coercion or constraint. This rather succinct definition encompasses the economic, civil and political realms. One way in which fiscal conservatives usually identify with it relates to the importance of the market place in guiding individual actions (Friedman, 1962). In this guise, government ought to only take a very limited role in regulating economic activity. In the civil realm, it is the idea of freedom of association, freedom of conscience, and even freedom to choose one's own life style.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms speech' attempted to combine negative and positive liberty of what peoples around the world ought to enjoy (Roosevelt, January 6, 1941).<sup>34</sup> In the case of negative liberty, FDR emphasised freedom of

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<sup>34</sup> Roosevelt's State of the Union address was largely aimed at giving meaning to eventual US involvement in WW2. In the post-Second World War context, the Four Freedoms had a major influence on the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), as well as subsequent international treaties.

speech and of worship. Concomitantly, in terms of positive liberty, President Roosevelt argued for freedom from fear and from want. In the case of freedom from want, the duty of government is to provide certain economic guarantees for workers and disadvantaged groups in US society (and globally). In this line of thinking, the state plays an active role in providing the minimal amount of economic and social security. This has historically motivated a number of administrations, including during the Progressive Era, the 1930s, the 1960s, and, to a much more hierarchical and lesser extent, the Whigs in the antebellum period (Foner, 1998, p. 53).

In addition to freedom, 'victory' is another crucial factor in how the United States self-identifies (Johnson, 2008, pp. 3-17). Nothing in US thinking represents this idea more than an individual who is experiencing hardship and through complete adversity manages to pick herself up and win against the odds. Known as the underdog syndrome, this idea can be seen in Hollywood films, TV series, news stories, popular novels and documentaries. It is also a major factor in how the US attempts to calibrate its role in the world. A number of times the United States has suffered from economic depression and overseas failures, such as Vietnam and Iraq, but has still argued that it can recover from these setbacks and bounce back for the 'good of humanity'.

### *The Continuing Significance of the Framers*

One of the key elements that bind the United States together is the natural law tradition, which the Founding Fathers emphasised. Thomas Jefferson stated this



clearly in the Declaration of Independence: *'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that amongst these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness'* (Jefferson, July 4, 1776). Throughout its history, political elites have used this type of language to argue for the virtuousness of the United States and to obtain support from the general public so that it can spread some of the values that it reasons are for all of mankind (Obama, January 21, 2013).

On the other hand, the Founding Fathers also decided that the United States Constitution (September 17, 1787) should have the essential aspect of checks and balances in its political system. This was a clear acknowledgment of human fallibility. Indeed, an idea of exceptionalism was tempered with a constitution that involved numerous committees and authors legally laying down a separation of powers between the executive, judicial and legislative branches. This provided the necessary checks and balances for basic institutional arrangements. At the same time, there is still the understanding that the United States is exceptional for the very reason that it can be self-critical and improve on its Constitution (Carroll, 2013).

A key relevance of the Constitution – with its major importance to US national identity and political organisation – is its avowal that anyone can be 'American', irrespective of background.<sup>35</sup> One just needs to adhere to a 'commonly accepted' set of norms and rules. Another factor of what makes US exceptionalism so

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<sup>35</sup> At the same time, though, one has to be a natural-born citizen to become President or Vice President.

prevalent and widely believed is the consistently adaptable and 'can do' dynamic amongst US citizenry, as Robert Lieber stated:

*'Foreigners get it completely wrong about American exceptionalism. And our own President [Barack Obama] doesn't understand the term. It doesn't mean that Americans are better or more moral or more intelligent. It means there's something about the character of the United States and Americans. About their adaptability and flexibility...the other thing about that is Americans are America because they adhere to a series of institutions and ideas – the Constitution. There is no common blood so to speak. You're German or Swedish or French or Hutu or Tutsi or whatever, those are ethnicities in a way that being American isn't. And that too sets us apart. And I don't think that's widely understood.'*<sup>36</sup>

Bush and Obama's Presidential rhetoric strongly advocates how American values plays a central role in US foreign policy. Indeed, if one listens to an inauguration speech or State of the Union address, or examines a National Security document, there is a plethora of language which states that the United States wants to globally spread the values of freedom, justice, democracy, gender rights, economic prosperity, the rule of law, freedom of speech, freedom of worship, private property and political pluralism, as well as opposing all forms of tyranny, violence and oppression. Thereby making it the 'indispensable nation' (Bush, January 29 2002; Obama, January 25, 2011; Bush, March, 2006; Obama, May, 2010; Kerry,

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<sup>36</sup> Author's interview with Professor Robert Lieber on April 16, 2014. Lieber is Professor of Government and International Affairs at Georgetown University, where he has previously served as Chair of the Government Department and Interim Chair of Psychology. He is an authority on American foreign policy and U.S. relations with the Middle East and Europe. In the policy realm, he has been a foreign policy adviser in several presidential campaigns and consultant to the State Department and for National Intelligence Estimates.

January 30, 2013; NSC-68, April 14, 1950). Bush argued that the United States' leading role in the 'war on terror', which encompassed the aspect of spreading freedom and democracy in the Middle East was sacrosanct in creating a better world order and thereby protecting itself and its allies:

*'Now we are joined in another great and difficult mission. On September the 11th, 2001, America, Britain, and all free nations saw how the ideologies of hatred and terror in a distant part of the world could bring violence and grief to our own citizens. We resolved to fight these threats actively, wherever they gather, before they reach our shores. And we resolved to oppose these threats by promoting freedom and democracy in the Middle East, a region that has known so much bitterness and resentment.'* (Bush, June 17, 2003)

#### *American Universalism and Its Limitations*

A counter to this universalistic impulse is the United States' evocation of being a 'territorially bounded nation-state' (Lock, 2008, p. 71). In part, realists and liberal institutionalists argue the United States needs to think like other nation-states and make sure that it follows its strategic goals in order to achieve the national interest. Whilst realists and liberal institutionalists differ in regard to the outcome – relative versus absolute gains – both of these major theoretical frameworks largely view the United States as a normal nation-state that should attempt to achieve its clearly defined objectives within an anarchical international system.

What is more, especially for (neo-) realists, the domestic sphere of a nation-state does not have a real bearing on how it behaves internationally. The United States

is an example 'par excellence' as it is a liberal democracy, which at the same time has militarily intervened in a number of countries throughout the globe. If the United States with its democratic institutions and rule of law is so militaristic, what difference does it make whether a nation-state's domestic sphere is autocratic or democratic when it comes to overseas interventions?

Democratic peace theory posits that two democracies have almost never gone to war with one another (Russett, 1993, p. 4; Moravcsik, 2008, pp. 244-245). A number of scholars across the political spectrum strongly contest this and it continues to provoke much debate (see Brown, Jones and Miller, 1996). What is important for this study though is the relevance of certain ideas and values that the United States holds. The fact that various administrations emphasise the importance of democratic principles and free markets has meant that the United States does not solely look at the world as an anarchical international system. In this way, the importance of values and norms feed into a dynamic that makes the behaviour of the United States a constructed mixture of *realpolitik* and liberal practices.

The United States does not see itself as a normal nation-state despite the prescriptive advice realists and liberal institutionalists may give (Lock, 2008, p. 71). In this way, Lock argues the United States combines elements in order to be the 'indispensable nation' (Albright, March 6, 1997). This makes it a territorially bounded nation-state and equally a country that contributes to a global political community. As far as the American policy elite is concerned, the United States naturally needs to take a leading role in global events to help provide for security

and prosperity. All administrations – whether Republican or Democratic – agree with this prevailing logic.

As stated, realists reason that the domestic sphere of a nation-state and its prevailing norms do not largely determine its behaviour in the international sphere. In this regard, as Walt argues the United States plays a far more belligerent and militaristic role in the international system compared to the previously named ‘rogue states’, which included Iran, Iraq, Cuba and North Korea. Moreover, realists stress that due to an anarchical, international system, there are naturally going to be countries with varying norms and different types of governments so an emphasis on a uniform system is unworkable. Therefore, trying to excessively promote democracy is contrary to this anarchical system, in which a nation-state needs to follow its national interests and be very pragmatic in its dealings with other states. This is in order to protect its citizens and ensure its own survival (Morgenthau, 1948).

The balance of power idea played an important role for classical realist thinkers of the mid-twentieth century, including Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr. These seminal thinkers argued that since human nature is naturally self-interested and power seeking it is not always clear whether the motivation behind a certain action is morally justifiable or not.<sup>37</sup> Often an individual leader believes

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<sup>37</sup> Classical realists put a certain amount of stress on human nature. In contrast, neo/structural-realists, Waltz (1979), Krasner, Walt, Posen, Van Evera and Mearsheimer place emphasis on the utility maximising, rational actor that operates within an anarchical, international system. Neo-realism takes a more systemic and structural approach to world politics and aims to be rigorous, parsimonious and ‘scientific’ in its approach contra classical and neo-classical realism. Other aspects – balance of power, an anarchical system, objective national interests and power politics – are the same across all realist approaches.

that his decision is being made with the noblest of intentions, even though it may lead to an immense amount of destruction. Niebuhr and Morgenthau consequently maintained the most favourable US policy was one that did not play a messianic role within the international system and that there should be a 'modest awareness of the limits of its own knowledge and power' (Niebuhr, 2008, p. 148). Whilst not arguing for pacifism, Niebuhr and Morgenthau prescribed that the United States should only intervene in another country when its core 'national interests' were at stake.

#### *US Responsibility for the 'Free World' in Confronting Danger*

The United States' discursive formation that it is a benign actor on the world stage means that its policy decisions take on a type of responsibility for 'freedom loving nations'. According to this logic, Washington's attempt to make the world a more secure and safer place is inviolable. In contrast to this, those nation-states and transnational actors that heavily dispute US norms are deemed dangerous. In this line of thinking, the possible linkage of 'rogue states' and transnational terrorist actors constitute an 'existential' threat to the United States. Indeed, the Bush administration argued that the threat posed by those assortments of countries and groups meant an ideological struggle that would take decades to resolve. Moreover, the perceived threat of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates was due to its 'totalitarian ideology'. The Bush and Obama administrations have stated that it needs to be routed over time, just as the Soviet Union was defeated in the

twentieth century (Bush, 2002; Press Association, February 3, 2013). It was this prevailing narrative that US allies have also largely internalised.<sup>38</sup>

It is historically significant that American political leaders use language to make the case that there is increased level of threat from a global adversary (Mueller, 2006, pp. 2-8). As a rule, therefore, US elites have argued that terrorism can only be defeated with a careful combination of intelligence, diplomacy, cultural and military work. Those countries and actors that choose to go against the United States are on the side of 'obstructionism' and are perceived as on the wrong side of history. From this perspective, any country that values freedom and progress will naturally be on the side of the United States. In this way, Washington can satisfy both its narrowly defined interests and concomitantly the interests of a universal 'progressive' value system (Lock, 2008, p. 75).

George W Bush's administration constantly used binary language to make the case of promoting universal values. Bush's argument that the United States was 'freedom loving', whereas the terrorists and those who harboured, supported and funded them were 'evil', was indicative of a clear difference between 'us' and 'them'. A strong use of the United States as the decent 'in-group' and any state or non-state actor that did not back the United States in its premise of eradicating terrorism as part of the 'out-group' is something that allowed Washington to amplify a danger. In this way, 'insecurity' is often a key signifier in helping solidify national identity. At the same time, it helps facilitate recognition of how a country

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<sup>38</sup> The UK government has also made the case that the fight against 'global terrorism' is a generational and long-term one (Kirkup, January 20, 2013).

should act as it strives to become more 'secure' (Campbell, 1998; Weldes et al., 1999).

The Clinton and Obama presidencies also had the tendency to use language that put the United States in the role of the leading 'freedom loving nation', whereas those that were inimical to the United States (and therefore the international system) clearly undermined the values of freedom. As Bill Clinton stated, a country needed therefore to change its thinking and practices, especially with regard to its interaction with Washington, for it to be brought back into the international 'civilised' fold:

*'But more importantly, North Korea promised not to become a nuclear power. They're still isolated. They're still very Communist. They still deal with a lot of rogue states that support terrorism. And so we're just responding to their actions. But the door is always open for them to take a different path, and we hope they will.'* (Clinton, June 5, 1994)

The Clinton administration conceptualised the term 'rogue states', which helped shape an important part of its national security approach (Dumbrell, 2002, pp. 43-56). Anthony Lake, National Security Advisor (1993-1997), articulated a view that certain 'backlash states' did not share the values of the international community. Lake argued that whilst there were many countries, which embraced 'basic standards' of democratic institutions, free markets and the promotion of global security, there were some nation-states that undermined these fundamental values and threatened global order. In this way, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Libya were rogue states because they were autocratic; pursuing Weapons of Mass



Destruction (WMDs); had very poor human rights records; and were state sponsors of terrorism (Lake, 1994, pp. 45-55; Litwak, 2007).

US perceived strategic interests and historical factors played a large role in constructing and determining the very selective nature of the countries that were included on this list (Miles, 2012). For instance, two other comparative cases, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan shared a number of these characteristics. However, due to perceived overlapping economic and strategic interests they were treated differently. The United States continued to have very negative relations with these aforementioned 'rogue states'. In this way, American political leaders clearly argued that the US was the leading actor on the 'side of progress', whereas those 'anti-US' nation-states were inexorably against the global order.

In the post-9/11 period, the Bush and Obama administrations argued the threat consisted of a transnational terrorist one with certain state actors supporting and/or harbouring it. The 'rogue states' rhetoric was heightened during the Bush administration and especially in the aftermath of 9/11. Although the Obama Presidency largely attempted to disavow this terminology, there was continuity in rhetoric and practice at least in the shared assumptions regarding the dangers of transnational terrorism.

The Obama administration's various security actions and the arguably dubious legal and strategic implications of drone attacks in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia were also premised on the idea that Washington wanted to maintain its right to lead the global system. There was widespread criticism regarding the frequent use of drones/Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and the secretive nature in which President Obama and his inner circle of security advisors operated on this issue

(Cavallaro, Sonnenberg, Knuckey, et al., September, 2012). However, within Obama's team there was a general consensus on how the United States had the right to use UAVs as they contributed to a more stable global order and were as John O. Brennan – Obama's chief counterterrorism advisor and subsequently CIA director – argued 'a more humane form of warfare' (McGreal, February 7, 2013).

### *Structure and Agency in the 9/11 Context*

Continuity between the Bush and Obama administrations was evident on various national security levels and this provided an element of cognitive dissonance for a number of Obama supporters. This was partially due to the fact the incoming Obama administration continued a strategic campaign, which was not that dissimilar from the Bush Presidency's second term. Obama's opposition to the Iraq War and his criticism of how it was conducted did not pertain to other areas of global security and counter-terrorist practices. In this way, the Bush administration influenced its successor because of the terrible events of 9/11 and how it managed to strategically construct a national security paradigm that prioritised the perceived threat of transnational terrorism. Bill Emmott makes the pertinent observation:

*'Basically what Obama found, the Bush policy had changed by the time of the second term, in response to events and problems, but the Obama campaign was in effect a campaign against the first term Bush policy, because that was the better target. So then the Obama administration comes in and they find that they have many of the same predicaments and I think Guantanamo Bay is a perfect example of it. He*

*promised to close it. It is still there. He promised to deal with everyone through proper courts, he certainly hasn't. So the institutions, the political dilemmas, the pressure of political opinion weigh very strongly on him. So I don't think he had a lot of agency. Obviously he did shift to some extent and by the end of eight years, we will say he shifted a fair amount, but I don't think in the American system, absent a kind of crisis, that it provides a lot of agency. So I think Bush after 9/11 had a lot of agency.'*<sup>39</sup>

John Dumbrell (2010) observes that every incumbent President has to work within a pre-existing structure, which consists of a number of factors and that even if a new administration would like to change certain major policies, it has to reconcile a variety of other important elements – historical, bureaucratic, congressional and the international system – that can all act as a constraint on a President's level of free rein (Dumbrell, 2010, p. 148).

The President and his cabinet have imperfect information, their cognitive limitations, and the need to be decisive regarding issues of heightened national security (Simon, 1972, pp. 161-176; Tversky and Kahneman, September 27, 1974, pp. 1124-1131). This supports the idea that an administration is influenced by successful past decisions even if the current environment is different (Dumbrell, 2010, Op. cit.). Moreover, an administration relies on a certain rule of thumb that takes on board those relevant factors, which are presently operable and realistic.

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<sup>39</sup> Author's interview with Bill Emmott. Emmott was editor of *The Economist* (1993-2006), an international best-selling author and advisor on global affairs. The interview took place on April 17, 2013.

It usually does not allow for a particularly new and bold way of approaching a national security issue.

The Bush administration had to deal with 9/11. An interpretation of what was the most credible and appropriate response to this tragedy fed into later important decisions. The Bush Presidency's perception of an exceptional United States, which had overwhelmingly powerful capabilities in remaking the international system was something that informed its thinking and actions, especially in the first term. Bush's cabinet advanced a strategic vision in which it would have the right to protect itself against states that harboured or supported transnational terrorist groups. In this way, the Bush administration used a preponderant amount of hard power and coined the phrase a 'global war on terror' in order to follow a very muscular and direct approach. Nonetheless, the Bush administration had to act within certain constraints and by the time of its second term, a number of multilateral policies came to the fore including the need for support of their operations in Kabul and (particularly) Baghdad. This meant a change of emphasis from one relying overwhelmingly on hard power.

In this case, Congress started to take on a more powerful role in withholding funding and fully scrutinising a number of the Bush administration's policies. Moreover, the US agreed to work more closely with the United Nations and other international institutions and agencies in order to achieve a certain amount of stability within Afghanistan and Iraq. Even during the most belligerent phase of the Bush administration's tenure, in its first term, the administration still made the argument for an international community that shared certain basic norms and values (Brighi and Hill, 2008, p. 129). Washington saw nation-states committed to

peace, shared prosperity and a promotion of freedom, as allied with the United States. This illustrates the importance the Bush Presidency placed on being seen as supporting international rules and norms or attempting to revise them in order to justify the 'global war on terror' (Bush, January 29, 2002; Jackson and McDonald, 2009, p. 22).

On certain issues, the Bush administration paid scant attention to international law. The War in Iraq was a strong example of US unilateralism wherein Bush's cabinet decided the United States would irk sections of the international community, if need be, providing it achieved supposed, core geostrategic goals. Despite this fact, the United States argued it led the 'free world' in preventing a major tyrant and his Baathist regime from acquiring Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). The Bush administration's argument about the reputed connection between Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime and Al-Qaeda, despite being fallacious, also played into the narrative that the United States was protecting the 'free world' from an existential threat. Secretary of State Colin Powell made this argument at the UN Security Council regarding the case for war in Iraq:

*'Some believe, some claim, these contacts do not amount to much. They say Saddam Hussein's secular tyranny and al-Qaida's religious tyranny do not mix. I am not comforted by this thought. Ambition and hatred are enough to bring Iraq and al-Qaida together, enough so al-Qaida could learn how to build more sophisticated bombs and learn how to forge documents, and enough so that al-Qaida could turn to Iraq for help in acquiring expertise on weapons of mass destruction.... As I said at the outset, none of this should come as a surprise to any of us. Terrorism has been a tool used by Saddam for decades. Saddam was a supporter of terrorism long before these*

*terrorist networks had a name, and this support continues. The nexus of poisons and terror is new. The nexus of Iraq and terror is old. The combination is lethal.*' (Powell, February 5, 2003)

An issue as contentious as the 2003 invasion of Iraq provides an insight into the Washington's psyche on issues of perceived national interests. The Jeffersonian notion of an 'Empire of Liberty' has been imagined throughout US history whereby the United States through its 'benevolence' helps the world by spreading freedom (Cox, 2007, pp. 61-63). The Bush administration strongly followed its perceived interests and concomitantly expected a positive outcome in which the United States would be the pivotal country in the expansion of 'freedom' and 'democracy'. According to this rationale, Iraqis, liberated from tyranny, would be 'grateful' for the United States' sacrifice. This was also argued in the case of Afghanistan with the idea of liberating the 'long-suffering' Afghan people from the 'tyranny' of the Taliban. This played an important role in justifying that intervention.

The Obama administration used the idea of 'sacrifice' to promote US national security concerns. It made the case that developing Afghanistan was significant in making it a more stable country that could over time take its rightful place as an independent and peaceful nation-state within the international community. In this regard, President Obama sought to illustrate the human element of war and show how Afghans and in particular US service personnel were sacrificing their lives for the important cause of 'human freedom' and 'dignity' (McCracken, 2012, pp. 993-1007).

### *Washington's Leading Role in International Institutions*

Washington has contended that its counter-terrorism approach is the lynchpin for global security. Accordingly, a leading America and its allies need to collectively deal with the threat of transnational terrorism. A global leadership role that also takes on board US political and economic interests feeds into the idea of an 'exceptional' nation. The United States has played a leading role in the post-Second World War world in the creation and major support of international organisations and institutions including the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, NATO and the World Trade Organisation. Obama argued that US exceptionalism involved continuing to stay committed to US-led international institutions, as it was in part this factor that brought on board other actors. It also helped maintain the United States' 'rightful' role as the world's leader:

*'You see, American influence is always stronger when we lead by example. We can't exempt ourselves from the rules that apply to everybody else. We can't call on others to make commitments to combat climate change if a whole lot of our political leaders deny that it's taken place. We can't try to resolve problems in the South China Sea when we have refused to make sure that the Law of the Sea Convention is ratified by our United States Senate, despite the fact that our top military leaders say the treaty advances our national security. That's not leadership, that's retreat. That's not strength, that's weakness. It would be utterly foreign to leaders like Roosevelt and Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy. I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being. But what makes us exceptional is not our ability to flout international norms and the rule of law, it is our willingness to affirm them through our actions.'* (Obama, May 28, 2014)

The United States maintained the leading role within a Western, capitalist bloc during the Cold War, and, in the subsequent post-Cold War period, an overall global diplomatic, political, ideological and economic one (Rupert, 2010, pp. 170-173). This has involved Washington customarily (indirectly) intervening in other countries.<sup>40</sup> In the economic realm, the use of international institutions has provided a large amount of leeway for Multinational Corporations (MNCs) to operate in numerous jurisdictions in a way that maximises profits. This helps ensure the United States' powerful and hegemonic position (Cox, 1981, p. 140).

However, there are a number of occasions whereby the United States, whether it is the Iraq invasion or with protectionist measures, clearly opposes these same international institutions. In this regard, US leaders make the argument of how Washington is often not at fault rather the organisation or institution in question needs to 'step up to the plate'. For instance, during the run up to the Iraq War, the Bush administration insisted that the UN Security Council should either support the United States or 'risk irrelevance' (Reynolds and Richter, February 14, 2003).

To argue that the United Nations becomes irrelevant because it does not support a United States-led resolution is not something the vast majority of nation-states and international public opinion would agree with. Nevertheless, in terms of US foreign policy, this is not in and of itself enough of a reason to listen to international opinion. What makes the United States more compliant (and supportive) of international rules is the importance it attaches to whether the

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<sup>40</sup> This was another reason why the 2003 invasion of Iraq caused such consternation even amongst those who believe in a US led global order.



other actors can prevent a certain action. In terms of perceived geostrategic aims, an important element within US decision-making is whether and when it can better achieve its goals by taking a more unilateral or multilateral approach.

### *US History and the Politics of Fear in Defining American Foreign Policy*

Although Americans have come to call themselves a nation, it was not always so. The Founding Fathers rejected the term 'nation', because it was tied too much to a geographic place, one language, and centralisation. They preferred a country of 'peoples' who were characterised by love of liberty (political virtue) and loyalty to the 'nation'. This involved a clear devotion to the Constitution. In a certain sense, therefore, the United States became the first 'political nation' (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 18; Arendt, 1990, pp. 125-126).

A great variety of American social, political and economic beliefs all make the country very diverse and complicated to govern. Indeed, the polarisation of opinion, which is often perpetuated within Presidential-Congressional relations and the mass media signify there is often a question of who a real American is. This debate also goes to the heart of what the United States stands for as a country and what its role is in the world.

An idea of the national interest therefore can be more complicated than meets the eye. One can strongly postulate that Washington tries to incorporate a policy that maximises its gains overseas on both an economic and security level. However, the actual economic interest of which group in US society benefits from a specific foreign policy, and the overemphasis of spending on the military-industrial

complex, is relevant for 'what' and 'who' profit more (Van der Pijl, 2007, p. 202). The exorbitant amount of military spending that could be spent instead on education and infrastructure is valued in part because it emphasises the idea of US national prowess in a world that needs to be led by a 'benevolent hegemon'.

George W Bush and Barack Obama both argued for the relevance of directly confronting a global terrorist threat. In this way, Al-Qaeda and any state actor that would potentially harbour transnational militants have been referred to in negative, oppositional terms (Bush, January 28, 2002; Obama, January 25, 2011; Campbell, 1998). Post-9/11, Washington reasoned and identified the United States as the world's leading 'civilised' actor that had to be a bulwark against a 'violent' and 'extreme' danger. US political leaders and media outlets have continually articulated and circulated this idea making it an accepted reality in many quarters of the United States. As Bush stated:

*'The attack took place on American soil, but it was an attack on the heart and soul of the civilized world. And the world has come together to fight a new and different war, the first, and we hope the only one, of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a war against all those who seek to export terror and a war against those governments that support or shelter them.'* (Bush, October 11, 2001)

In the post-9/11 context, the Bush administration managed to justify its preventive, global approach by (successfully) appealing to both Congress and the American public. It argued the threat of terrorism and a repeat attack on US soil was very high. The strategically constructed narrative and institutionalisation of a 'Global War on Terror' would also have implications for domestic civil liberties.

The Bush administration created and implemented a policy that was monumental

in scale and provided the linchpin for a number of actions. The politics of fear was used in order to achieve a policy that gained the support of vital elements within the US body politic (Zenko and Cohen, March, 2012, pp. 79-93).

The Bush administration's narrative of an amorphous, deadly non-state, transnational network that needed to be fought became very quickly a state-centric one (Rowley and Weldes, 2008, p. 203). The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were premised on a connection between a state actor – the Taliban or the Baath Party – as harbouring and/or supporting Al-Qaeda. In the same way, the Bush Presidency continually made the case that these state actors could transfer Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) to a non-state actor presenting a clear and present danger. Despite the clear lack of evidence of Baathist Iraq having a relationship with Al-Qaeda, the Bush administration continued to make this claim with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously noting at a press conference: *'[T]here are known knowns; there are things we know that we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know.'* (Rumsfeld, February 12, 2002)

In terms of the Taliban, there was some legitimacy to the claims it was harbouring remnants of the Al-Qaeda leadership. Hence, the international community gave a genuine amount of support to the United States in response to the tragic events of 9/11. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1368 was unanimously passed by 15 to 0 on the following day, which condemned the attacks and recognised the right of individual and collective self-defence. In the following months, the Security Council passed further resolutions, supporting the

overthrow of the Taliban due to it sheltering of Al-Qaeda leaders. In the post-Taliban context, there was assistance for a unified, multi-ethnic, sovereign nation-state that expressed the rights of all the people living in its borders. Moreover, the Security Council also supported the formation of an International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) that had the role of supporting and stabilising the country (United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1368, 1373, 1378, 1383, and 1386).

The Bush administration argued that the United States had to deal with Al-Qaeda – as it did in the past with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union – in a comprehensive and global context. This reasoning has been an important motivational tool in guiding American foreign policy in the 9/11 context. Moreover, all recent administrations use US identity narratives that often hark back to the analogy of the Second World War as the most relevant one. It illustrates a certain historical memory and image that is easy to use and helps sustain a policy even when other analogies may be more precise (Kornprobst, 2007, pp. 29-49; Rasmussen, 2003, pp. 499-519; Khong, 1992). Bush made this parallel regarding Al-Qaeda:

*'In the 1920s, the world ignored the words of Hitler as he explained his intention to build an Aryan super-state in Germany, take revenge on Europe, and eradicate the Jews, and the world paid a terrible price. His Nazi regime killed millions in the gas chambers and set the world aflame in war before it was finally defeated at a terrible cost in lives and treasure.*

*Bin Laden and his terrorist allies have made their intentions as clear as Lenin and Hitler before them. And the question is, will we listen? America and our coalition partners are listening. We have made our choice. We take the words of the enemy*

*seriously. Over the past six years, we have captured or killed hundreds of terrorists. We have disrupted their finances. We have prevented new attacks before they could be carried out. We removed regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq that had supported terrorists and threatened our citizens, and in so doing, liberated 50 million people from the clutches of tyranny.'* (Bush, November 1, 2007)

This analogical reasoning provides the opportunity for a major response to a perceived threat. Use of analogies and metaphors afford US leaders with the self-anointed right to fight on the 'side of justice'. It also though obscures some of the darker elements of US foreign policy, which have included overthrowing a number of democratically elected leaders in the Cold War period, support for dictatorships and the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. The United States' overarching hegemonic strategic narrative meant that these actions were taken in the name of 'freedom', in order to defeat a great 'evil' (Rowley and Weldes, 2008, p. 206).

The United States argues that it is on 'the side of justice'. This is applicable to the idea of American exceptionalism and grand strategic planning in which a patient, determined and long-term perspective can lead to more 'freedom' in the world (Kennan, 1947, pp. 566-582). On the other side, those non-state and especially state actors that are on the side of regression and are anti-freedom – as in the case of the Soviet Union or Maoist China – are going against this international political order. This big picture thinking led the United States to conceptualise the loss of freedom somewhere in the developing world as a potential loss of freedom

everywhere, leading to a number of misguided policies.<sup>41</sup> President Lyndon B. Johnson's words regarding Vietnam are a clear echo of this global approach:

*'Vietnam is far away from this quiet campus. We have no territory there, nor do we seek any. The war is dirty and brutal and difficult. And some four hundred young men, born into an America that is bursting with opportunity and promise, have ended their lives on Vietnam's steaming soil. Why must we take this painful road? Why must this nation hazard its ease, and its interest, and its power for the sake of a people so far away? We fight because we must fight if we are to live in a world where every country can shape its own destiny. And only in such a world will our own freedom be finally secure.'* (Johnson, April 7, 1965)

#### *Further Constructivist Insights*

The final part of this chapter consists of making some further clarifications of the constructivist theoretical approach and why it is useful for this study. It is maintained that actors find themselves situated within a structure and nexus of meanings, which help define their identity and interests (Weber, 1978; Luckmann and Berger, 1991). This intersubjective understanding happens due to the social structure and an actor's interpretation of it. Certain practices are therefore taken as normal and a correct way of acting. However, none of these social practices and

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<sup>41</sup> President Dwight D. Eisenhower enunciated the 'Domino Theory' theory on April 7, 1954, in relation to the situation in Indochina and the potential full scale spread of communism: *'Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the "falling domino" principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.'* Many US administrations used this idea during the Cold War to justify interventions in the Third World.

norms can ever be entirely taken for granted (Kratochwil, 1989; Price and Reus-Smit, 1998, p. 283). Constructivism examines the historical and social contingency of certain ideas, and how they have and do change, due to the power of agency. The social reality of empire and slavery are examples of very specific historical and ideational factors. They would be considered, in most quarters, illegitimate and a completely unacceptable form of social order if operating in the twenty-first century. Acknowledging the significance of social practices, norms and intersubjective knowledge, Emanuel Adler emphasises how normative and epistemic interpretations of the world are vital to the constructivist approach:

*'Constructivism is the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world.... Constructivism shows that even our most enduring institutions are based on collective understandings; that they are reified structures that were once upon a time conceived ex nihilo by human consciousness; and that these understandings were subsequently diffused and consolidated until they were taken for granted.'* (Adler, 1997, p. 322)

Our most fundamental social certainties are creations and a future experience, which cannot comprehend itself under our present fundamental categories, would most likely overturn them due to their lack of validity and authority. What is socially 'objective' and 'authoritative' for us today may not be either objective or authoritative for some future collective. This is premised upon the discursive construction and meanings that we collectively give to our world. However, the aspect of a society replicating itself in accordance with its accepted norms,

illustrates the relevance of institutionalised practices in how and why things stay the same or (eventually) change.

An institution formalises a series of past agreements, in which case they acquire the force of convention, and guide deliberation on present and future agreements on the basis of the convention it enshrines. The ordinary meanings we give therefore to chairs, a candle, a darkly lit room, and food being put on a table is something that appears completely 'natural', but this has over time been constructed so that one can recognise a restaurant, what its functions are, and what one's own role is within it. Thus, the social context becomes habitually understood and makes actions possible.

This supposed taken for granted reality is not always so clear-cut and can be fiercely disputed though. In a number of historical or contemporary inter-state cases or on an intra-state one, there is a contested interpretation of history and often an essentialisation of identity, which is frequently destructive when used by one side against the other. On different levels of social and power relations – gender, ethnicity, race, industrial relations, religion, state – there can be a more conflictual or cooperative relationship depending on how the various actors have specified what their role should be and whether this (often) internalised norm is respected or not.

Both sets of hardliners on the Israeli/Palestinian issue operate on a similar logic that they take upon themselves to (and indeed they believe they have the right to) determine who shares this world with them and who does not. Such a factor – that the other exists and has claims and rights to existence and self-determination – plays no role in their way of determining whose existence is worth



acknowledgment. However, what both sides miss is the fact Palestinians and Israelis do exist and more importantly, *believe* in their existence and rights. The identity of being an Israeli or Palestinian is historically complex and mediated by a host of socio-political factors (like all national or other identities), which are suppressed by members of both sides, where 'identity' is treated as some monolithic 'eternal' substance. The latter view fixes the positions of 'self' and 'other' into me = good, other = the enemy.

Thus, as this chapter has demonstrated, constructivism gives an ontologically rich view of how social order comes into and remains in place; how and why change occurs; and the relevance of how identity and interests (re-) constitute each other. Washington discursively constructs its global strategic situation through a certain lens, which posits a leading role for a 'benign' United States whether it is taking on the 'scourge' of communism during the Cold War, or transnational terrorism in the post 9/11 milieu. The next chapter explores the methodological approach of this study in order to demonstrate how it is applicable to US policy towards Afghanistan.

## **Methodology**

The methodological aspect of this study emphasises the utility of social constructivism in providing a more comprehensive understanding of US foreign policy and international relations. This constructivist approach does not take 'interests' as pre-given and fixed. Rather it problematises them, which means it treats interests as objects of analysis, due to the open-ended aspect of the social world (Finnemore, 1996, pp. 3-4). Moreover, it takes seriously the idea that social meaning helps actors understand who they are and what they want. The intention here is to comprehend Washington's approach to Afghanistan, via a thirty-five-year period case study, in order to exemplify how certain intersubjective beliefs and actions shaped an evolving policy.

In terms of the constructivist approach, this thesis examines the relevance of discourse and practices in order to see how US policymakers make a certain approach seem the correct and appropriate way that Washington has needed to implement its policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan. In this way, Presidents and other senior decision makers use language to justify their actions and in the process persuade elite level interlocutors and public opinion of the necessity in acting a particular way. These policymakers work within a social structure in which they have to build alliances and promote ideas that they would like to become taken for granted. It is through the use of discourse and symbols that a social practice is instigated and power relations are either maintained or changed (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 57-59; Foucault, 1972; Milliken, 1999, pp. 225-254; Hansen, 2012, pp. 94-109). The critical discourse element refers to unmasking how these power relations have

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come about; whether they are in the process of changing; and what type of normative commitment can help bring about a long-term peaceful resolution to conflict.

Richard Jackson's work provides a very useful methodological guide in explicating on critical discourse analysis and the relevance of how US foreign policy elites constructed and institutionalised the 'war on terror'. This methodological approach of critical discourse analysis is based on the assumption that discourse is a form of social practice, which helps construct our social world. As Jackson states: *'It [critical discourse analysis] assumes that discourse is a form of social practice which both makes or constitutes the social world, and is at the same time, constituted by other social practices. Discourses both contribute to the shaping of social structures and are also shaped by them; there is a dialectical relationship between two. Of even greater import, critical discourse analysis assumes that discursive practices are never neutral, but rather they contribute to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between social groups; discourses are an exercise in power.'* (Jackson, 2005, pp. 24-25)

In this thesis, therefore, the author employs critical discourse analysis in order to analyse senior US policymakers' speech acts and how this directly connects with their material practices. Discourse helps construct our understanding of social action and reality. It is through social interaction that practices become institutionalised. Washington's construction of the United States as 'brave' and 'freedom loving' puts emphasis on an 'evil' or 'barbaric' other, whether this meant supporting 'liberation movements' against the Soviet Union during the latter stages of the Cold War or instigating a socially constructed 'global war on terror'

that has meant a continual deployment of language and social practices to assert the relevance of a major counterterrorist approach.

An important methodological note refers to how the foreign policy elite think and operate. Examining debates, public statements and private reflections of prominent decision and policymakers are all relevant in understanding the modus operandi of how US policy is conceived and defended. In this way, public rhetoric is an important feature in foreign policy despite the sceptical view political leaders say one thing in order to achieve another (Hoganson, 1998). This is because Washington always has to justify its foreign policy approach within a normative framework (Finnemore, in Katzenstein ed., 1996, p. 159). Therefore, policymakers articulate their objectives in a way that demonstrates their adherence to commonly held norms, expectations, practices and values of American society and a broader international one. So whilst the author accepts that decision makers have mixed motives, US leaders have to achieve consent amongst its population and within the foreign policy establishment in order to ensure trust and a greater sense of legitimacy. Consistency therefore becomes important. In so doing, it reinforces a certain approach the United States can take (Quinn, 2010, pp. 27-29). Michael Hunt makes this cogent point:

*'Public rhetoric is not simply a screen, tool or ornament. It is also, perhaps even primarily, a form of communication, rich in symbols and mythology and closely constrained by certain rules. To be effective, public rhetoric must draw on values widely shared and understood by its audience... If a rhetoric fails to reflect the speaker's genuine views on fundamental issues, it runs the risk over time of creating false public expectations and lays the basis for politically dangerous*

*misunderstanding. If it indulges in blatant inconsistency, it eventually pays the price of diminished force and credibility.'* (Hunt, 1987, p. 15<sup>42</sup>)

The research for this study has encompassed the following:

- 1) Online archival research in order to fully examine important primary source material. This has included using declassified material from the National Security Archive; the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library; the Library of Congress; the US National Archives; the Ronald W Reagan Presidential Foundation and Library; the UK National Archives and the Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS).<sup>43</sup>
- 2) The importance of having a historical and theoretically informed constructivist approach, as this gives a rich contextual understanding to the study.
- 3) Examining existing data within the specified time frame. This has involved analysis of US political leaders' speeches, national security archives,

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<sup>42</sup> This reference originally came to the author's attention reading Trevor McCrisken's (2003) introductory chapter of *American Exceptionalism and the Vietnam Syndrome*. Please see bibliography.

<sup>43</sup> The author conducted an in-depth telephone interview with Dr Barbara Elias who is Director of the Afghanistan, Pakistan and Taliban Project at the National Security Archive on April 3, 2014. In this interview, we discussed how the Archive collects and disseminates primary source materials. This led to a discussion about the online archival material and the future material that will be released. We also spoke about some of the methodological challenges to archival work. The author wanted to meet Dr Elias whilst conducting research in Washington D.C. but due to her tenure at Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, it was not possible. This also meant that much of the future material was in her possession rather than at the National Security Archive, which the author subsequently visited.

monographs, journal articles, international observers, US governmental sources, the media and non-state actors.

- 4) A plethora of semi-structured, in-depth expert interviews with diplomats, opinion formers, state officials, think tank experts and academics.

This final aspect of conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews has been important in drawing out from the interviewees a further and deeper understanding of 'why', 'what', and 'how it was possible' that certain policies took place and the role of key actors in shaping them. The interviews cast light upon how an actor justified a policy and the perceived strategic factors involved as well as the outcomes, thereby illustrating the success or otherwise of a specific policy. Concomitantly, the interviewees also gave a historical and socio-political overview, thus providing a richer understanding (Yin, 2009, pp. 106-109).

The interviews were wide ranging and touched upon the expertise an interviewee had in an advisory or decision making capacity whether in Washington D.C. other major capitals, or in Afghanistan. In order to verify the reliability of the interviews, the author cross checked with other interviewees by asking a similar or exact same question and also going back to historical and contemporary primary source material as well as touching upon scholarly and opinion forming work (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001, p. 395; Checkel, 2008, p. 79).

The author asked the same opening question in regard to all the recorded (and in certain cases unrecorded) interviews: *'What has been the United States' purpose of being in Afghanistan in the post-9/11 context?'* This was an important question for the research as it wanted to understand the perceived US national interest in that

country. Moreover, this and subsequent interview questions also provided the possibility of drawing out of the interviewee certain underlying assumptions and narratives, which are commonplace and cognitively shared within elite level US foreign policy circles. This provided the author with a clearer understanding of the United States' Afghan policy and its prevailing normative commitments.

In analysing US policy towards Afghanistan, 1979-2014, the author examined how and in what way senior policymakers used language to construct an understanding of Afghanistan as central to US identity and interests, whether for instance, in the latter stages of the Cold War or for the global war on terror. The author will delineate three policy change moments to test constructivist claims, when discourse shifted from one type to another: 1979-1980; after 9/11; and during Obama's Presidency, 2010-2011.

As previously stated, the author examined a whole host of speeches, memos, and interviews and directly connected this with the political, social and historical context. In order to accurately reflect the United States' elite driven Afghan policy during this time period, my textual focus was predominantly on senior members of the Carter, Reagan, Bush (I), Clinton, Bush (II), and Obama Presidencies. Directly connected with this point, there were a number of questions that I applied in order to see how and in what way these texts help elucidate on US policy towards Afghanistan:

What were the beliefs and value systems that underline the text?

What was the wider political, historical, economic, and social context?

What was the political actor's justification in advocating a particular policy?

What were the alternatives?

What type of language was used to portray the different actors?

Did the text achieve a particular result?

How did policymakers use language to make their practices seem legitimate and appropriate?

How did the language and practices construct, challenge or reinforce power relations?

How did policymakers work within an institutional and discursive context?

How and why did this institutional and discursive context change?

One important factor for American political leaders is how they are part of a coherent and overarching social system that provides them – via the use of symbols, values, myths and beliefs – with a working model of how they can operate and what they should prioritise (Hunt, 1987, p. 12; Geertz, 1973). This is all part of a process that they have to continually interpret regarding what the United States ‘stands for’ and ‘what it is’. A recurrent statement of the necessity of US leadership in a difficult world and the importance of its universal values in achieving a better world order is erected in order to construct (and reconstruct) a certain taken for granted reality (Howard, 1989, pp. 3-4). In this regard, ideology connects with cultural factors. A proposed element of realist thinking posits that there are foreign policy elites who act (or ought to act) in a rational, detached and objective way, thinking through challenges the United States faces to achieve its national interests (Morgenthau, 1948; Kennan, 1951). Washington supposedly



had hard headed realists who were capable of taking on some of the twentieth century's major ideologies.

George Kennan wrote in the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs* that the Soviet Union was an inherently aggressive and expansionist Empire especially under Stalin. At the same time, the United States, because of its culture and traditions, was restrained and reasonable. Even Kennan, taking an avowedly realist position as the major architect of the Cold War containment policy, argued for the importance of America achieving its potential. The idea of its exceptional character was a significant determinant. Therefore, Washington needed to channel its 'unique character' to achieve victory and with reference to a higher power at the end of this article, Kennan made the point that America was ready for this challenge:

*'To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.*

*Surely, there was never a fairer test of national quality than this. In the light of these circumstances, the thoughtful observer of Russian-American relations will find no cause for complaint in the Kremlin's challenge to American society. He will rather experience a certain gratitude to Providence, which by providing the American people with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.'* (Kennan, 1947, p. 582)

This understanding of the United States as a 'noble' country with the moral responsibility for the world's progress and survival is deeply ingrained in US thinking. Indeed, for many Americans it is so internalised that the possibility it

could contain an ideological component is very often dismissed. It is accepted as a part of the national character that the United States is the 'exceptional country'. As the diplomatic historian Michael Hunt perceptively argues though, the tendency of the United States frequently to overlook its deeply ideological approach to global affairs is something that is justified on two accounts: firstly, the United States has enjoyed a stability that most other nation-states can only envy; secondly, this continuity means that because of its 'cultural stability' Washington has been able to have an informal approach, which in turn leads to a policy that *'rests on a consensus and therefore exercises a greater (if more subtle) power.'* (Hunt, 1987, p. 14)

The United States has not therefore needed to radically challenge some of the underlying assumptions about its foreign policy. A large amount of the political establishment sees the United States as a benevolent power that at its best can positively change the global environment, due to its unique qualities. These interlinking ideas give meaning and focus to a policy that maintains a collective identity of what the United States 'is' and how it 'ought' to behave.

Since Washington works within a pre-existing social and historical context this means that there are norms and rules that help shape what the United States believes it can and should do. Depending on the circumstances, each administration has a certain level of agency that it uses to take US foreign policy in a particular direction, but this is always embedded within a prevailing social structure that provides a sense of what is possible.

It is part of the methodological premise that causation plays an important role in the social world. Amongst international relations scholarship, a constructivist

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approach is often characterised as being in the post-positivistic camp and therefore unable to use causality as a source of analysis. In equal measure, both positivists and post-positivist/reflectivist schools of thought largely subscribe to the notion that achieving causation only happens when using a Humean approach, which includes the heavily empiricist idea of showing '*causal relations are regularity relations of patterns of observables*' (Kurki, 2008, p. 6; King, Keohane and Verba, 1994, pp. 109-112).

In this regard, the positivist approach of solely looking for '*regularity relations of patterns of observables*' does not address deep-rooted ontological factors (Kurki, 2008, p. 6 and pp. 189-213; Bhaskar, 1998; Kurki and Wight, 2013, pp. 14-35; Searle, 1995; Hay, 2002). These elements include the social structures of both the United States and Afghanistan; the respective countries' historical factors; the narratives used by certain state (and non-state) actors and also an asymmetrical relationship of material wealth.

Ontology refers to 'being', to what 'exists' and it asks deep-rooted questions about the social and political nature of reality, which directly connects with the structure and agency debate. An *ontological atomist* believes society is made up of individuals who are ultimately independent of their relation to one another, i.e. basic human needs and motivations are intrinsically located before social groups and interaction occurs (Fay, 1996, p. 31; Hay, 2002; p. 61). It is this pre-social, methodologically individualist approach that informs rational choice theory and neo-classical economics and is reducible to examining the world or state/society relations solely through the lens of individuals who constitute it. Social structure and processes are therefore very much analytically discounted.

The diametrically opposite approach refers to *ontological structuralists* who argue that studying the social and political world is made up of understanding impersonal laws and structures. Since every individual's identity is connected with its group and societal affiliation the unit of analysis is therefore the social whole. According to methodological holists, in order to understand individual actions, one has to focus on and examine the social forces and structures that are in place (Fay, 1996, pp. 50-51; Hay, 2002, Op. cit.; Durkheim, 1982; Tilly and Goodin, 2006, pp. 10-12).

Throughout the thesis, this dichotomous/dualistic way of thinking: either/or, atomist vs. structuralist, positivist vs. post-positivist/reflectivist, individualist vs. holist, is discarded. This is in order to adopt a dialectical relationship between agency and structure, ideas and material factors, and to explicate on how the interplay of both elements constitute political outcomes (Giddens, 1984, pp. 1-40; Bhaskar, Op. cit.; Bourdieu, 1984; Hay, 2002, pp. 89-134; Archer, 1995, pp. 1-16). Structure and agency are mutually dependent. The structure impacts on what an agent can possibly do, but it is through this human agency – their habits, critical reflectiveness and actions – that reproduces, changes or transforms the social structure. In turn, Fay explains how this helps construct our own understanding of the world:

*'Understanding others (especially via the critically intersubjective procedures of social science) is deeply interrelated with understanding ourselves. Changes in our understanding of others lead to changes in our self-understanding, and changes in our self-understanding lead to changes in our understanding of others. Moreover, because forms of social life are in part constructed by self-understandings, changes*

*in self-understandings ultimately mean alterations in the way we live.*' (Fay, 1996, p. 229)

Beliefs play a significant role in the construction of social reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). The intersubjective aspect of world politics illustrates how interests are constructed and perceived. It opens up further a whole area of empirical research in terms of understanding how a significant actor such as the United States defines itself vis-à-vis other actors and whether through this interaction there is continuity and change in its perceived interests and identity. This is due to the open-ended aspect of the social world (Hay, 2002, pp. 20-21; Adler, 2005; Giddens, 1984). As this methodological section has explained, these belief systems and discursive constructions (re-) constitute, institutionalise and normalise specific policy practices. In the next chapter, we turn to US policy towards Afghanistan in the latter stages of the Cold War in order to understand how the strategic social construction of the 'freedom fighters' played a pivotal role in undermining the Soviet Union in the developing world.

## Washington and the 'Freedom Fighters': The US Response to the Soviet

### Intervention of Afghanistan, 1979-1989

*'Coincidentally, the day after Afghanistan Day, this country plans to launch the third Columbia space shuttle. Just as the Columbia, we think, represents man's finest aspirations in the field of science and technology, so too does the struggle of the Afghan people represent man's highest aspirations for freedom. The fact that freedom is the strongest force in the world is daily demonstrated by the people of Afghanistan. Accordingly, I am dedicating on behalf of the American people the March 22nd launch of the Columbia to the people of Afghanistan.'*

Ronald Reagan,

Remarks on Signing the Afghanistan Day Proclamation, March 10, 1982

Following the Soviet Union's intervention at the end of 1979, Washington's support for 'freedom' in Afghanistan became a major leitmotif and one that over time strengthened its strategic hand vis-à-vis the Kremlin. Reagan's epigraph succinctly puts into words the depth of feeling in Washington for the 'Afghan People' during this decade. In this way, the United States' backing in the 1980s of the various Islamist Mujahideen groups has had a major impact on the development of Afghanistan, the ending of the Cold War and subsequent Islamic militancy in the post-Cold War world. A policy of arming and supporting any militant, anti-Moscow element provided the Carter and Reagan administrations with a clear point of reference and perceived strategic interest to undermine the Soviet Union in a relevant geo-political area. However, this was premised on Washington's strategic social construction of the 'freedom fighters', which played an important role in the evolution of US policy towards Afghanistan during this

period. The conflict managed to bring some unity to otherwise fractious Presidential-Congressional relations. Indeed, the discursive formation of 'freedom fighters' and the idea of a 'noble people' fighting against the Soviet Union emerged as an important narrative and basis for strategic action in Washington.

This chapter in part develops on primary source archival material concerning how the Carter administration reacted to what historians conventionally portray as the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. The historiography largely points to an invasion (Saikal, 2004, pp. 194-197; Arnold, 1985; Dorronsoro, 2005, p. 2). However, this is misrepresentative as the Kremlin was very loath to intervene in a rapidly deteriorating situation within Afghanistan, especially given the internecine divisions within the communist-led People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).

The literature on the aftermath of the Soviet intervention points to the end of Détente and a new phase in superpower relations (Gaddis Smith, 1986; Dumbrell, 1993, p. 200). In this line of reasoning, the Carter administration took a more confrontational approach with the Soviet Union. President Jimmy Carter's change in policy is largely seen as the starting point of what would become known as Reaganism (Halliday, 1986; Brement to Brzezinski, Memo, January 7, 1980; Brzezinski to Carter, Memo, January 9, 1980). Certain works support the view that the Carter administration – especially the National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski – successfully managed to lure the Soviet Union into an invasion to give Moscow their own 'Vietnam' (Ali, 2002, pp. 207-208; Diamond, 2008, Stanford, pp. 65-68). Despite this very tendentious claim, most critics acknowledge the major response of the Reagan Presidency to the Soviet occupation as the decade

unfolded (Rasanayagam, 2003; Riedel, 2014; Lansford, 2003). What they overlook, however, is that this was initially incremental and only took off due to a confluence of factors – elements within the executive branch, major support from Congress, the situation on the ground in Afghanistan, and the changing international (social) context all contributed to the confidence in the ‘freedom fighters’ and concomitantly how the US strategically benefited. This is significant, as the Reagan administration supported Afghanistan on the grounds that that nation should be able to follow a policy of ‘freedom’ and ‘self-determination’. Moreover, many members of Congress shared this opinion, which meant that – unlike in other Third World conflicts – the Afghanistan issue managed to garner support across the board.

In order to effectively make this case, there are certain key questions addressed: How was it possible that Afghanistan become so central to US perceived national security objectives during the Cold War’s latter stages? And why did this conflict become a ‘success story’ for Washington in the developing world? This chapter examines the changing aspect of US policy towards Afghanistan in order to argue that the belief in the ‘freedom fighters’ and their increasingly successful mission in defeating the Soviet Union were highly salient in the support that took place. The idea is advanced that US policymakers supported the shifting events in Afghanistan for *both* reasons of strategic and ideological considerations. In this way, Ronald Reagan discursively constructed the Afghanistan conflict as one of David versus Goliath:

*‘Yet, while we condemn what has happened in Afghanistan, we are not without hope. To watch the courageous Afghan freedom fighters battle modern arsenals with*



*simple hand-held weapons is an inspiration to those who love freedom. Their courage teaches us a great lesson — that there are things in this world worth defending. To the Afghan people, I say on behalf of all Americans that we admire your heroism, your devotion to freedom, and your relentless struggle against your oppressors.'* (Reagan, March 21, 1983)

This chapter posits that the discursive construction of the 'freedom fighters' provided Washington with a clear focus and meaning to the Mujahideen's independence struggle against the Soviet Union's Fortieth Army and the PDPA. One would therefore expect to find a shift in policy discourse in the aftermath of the Soviet intervention and an institutionalisation of practices throughout the decade in which senior US policymakers supported the 'freedom fighters'. On the other hand, a realist view would posit that Washington solely supported the Mujahideen out of a marriage of convenience, with its overarching strategic aim to bleed the Soviet Union dry. The naming of the 'freedom fighters' was only relevant as cover for the real reason of being in Afghanistan, which was to undermine the Soviet Union. Whilst there is some validity that Washington wanted to slow bleed its major Cold War nemesis, nonetheless, this chapter will demonstrate the complexity of the United States' Afghan policy. Indeed, senior policymakers' strategic social construction of the 'freedom fighters' meant that Washington justified Afghan policy as one of helping a noble people regain its independence from a cruel Soviet occupation.

During the Carter and Reagan administrations, there was increased backing for several Mujahideen groups. The United States wanted to have influence over Afghanistan and to roll back its erstwhile foe, the Soviet Union, from South-West

Asia. Afghanistan's close proximity to the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean meant the United States agreed with Pakistan that it needed to fund and support a number of disparate groups. This would ensure a fierce resistance to the PDPA, which had come into power following the Saur Revolution of April 1978 (Rubin, 2002, pp. 104-105; Summary of Conclusions, January 2, 1980). Connected to this framing of the events and actors in Afghanistan, there is also an examination in this chapter of how US policy connected with other key actors – including Pakistan and Saudi Arabia – as well as the importance of Pakistan's intelligence service, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). This will demonstrate how ideological considerations created space for the radicalisation of Afghanistan, and the perceived benefit of giving the Soviet Union a 'bloody nose', which in its aftermath has had major domestic, regional and global security implications.

#### *The Soviet Intervention and the Carter Administration's Response*

President Carter's declaration on July 3, 1979 that Washington supported covert assistance to the Afghan rebels via Pakistan's ISI, was the first clear foray into opposing the Soviet Union's presence in Afghanistan. This was a small and innocuous beginning as only half a million dollars was deployed to boost psychological and propaganda efforts against the Soviet Union. Furthermore, it was done via intermediaries in order to disguise US involvement so not to directly antagonize Moscow (Coll, 2004, p. 46). However, a small trickle of funding to the Afghan Mujahideen over time turned into a vast stream and by 1987 had reached \$630 million per annum (Roy, 1991, p. 35). This funding was matched dollar-by-dollar by Saudi Arabia who wanted to influence the various Islamist groups within

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Afghanistan, which shared aspects of its ideological and strategic concerns. An agreement that Riyadh would match the United States' funding was cemented in February 1980 (Gates, 1997, p. 148). The enormous quantity of money was transferred directly to Pakistan, who took the key decisions on which Mujahideen groups should be supported and in what way (Bergen, 2001, p. 68).

Although initial US involvement in Afghanistan carried modest cost, Brzezinski later claimed that the United States had planned to lull the Kremlin into an intervention of that country. Indeed, in a 1998 interview he made this very point arguing Washington knew it could inflict its own 'Vietnam War' on the Soviet Union. Brzezinski pointed out that in the wider scheme of things, the support of a few 'stirred up Moslems' to help bring down the Communist bloc was a price worth paying even in the aftermath of the Cold War:

*'We didn't push for the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the possibility they would... It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter. We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire... What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?'* (Interview with Brzezinski in Le Nouvel Observateur, January 15 to 21, 1998)

Written memos at the time directly contradict Brzezinski's bravado (Brzezinski to Carter, Memo, December 26, 1979). The Carter administration's supposed

certainty about giving the Soviet Union a 'bloody nose' was *ex post facto* rationale. Brzezinski wrote to President Carter explaining the potential dangers and pitfalls that were encompassed with a Soviet intervention and the challenges for Washington. Indeed, the National Security Advisor was certainly not so sanguine about the Soviet Union being lulled into their own 'Vietnam' as the circumstances were very different. Brzezinski was clearly cautious. In this one referenced memo, Carter's National Security Advisor expressed pessimism about the Afghan resistance to the Soviet Union, in large part because they did not have the support and capability on both a domestic and international level that the Vietcong clearly had. US policy was instead a reactive one, as Steve Coll expounded:

*'On the American side, I think it's more in some ways about perception, because this was a more reactive policy rather than a constructed policy. And I mean if you look at how Brzezinski has gotten away implying and then getting credit for inducing this grand Soviet mistake. I don't see it. I mean I see that he gave an interview to Le Nouvel Observateur that he made the claim, but there is really no evidence associated with that claim, and then you look at the memo he wrote to President Carter after the invasion, and yes he refers to the opportunity to raise the costs but there's no reference to, "they've done just what we hoped they would". I mean the Carter administration suffered enormously in reputational and other terms because of the Soviet invasion, which made the Carter administration look weak and feckless and fooled.'*<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Author's interview with Professor Steve Coll. Coll won the Pulitzer Prize in 2005 for his book *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*.

The National Security Council's (NSC) 'Summary of Conclusions' of the same day was also cautious about the Soviet advance into a strategically important part of the world. Moscow seemed on the verge of something major and this would have had serious implications for Washington's image and strength in the region. After the Iranian revolution and concomitant hostage crisis, this only appeared to add fuel to the fire. The importance of acting swiftly and involving the United Nations showed the alarm and genuine uncertainty that key decision makers in the NSC felt at the time (National Security Council/Special Coordination Committee Meeting, December 26, 1979).

*Détente's Death Knell and the Discursive Formation of the 'Freedom Fighters'*

The Carter administration's interpretation of the Soviet intervention took two clear forms, which had a major implication for how the United States responded. A first idea propounded was the Soviet Union propping up a weakened Pro-Soviet regime in order to have control of its neighbouring countries and to stem the problem of Islamist movements in the region, as this would ultimately undermine Moscow's perceived interests. Indeed, after the Iranian revolution this could pose serious complications for Soviet security with its southern neighbours. The intervention was therefore a defensive one done out of Afghanistan's instability (Westad, 2007, pp. 316-326; Leffler, 2007, pp. 303-311).

At the time, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner largely advocated this position (Vance, 1983, p. 388; Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, December 28, 1979). Recently declassified archival sources from Moscow's side generally

demonstrate this position to have been a correct one (Memorandum on Afghanistan, October 29, 1979). Chief Kremlin decisions-makers were more focused on how to prop up and protect their interests in Afghanistan, as there were genuine security concerns, with the possibility Washington would gain further influence over the government in Kabul (Ibid.; Dobrynin, 1995, pp. 434-454). Soviet perceptions of its national interests originally precipitated a strong aversion to intervening in Afghanistan (Memorandum of Conversation, March 20, 1979). Sir Christopher Mallaby supported this view and argued the Foreign Office understood the Moscow rationale at this juncture:

*'What we thought – I was doing Soviet affairs at the Foreign Office, at the time – well the first argument was: they've used force within their existing area of Empire, or satellite area, in order to restore the stability of a Marxist-Leninist, in other words Moscow-dominated regime. And there was an argument in British government discussion, about whether they would ever do it outside the Warsaw Pact and the case of Afghanistan was imminent and obviously imminent. And a lot of people, Soviet experts in our machine said: "they [the Kremlin] will think, adding to their Empire is just too provocative and that Afghanistan is not much of a country. And you shouldn't take big risks for that because you will have so much trouble in the wider world, especially for your reputation, but also for tangible things like American grain imports, so we shouldn't do it.'"*<sup>45</sup>

The Carter administration's other rubric in which to perceive the Soviet invasion was a global one. An image of a chessboard with Moscow having expansionist

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<sup>45</sup> Author's interview with Sir Christopher Mallaby on March 24, 2014.

plans meant a zero-sum view of the world. Any gain for the Soviet Union meant a loss for the United States. It played into the Carter Presidency's 'arc of crisis' concept – an area from the Horn of Africa to the Indian subcontinent – that was seen as strategically significant and prone to Soviet penetration. In particular, the Soviet Union's control over Afghanistan had serious consequences for the Persian Gulf, a crucial geo-political area. Carter and (especially) Brzezinski primarily saw the Soviet intervention through this lens (Carter, 1982, pp. 471-472; Brzezinski, 1983; Sargent, 2015, p. 288).

The Carter-Brzezinski policy towards Afghanistan in the aftermath of the invasion drew on certain 'realpolitik' assumptions. Carter's State of the Union Address, on January 23, 1980, emphasised the major importance of the Persian Gulf for the United States' perceived strategic interests and declared that any outside interference would result in a military confrontation (Carter, 1982, p. 471). The 1973 Oil Crisis and subsequent 1979 energy crisis had a clearly negative impact on the American economy, which demonstrated the continued importance of petroleum. As Jimmy Carter heavily implied in his 1980 State of the Union address in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's intervention of Afghanistan:

*'Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.'* (Carter, January 23, 1980)

The Carter Presidency argued that the Soviet invasion was a clear breach of international peace. Indeed, after the Soviet forces had entered the country, Carter wrote to General Secretary Brezhnev to express his disdain for this action and to

warn the Soviet leader that unless reversed it would negatively impact US/Soviet relations. The President's warning carried with it a strongly worded message that without this change in Soviet behaviour there would be a clear shift in relations between the superpowers. Carter argued that the interference of Afghanistan's internal affairs was not only a clear breach of international norms but also one that broke the Basic Principles of Relations Agreement that had been signed by President Richard Nixon and General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev on June 22, 1973 (Carter to Brezhnev, December 28, 1979; Nixon and Brezhnev, May 29, 1972).

The Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations had to all varying degrees supported 'détente', the easing of tensions between Washington and Moscow. However, for the Carter administration the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan meant a clear change in how it saw the Soviet Union and what was the most appropriate form of response. As the 1980s unfolded, Washington's policy shift towards the Soviet Union would especially manifest itself in the developing world with Afghanistan being given pride of place.

In the aftermath of the Soviet intervention of Afghanistan, the Carter administration used strong language condemning the action, insisting it was a clear breach of international law and that the Soviet Union should immediately withdraw from the country. Therefore, in response to the Soviet Union's intervention, the Carter administration requested a delay in voting on the SALT II Treaty. President Carter sent a letter to Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd, and argued that it should be abandoned if the Soviets did not withdraw from Afghanistan (Carter, January 3, 1980). Sanctions on the Soviet Union, a boycott on the Moscow Olympic Games and the end of détente became the order of the day



(Gaddis Smith, 1986, pp. 224-227; Hunt, 2007, p. 249; The National Archives of the UK, PREM 19/135).

Concomitantly, the Carter administration's discourse surrounding the Afghan Mujahideen quickly became established as that of using the term freedom fighters. This discursive construction meant legitimising support for the 'freedom fighters' quest for independence against a cruel and inhumane Soviet Empire (Carter, April 10, 1980). According to the American President, these actors were courageous and on the side of liberty. As for example, Carter stated on April 11, 1980:

*'The Soviets, I am sure, have been extremely surprised at the tenacity and the courage of the Afghan freedom fighters. There's been an extraordinary circumstance there in that there have been heavy defections from the Afghan armed forces by those who favor liberty and freedom more than accepting the subjugation of the Soviet invaders.'* (Carter, April 11, 1980)

The Carter administration's discursive formation of the 'freedom fighters' would inform the United States' Afghan policy throughout the 1980s. Indeed, Washington made a binary distinction between their support of the brave and decent 'freedom fighters' against a clearly identifiable common enemy in the PDPA and especially the Soviet Union's Fortieth Army who 'violated every standard of human decency'. Through this discursive frame, the Carter and Reagan administrations supported a clear militarisation of the conflict in order to help the Mujahideen achieve (eventual) victory and reclaim its independence in the process.

*The Carter Administration and the Relevance of Values*

In terms of the administration's decision-making procedure, there was a highly centralised and formalized system in place, with Carter directing the proceedings and having the final say; this is otherwise known as centralised collegiality (Dumbrell, 1993, p. 195). All diverse opinions amongst cabinet level meetings were encouraged, and within this multiple advocacy approach there was the perceived benefit of a more accessible President, who properly considered all major perspectives (Leffler, 2007, pp. 261-263). At the same time, this system occasionally suffered from fragmentation and incoherence, largely resulting from bureaucratic infighting – notably between Vance and Brzezinski (Dumbrell, 1993, pp. 194-200; Rosati and Scott, 2011, p. 115).

Much has been made of the fractious relationship between the National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in terms of bureaucratic and policy disagreements and how this impacted on the Carter administration's policies towards Moscow. In this line of reasoning, Brzezinski's position won out over time (Rosati and Scott, *Op. cit.*). This underestimates President Carter's level of agency (Mitchell, 2010, pp. 68-69). There is an element of truth that Carter's position vis-à-vis Moscow hardened after the Soviet intervention and the era of *Détente* came to an end (Halliday, 1986). However, Carter was central in terms of directing the evolving Soviet policy (Dumbrell, 1993, p. 195). Moreover, a simplification has crept in regarding how the leading figures in the Carter administration strategically perceived the world. The administration's principal decision-makers all believed in elements of preventive diplomacy, complex interdependence, and the perceived pursuit of human rights, in order to have a strategic and moral advantage over Moscow. Whilst this

thinking played a more important role before the Soviet Union's intervention of Afghanistan, nonetheless, it remained part of the Carter Presidency's approach throughout its tenure (Dumbrell, 1993, p. 115; Gill, 1990, p. 53; Sargent, 2015, pp. 229-260 and pp. 262-263).

President Carter emphasised the importance of US values and that his Presidency would pursue a foreign policy based on promoting and institutionalising human rights (Leffler, 2007, p. 263). This meant the United States' relationship with autocratic allies varied over time. Indeed, the Presidential Directive NSC-30 stressed the objective of observing human rights globally whilst being aware of the socio-historical factors that make each society distinctive (Carter, February 17, 1978; McCrisken, 2003, p. 58; Njolstad, 2010, p. 144). Even Brzezinski advocated the idea of the exceptional United States endorsing its values and democratic institutions in order to win support in the developing world (Dumbrell, 1993, p. 115):

*'I was concerned that America was becoming "lonely" in the world. I felt strongly that a major emphasis on human rights as a component of U.S. foreign policy would advance America's global interests by demonstrating to the emerging nations of the Third World the reality of our democratic system, in sharp contrast to the political system and practices of our adversaries. The best way to answer the Soviets' ideological challenge would be to commit the United States to a concept which most reflected America's very essence.'*

(Brzezinski, 1983, p. 124)

Washington also learned a key lesson from the Iranian revolution, which was subsequently applied to the Afghanistan conflict. Religion still mattered in global

politics and this especially pertained to the Islamic world. Resurgence in religious feeling was something Washington could tap into in order to advance its perceived interests (Preston, 2012, p. 578). Thus, values and interests worked in tandem.

### *US Allies in the Conflict*

The Afghan Mujahideen leadership was based over the border in Peshawar, Pakistan. They consisted of a number of relevant nationalist and religious outfits. Two of the largest factions and rival groups were Jamiat-e-Islami and Hezb-e-Islami. Ahmad Shah Massoud's and Burhanuddin Rabbani's ethnically rich and diverse Jamiat-e-Islami was an important actor in the conflict. Pakistan gave though the lion's share of Washington/Riyadh funding to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami (Coll, 2004; Saikal, 2010, p. 130).

In the aftermath of 9/11, Hekmatyar became one of the top militant actors fighting the GIRoA/ANSF and US/ISAF in Afghanistan. During the 1980s, Islamabad's support for Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami put this group in a prominent and powerful position. Certain transnational Islamist and Arab militants – including Abdullah Yusuf Azzam and Osama bin Laden – were also based in Peshawar during this time period and supported getting the 'Godless' Soviet Union out of Afghanistan.

Throughout the 1980s conflict, there was not complete unity between the top echelons of these groups and the soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan. Moreover, some of the Mujahideen leaders – including Hekmatyar – wanted to cultivate a very close relationship with Pakistan. They were more interested in developing

their own base rather than supporting a unified and coherent policy against the PDPA and Soviet troops. A lack of top-level field commanders did not though prevent a successful outcome in terms of the resultant Soviet departure (Barfield, 2010, pp. 239-240). It nonetheless played a role in the dependence of certain Mujahideen factions on Pakistan's ISI, a relationship that Islamabad could also use to maximum effect in the post-Cold War context.

A lack of coordination between and within the various Mujahideen groups also meant a more informal approach regarding how the resistance fighters fought the Soviet Union. Personal connections, regional ethnicity, tribal ties (in the south and east), and, in certain cases self-interest, largely became more important than pure ideological considerations (Barfield, 2010, p. 236). However, the Peshawar-led Mujahideen parties cultivated an Islamist insurgency and nationalist sentiments on the battlefield in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s (Roy, 1991, p. 17). Pakistan's President Zia-ul-Haq made sure that the political and ideological radicalisation of a whole generation on the Durand Line was meshed with strategic considerations.<sup>46</sup> It was based on a foundation of pragmatism, which also came into play as the conflict unfolded, as all parties had a 'common enemy' (Zahab and Roy, 2002, p. 53).

Before the Soviet Union's intervention at the end of 1979, Washington's awareness of Afghanistan was very limited. The United States' relationship with

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<sup>46</sup> The Durand Line was the demarcation made between the British Empire/British Raj and Afghanistan in 1893 to delineate their respective sphere of influence and improve relations. Since 1947 it is the border that separates Afghanistan and Pakistan, which has been a continuing source of tension between both countries, especially because Afghanistan has never fully recognised it. Moreover, it is a very long and porous border with Pashtun tribes having many interlinkages on both sides of it.

significant neighbouring and regional countries – Iran, Pakistan and India – meant Afghanistan was only given a very limited amount of attention (Cable, US Embassy Kabul to SecState, June 13, 1978, pp. 5-6).<sup>47</sup> In this regard, the Soviet intervention put a spotlight on the country. The Reagan administration and a robust Afghan lobby in Congress subsequently constructed the narrative of a ‘noble people’ fighting a totalitarian superpower and this was emphasised throughout the conflict.

By supporting the covert operations, the Carter and Reagan administrations condoned the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) role of providing material and logistical support for the rebels in what became known as Operation Cyclone. However, following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the State Department and Congress started to insist on not supporting such radical Islamist elements, including Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e-Islami. The executive and legislative branches increasingly saw these groups as a liability and anti-US. Pakistan was though determined to have a hegemonic role in Afghanistan’s affairs and this meant supporting and arming more radical, Islamist elements, in order to have perceived ‘strategic depth’ vis-à-vis India.<sup>48</sup> Conversely, Islamabad completely stopped its (previously very limited) backing of Massoud’s/Rabbani’s Jamiat-e-Islami and other more ‘moderate elements’ who had fought tenaciously against the Soviet Union, even with a lack of logistical support and military funding. This was

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<sup>47</sup> An ambitious development project in the 1950s in the capital of the southern province of Helmand – Lashkar Gar – only had a minimal impact on relations between the United States and Afghanistan.

<sup>48</sup> Strategic depth has various meanings. It is used in this work to illustrate Pakistan’s perception that it needs to have a pro-Islamabad regime in Kabul in order to prevent and push back against Indian encirclement.

something that did not seem to concern the CIA, who believed Islamism in Afghanistan posed no real threat to US national interests henceforth (Coll, 2004, p. 174).

At the end of the conflict, the CIA swiftly manoeuvred alongside Saudi intelligence, the General Intelligence Department (GID), to provide a final amount of aid to Pakistan, before diplomatic deadlines and Congressional oversight came into play. The United States left the country to endure a future civil war and eventual rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s. Nothing in the United States' calculations though predicted a small landlocked country in South-West Asia would become a major global security concern.

The Carter and Reagan administrations support of the Mujahideen meant a close relationship with President Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan and the ISI. Zia was an Islamist general – who attempted to bring religion squarely into Pakistan's political realm – that had come to power after declaring martial law in 1977. Subsequently, Zia became President in 1978 and sent his civilian predecessor Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to the gallows in order to fully consolidate his power (Coll, 2004, p. 27). President Zia's insistence that religion should play a key role in everyday affairs, coupled with direct funding of Madrassas alongside the Afghan frontier meant a radicalisation of a certain swathe of civilians. These men would go on to fight in Afghanistan against the 'Godless Soviets' and also importantly give Pakistan 'strategic depth' in relation to India. At the same time, as previously stated, Zia was very pragmatic in his political dealings, and it was this aspect to his leadership that impressed itself upon Washington (Haqqani 2005; Rashid, 2008; Coll, 2004; Lieven, 2011, p. 407).

Saudi Arabia also played an important role in its support of the religious Mujahideen groups. Riyadh's funding went exclusively to Islamist outfits including the Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan.<sup>49</sup> Abdul Rasul Sayyaf's leadership of this group and also his mobilization of Arab militias meant a strong connection with the Kingdom. In this case, funding came from Saudi political and business leadership as well as the fundamentalist Saudi religious establishment that raised funds via various major aid sources such as the Muslim World League and Islamic Coordination Council. This was the seventh Mujahideen group that fought the Soviet Union and Sayyaf's closeness to these elements meant a further strengthening of transnational Islamism in the Afghanistan conflict (Rubin, 2002, p. 197; Coll, 2004, pp. 86-87 and 110-114).

With the Reagan administration, there was an exponential increase in the United States' support rhetorically and substantively for the various Mujahideen groups. However, because of the provision that US and Saudi financial assistance went directly to Pakistan's ISI, this meant Islamabad took a clear position regarding who and what group got the most support. This came to be known as Pakistan's 'Afghan policy' concerning support of militant national and transnational groups for its perceived national interests. During the Carter and Reagan administrations, this perfectly aligned with aspects of the leadership in Washington. However, in the post-Cold War context it had negative repercussions for US/Pakistan relations.

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<sup>49</sup> It is currently a minor political party that is now known as the Islamic Dawah Organisation of Afghanistan.



### *The Reagan Administration and the 'Freedom Fighters'*

The Reagan Doctrine had a central, geostrategic focus on rolling back Soviet Union gains in the developing world (Pach, 2006, pp. 75-88; Scott, 1999; Morgan, 2016, p. 260). It provided a conceptual tool for the Reagan administration to indirectly challenge Moscow in regional conflicts where the Soviet Union was supporting anti-Western governments or rebels. This largely resulted in a case-by-case policy that helped increase US influence in different parts of the world through various proxy actors, but it often came at a cost that was very detrimental to the values of democracy and human rights in countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Cambodia. It also had repercussions for the stability and development of Afghanistan. The Reagan administration strongly believed in the correctness of this approach and advocated a strong, muscular response to any perceived Soviet gain. Afghanistan became the key battleground. In light of this, Reagan insisted on forcefully expressing his deep conviction that the United States and others within the international community had to do whatever it could to help the Afghan resistance.<sup>50</sup> Reagan strongly stated his backing for the 'freedom fighters' of Afghanistan:

*'The international community, with the United States joining governments around the world, has condemned the invasion of Afghanistan as a violation of every standard of decency and international law and has called for a withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan. Every country and every people has a stake in the*

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<sup>50</sup> During the author's telephone interview with Dr Barbara Elias of the National Security Archive, Elias explained that there was a fairly uniform belief in Washington of how the United States was always 'on the side of the underdog'. The Mujahideen represented this idea.

*Afghan resistance, for the freedom fighters of Afghanistan are defending principles of independence and freedom that form the basis of global security and stability.'*

(Reagan, [b] March 10, 1982)

Reagan's support for the 'freedom fighters' meant an indirect connection with certain groups including Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami. There were evidently linkages of brutality from the Mujahideen against an equally ruthless Soviet Union and PDPA. The major concern for the United States though was to bleed Moscow dry and this had bipartisanship backing in the 1980s, as illustrated with the support of the Democrat Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Tip O'Neill, who gave his full backing to the covert operation.

The Reagan administration defined the various Mujahideen groups as courageous 'freedom fighters' who opposed a totalitarian and brutal regime. Whenever President Reagan referred to the various Afghan opposition parties, they were always addressed and understood in these glowing terms. Even before his Presidential tenure, one can find in Reagan's public speeches and diaries lustrous references to the Mujahideen. He constantly emphasised how the rebels were on the side of 'liberty'. Moreover, Reagan supported the United States' policy vis-à-vis Pakistan and the indirect funding of the various 'freedom fighters' as evidenced in this private correspondence/letter to the General Electric Public Relations Executive, Edward Langley:

*'I believe the situation calls for an American presence in the Middle East – probably with air power, the supplying of arms to the Afghan freedom fighters by way of Pakistan, and, possibly, since we have a treaty with Pakistan, an American presence there in that country.'*

(Skinner, Anderson, and Anderson, 2003, p. 434)

Arguably this letter was used to shore up support from an important business ally whilst showing Reagan's resolve towards the Soviet Union during the 1980 Presidential campaign. It does, though, also show clarity of purpose. The soon-to-be President wanted to ensure that the United States remained the key actor in both the Middle East and Southwest Asia, whether through a direct or indirect presence.

### *American Exceptionalism and Fighting the 'Evil Empire'*

The inauguration of Reagan on January 20, 1981, symbolised a newfound optimism and confidence regarding the United States' international role. For the new President, America was an exceptional country that would always achieve 'greatness' through the actions of brave, creative, hardworking and entrepreneurial individuals, who were dedicated to the love of 'freedom' (Leffler, 2007, pp. 341-342). In much the same way, President Reagan saw the Mujahideen as 'courageous' actors who loved their country and would go all out to defend it against an alien and intolerant Soviet Empire (Reagan, 2007, pp. 128-129). As Reagan stated, the exceptional United States would support the self-determination and independence of the bold 'freedom fighters':

*'Despite the presence of 90,000 Soviet combat troops, a recent increase of some 5,000, the courageous people of Afghanistan have fought back. Today they effectively deny Soviet forces control of most of Afghanistan. Efforts by the Soviets to establish a puppet government in the Soviet image, which could govern a conquered land, have*

*failed. Soviet control extends little beyond the major cities, and even there the Afghan freedom fighters often hold sway by night and sometimes even by day. The battle for Afghan independence continues.'*

(Reagan, December 27, 1981)

Unsurprisingly, Reagan's understanding of the Soviet Union was the polar opposite. Under the Soviet system, there was great 'tyranny' and 'terror' pushed onto the Soviet citizenry. Reagan believed the Soviet Union was hell bent on world domination and Washington's policy towards Moscow – mainly in his administration's first term – amounted to largely exposing and challenging the Kremlin wherever it could. Afghanistan became the key theatre of war, which the United States could fiercely take on the Soviet Union without spilling the blood of a single US soldier's life. According to Reagan, the United States should stop apologising for its 'greatness' and be resolute in taking on the Kremlin throughout the world. Washington could achieve its ideals and interests – in terms of promoting 'liberation movements' against 'Soviet Imperialism' and undermine the Kremlin's global influence – whilst 'aiding' and 'abetting' developing countries in the process. This binary thinking, which characterised the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire' played a role in shaping US public opinion to fervently believe in American exceptionalism.

Characterising the Soviet Union as the 'evil empire', which the United States needed to defeat in a battle of 'good' versus 'evil' provided a reconsolidation of US identity. This is a historically significant measure that Presidents have used in order to promote national solidarity (Cullinane and Ryan, eds. 2015; Rowley and Weldes, 2008). Reagan particularly evoked this difference and constantly used

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very strong language towards Moscow in order to ensure the support of the electorate and Congress. As Reagan argued, there was no moral equivalence between American and Soviet actions:

*'I urge you to beware the temptation of pride – the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.'* (Reagan, March 8, 1983)

This particular speech was made to the National Association of Evangelical Groups and so may have been consciously binary in its use of language. In particular, its aim was to counter the nuclear freeze movement that had encompassed a whole swathe of public opinion. Reagan wanted to emphasise the need to 'build up' in order to put pressure on, and defeat, a totalitarian foe. The President used this opportunity to emphasise the point that not only was the Soviet system inherently wrong, but also due to their ferociously anti-religious beliefs and anti-individual rights was going against some of the important tenets that all human beings should live by. The United States would always be for individual rights and, as a result, was 'exceptional' in supporting the natural rights of all humanity.

#### *Reagan's Cabinet and the 'Freedom Fighters'*

Within the Reagan cabinet there was a large difference of opinion on foreign policy with the Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger being far more of an ideologue than Secretaries of State, Alexander Haig (1981-1982) and George Shultz (1982-

1989) (McCracken, 2003, p. 91).<sup>51</sup> However, all agreed on the perceived Soviet menace and the importance of increased military expenditure in order to support the Mujahideen aka the freedom fighters (Shultz, 1993, p. 692). In the short term, therefore, the administration aimed to make Moscow pay a 'high price', and in the more medium term, it sought to make the Soviet Union leave Afghanistan in abject failure (National Security Decision Directive 75, January 17, 1983, p. 4; Leffler, 2007, p. 411).

Reagan's informal and devolved style of governing, whereby the President allowed his key officials to play an important role in the decision making process meant that a divergence of opinion on various domestic and international issues arose. This was problematic as it sometimes led to incoherence and 'bureaucratic warfare' within the administration (Barrett, 1997, pp. 75-76; Morgan, 2016, p. 156; Leffler, 2007, pp. 348-349). However, Reagan was his own man on what he deemed especially significant, and was never dependent on one sole advisor, such as in the case of President Dwight Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (Morgan, 2016, p. 157; Immerman, 1999, pp. 46-47; Leffler, 2007, p. 354). In this way, Reagan sided with aides who best articulated his preferences. The President strongly believed in the Afghan rebels cause due to the perceived 'underdog' aspect; the support it received across the board in Washington; and

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<sup>51</sup> By ideologue this does not mean – whether in the Afghanistan context or in general - more hawkish. In fact, if comparing Weinberger with Shultz, the opposite is the case. The State Department under Shultz was far more in sync with Reagan and William Casey (Director of the CIA) in terms of insisting on ratcheting up aid to the Mujahideen. The Department of Defense under Weinberger took a more conservative approach, as they feared a Soviet backlash. This was due to the potential discovery of US support coming out into the open, and if weapons got into the wrong hands, especially in the developing world.

that it helped advance perceived US national interests against a belligerent, atheistic superpower.

Secretary of State George Shultz's belief in the importance of supporting the Mujahideen made him a determined advocate of a hard-line policy towards Moscow. According to the Secretary of State, the Afghan 'freedom fighters' were on the side of liberty. In terms of the general climate, Shultz correctly perceived that by referring to a common sense of shared ideas, he could effectively argue the Reagan administration's case in advocating a robust response. In conjunction with this, the United States argued it upheld a 'long-standing principle' of defending others not simply over territory but also because of faith and identity. Secretary Shultz therefore claimed the notion of a shared humanity whereby people should be allowed freedom of conscience, freedom of worship and the right to self-determination, as these were American and (concomitantly) universal values. Shultz tied the US to the hip of the Afghan 'freedom fighters' and their fortunes in the conflict, as expressed in his speech to a group of Afghan refugees in the Khyber Pass, Pakistan:<sup>52</sup>

*'We are not fighting the Russians over a piece of land, a mountain or a pot. Our dispute is a dispute of ideology. Our war against the Russians is a war of faith and identity. My message to you from the United States is very simple. We are with you. You do not fight alone. I want you to know that you do not fight alone. I assure you that the United States will continue to stand with you. In the end, freedom will prevail.'*

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<sup>52</sup> Brzezinski had also made his own impassioned plea in the Khyber Pass in February 1980 to the Mujahideen with the rallying cry: *'We know with their deep belief in God that their struggle will succeed... That land over there is yours. You'll go back to it one day because your fight will prevail. You'll have your homes, your mosques back again. Because your cause is right. God is on your side.'*

*We will prevail because we have strength, because we are determined, and most of all, because our cause is the cause of right and justice.'*

(Taubman, July 3, 1983<sup>53</sup>)

William Casey – the CIA director from 1981 to 1987 – was the pivotal individual in the Reagan cabinet who supported the policy on Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Mujahideen. He played a crucial role in connecting the CIA with Pakistan and Saudi intelligence in order to roll back and defeat the Soviet Union. Throughout his tenure, Casey made sure to emphasise the importance of the struggle against the Soviet Union as both a materialistic and ideational one. Casey believed that an 'exceptional' United States and the monotheistic nature of its allies – whether in Latin America, Central Europe or Afghanistan – was a correct and very necessary boon to the destructive, atheistic communism of the Soviet Union (Coll, 2004, p. 93). As Steve Coll noted:

*'Oh I think it [US exceptionalism] was believed. I think Reagan believed it for sure. And you know even people like Casey who were more Machiavellian in their tactical approaches still believed there was an existential struggle that was on between what they would call 'totalitarian' and what they would call 'free societies' and as a devout Catholic, in Casey's instance, thinking about the underground churches in Central Europe and Poland... and even in Latin America.'*<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Please note, the author has directly quoted Shultz's words and has taken out the journalist's observations, in order to focus on what the Secretary of State said ad verbatim. The author cites the reference in the bibliography section, should the reader want to read the full piece.

<sup>54</sup> Author's interview with Professor Steve Coll.



The CIA's power of manoeuvre was greatly abetted with the support it received from Congress. A major amount of partisanship took place over the aiding of the Contras in Nicaragua, El Salvador and the overall Iran-Contra affair. However, on Afghanistan, the select committee was very supportive, as the Soviet Union was seen as a belligerent power, which had no regard for innocent life and who directly infringed on the sovereignty of a nation-state. Moreover, the Soviet Union's intervention in – what was emerging as – a strategically significant country meant Congress was determined to act decisively. The idea of 'freedom' for Afghanistan and the 'preservation' of their rights featured heavily in the narrative.

*Hardline Congressional Support for the Mujahideen and Moscow's Loss of Legitimacy*

A concurrent resolution – S. Con. Res. 74 – introduced to the 98<sup>th</sup> Congress on June 10, 1983 by the Democratic Senator Paul Tsongas (D-MA) and Republican Representative Donald L Ritter (R-PA 15) stated in very stark terms the importance of achieving a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Indeed, there was complete support for the Afghan's full and decisive 'fight for freedom' (Tsongas and Ritter, June 10, 1983).<sup>55</sup> This bipartisan House-Senate coalition became known as the Afghan Task Force (Cordovez and Harrison, 1995, p. 156). In the Senate the measure passed with 97 votes to 0. It stated:

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<sup>55</sup> Tsongas retired from the Senate in 1984 due to health problems. A youthful John Kerry took his seat. Joe Biden is one of the co-sponsors of this bill.

*'Declares that it should be U.S. policy to: (1) support the people of Afghanistan to continue their struggle to be free of foreign domination; (2) support the Afghans in their fight for freedom; and (3) pursue a negotiated settlement of the war in Afghanistan based on the total withdrawal of Soviet troops and the recognition of the right of the Afghans to choose their own destiny.'*

A sense of unity within the legislative branch is exemplified with the factor of Ritter and Tsongas being politically disparate but resolute on this particular issue. This enabled Congressman Charlie Wilson (D-TX 2) and Republican Senator Gordon Humphrey (R-NH) to play prominent roles from 1983 onwards in facilitating increased funding for Pakistan and the Mujahideen (Crille, 2003). The support from Congress was so strong that even Casey was criticised for not going further with CIA operations (Cordovez and Harrison, 1995, p. 156). The Reagan administration's major backing of the Mujahideen (aka 'freedom fighters') received across-the-board support in Washington.

On top of this, the Soviet Union lost a great deal of prestige as the supposed leader of the 'anti-imperialist' bloc. Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968) had involved a direct intervention of Soviet troops to force these countries back into the Warsaw Pact fold. It was, though, the Afghanistan intervention at the end of 1979 that generally turned international opinion against Moscow especially because it was against a desperately impoverished Third World country not in its direct sphere of influence.<sup>56</sup> This was something the United States used to its full

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<sup>56</sup> See the United Nations Security Council Resolution 462 and the various United Nations General Assembly Resolutions during the 1980s, which on an annual basis voted overwhelmingly for the Soviet Union to withdraw its forces. The Security Council has legal status but since the Soviet Union was one of the permanent five with veto powers nothing could be binding. On the other hand, the

diplomatic, ideational, financial and military advantage right up until Moscow's withdrawal.

*Ratcheting up the Support for the 'freedom fighters'*

One way the US made its weight felt was the National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 166 – signed by Reagan on March 27 1985 – which significantly increased aid to Pakistan and the Mujahideen (NSDD 166). This was partly in response to the Soviet Fortieth Army's new offensive, which attempted to achieve victory throughout Afghanistan. At this point in time, a large amount of Congressional support and funding provided the administration with the opportunity to translate its arguments about the 'freedom fighters' into something even more concrete. There was also the perception within both the executive and legislative branches that the conflict in Afghanistan was actually succeeding in undermining the Soviet Union's fortunes.

NSDD 166 promulgated a vast increase in enhanced weaponry and improved technology to challenge the Soviets. Concomitantly, the CIA increased its involvement in providing training and battlefield intelligence to Pakistan's ISI who in turn trained the Mujahideen (Yousaf and Adkin, 1992). In parallel, a new round of diplomatic pressure was stepped up. Furthermore, by 1986, the introduction of the Stinger – a shoulder fired, heat-seeking missile that managed to regularly

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General Assembly makes recommendations, which are generally non-binding on its member states. It provides a good indication of global, intergovernmental opinion.

down Soviet aircrafts – caused further change in the conflict's balance, on both the military and psychological front (Shultz, Op. cit.; Morgan, 2016, p. 261).

The Department of Defense (DoD) under Weinberger had a slightly different perspective with regard to supplying the Stingers. It wanted plausible deniability. This was not least because it was concerned the Soviets might capture a stinger and reverse engineer it for use in the developing world or even in Europe. Until this point, the Soviet-style weapons provided were predominantly from Egypt and China, and did not therefore bare the stamp of US involvement. Nonetheless, since Pakistan managed to obtain complete control over allocation of resources to the Mujahideen, it was ultimately President Zia-ul-Haq's decision. Zia was wary of the Soviet Union and always wanted to find the right level of force against Moscow in order to be effective but not cause a backlash. This was something he repeatedly told the ISI's director Akhtar Abdur Rahman: *'The water in Afghanistan must boil at the right temperature'* (Coll, 2004, p. 63). Stingers, therefore, became another powerful weapon in the war.

### *The End of the Conflict and History's Revenge*

The US and its allies provided a vast increase in funding and this had a major and decisive impact on the final stages of the conflict, which caused the Soviet Union to lose the economic, military, political and psychological will to carry on. Also given the increasing changes within Soviet society, the international social system, the European context and (especially) the Kremlin, there was a Soviet decision to focus on domestic reform as the perception of threat had changed (Leffler, 2007,

p. 414). Gorbachev clearly acknowledged the relevance and need to end the war (Politburo Session, June 26, 1986; Halliday, 1999, pp. 683-686).

Moscow's underestimation regarding the importance of ideology amongst Afghans also played a role in why the Soviet Union was not able to pacify and win over key societal elements. The rural/urban divide is somewhat pronounced in Afghanistan and a largely devolved form of governance plays into how and what a central government can accomplish. In this regard, Moscow failed to recognise the element of an authentic political movement under the guise of Islam, especially in the rural areas of the country. Its focus on keeping the PDPA in power rather than establishing stronger institutions and functions of the state arguably also meant a weakening of its own authority (Roy, 1991, p. 46).

With the Geneva Accords on Afghanistan signed April 14, 1988, an agreed settlement between Pakistan and Afghanistan on outstanding issues was reached. It also guaranteed the withdrawal of Soviet troops by February 15, 1989. The United States, the Soviet Union, Pakistan and Afghanistan were signatories but not the Mujahideen (Saikal, 1996, pp. 19-34). This was a contributory factor to the civil war in the aftermath of the Soviet departure.

The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan constituted a perceived resounding success for the Reagan administration. Along these lines, the Reagan Presidency's second term policy towards Afghanistan had complicated Mikhail Gorbachev's determination to focus on domestic renewal. Washington had defeated its major nemesis and this was a boon to the United States' strength in relation to the Soviet Union, which was itself on the point of disintegration. As this chapter has demonstrated, the Carter and Reagan administration's strategic social

construction of the 'freedom fighters' had helped frame US foreign policy towards Afghanistan throughout the 1980s. It played a major motivational role in providing support against Moscow. Moreover, the actions of the Soviet Union had played into the hands of Washington. In this way, the Reagan administration with the help of Saudi Arabia and other allies provided support and training to the Afghan rebel groups via Pakistan's ISI. The subsequent challenge of Islamic extremism and its terrible implications can be largely traced to these events, as is explored in the next chapter. It was therefore a technical success but a political failure. However, history is lived forward even if only understood looking backward. The United States national security establishment saw their own perceived exemplary role in supporting the Mujahideen as a significant contribution to defeating a major 'enemy' and making the world safer due to American leadership.

## The Bush Administration and the Strategic Meaning of 9/11

*'I believe in the transformational power of liberty. I believe that a free Iraq is in this Nation's interests. I believe a free Afghanistan is in this Nation's interests, and I believe both a free Afghanistan and a free Iraq will serve as a powerful example for millions who plead in silence for liberty in the broader Middle East.'*

George W Bush, September 30, 2004

*'On September the 11th, 2001, America felt its vulnerability, even to threats that gather on the other side of the Earth. We resolved then and we are resolved today to confront every threat, from any source, that could bring sudden terror and suffering to America.'*

George W Bush, October 7, 2002

The 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT) became a dominant narrative and paved the way for a set of institutionalised militarised practices and collectively held beliefs that make up the post-9/11 world (Jackson, 2005; Hassan, 2013; Halliday, 2010; Buzan and Hansen, 2008, pp. 243-253; Holland, 2014; Croft, 2006, Krebs, 2015). As the above epigraphs attest, the Bush administration's strategic interpretation and response to the tragic events of 9/11 is relevant in understanding how the GWOT emerged and the overall impact that ensued. A 'war on terror' became a global phenomenon and Afghanistan a central country in this perceived war. Within this political, social and cultural context, the executive branch effectively managed to discursively construct a narrative of existential danger and concomitantly the US as the beacon of 'civilisation' and 'freedom' that would take on this newly perceived global threat. It was this strategic framing the Bush administration successfully used – with major support from Congress, the mass media and (subsequently) public opinion – which created a major policy shift.

### *The Construction of a New Paradigm*

The events of 9/11 helped instigate a change in US perceptions and a new paradigm – largely under the tutelage of the executive branch – came into being. Washington would play a forthright and leading role in combating the perceived threat of transnational terrorism. The Bush administration now argued that threats could have imminent danger for the US. This meant by hook or crook Washington would face down any adversaries – state or non-state actors – to ensure stability and prevent any repeat attacks. In order to understand how US policy towards Afghanistan dramatically changed after 9/11, this chapter asks these key questions: What was Washington's relationship with Afghanistan in the post-Cold War period leading up to 9/11? How did the Global War on Terror become the dominant narrative and institutionalised? What bearing did the GWOT have on the intervention in Afghanistan?

US foreign policy altered after the events of September 11. The Bush administration's reading of the strategic threats and opportunities became one through which 9/11 was a central guide. In the aftermath of the attacks a new setting for global order came into being, which heavily involved fighting lethal, international elements. A fresh approach would be one that required a 'hands on' approach to transnational terrorism. The United States' leadership role in this endeavour is something that has in many ways defined the Bush and Obama administrations foreign policy agenda. Moreover, as the security expert Seth Jones



at RAND Corporation stated, the primary objective for US national security goals became understood as one of a perceived terrorist threat:

*I think the primary objective has been to eliminate as much as possible, reduce the threat from terrorist groups that threatened the United States or its interests overseas, particularly Al-Qaeda.*

*There've been other objectives along the way including trying to ensure that nuclear weapons in Pakistan don't get into the hands of terrorists organisations. But I think the primary goal has been a counterterrorism objective, particularly in response to a group that targeted the US on 9/11.<sup>57</sup>*

Through the events of 9/11, the Bush administration discursively constructed a paradigm in which the US would operate in a highly muscular, militaristic capacity in order to take on the phenomenon of terrorism and thereby make itself and its allies safer.<sup>58</sup> Washington now argued the greatest challenge to global security was the nexus of WMDs, state and non-state actors hostile to the United States and its allies.

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<sup>57</sup> Author's interview with Dr Seth Jones on April 22, 2014 at his office. Jones is associate director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation, as well as an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University's School for Advanced International Studies (SAIS). In 2011, he served as the representative for the commander, US Special Operations Command, to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations. Before that, in 2010, Jones was a plans officer and advisor to the commanding general, US Special Operations Forces, in Afghanistan (Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command–Afghanistan).

<sup>58</sup> The Bush administration also managed to convince Congress about the relevance of a heightened amount of domestic surveillance in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. US political history is replete with examples of the Federal Government instigating curbs on civil liberties due to a perceived threat of 'Un-American' activities. The USA Patriot Act was passed almost unanimously through Congress (Public Law 107-56, October 26, 2001).

This chapter builds on accumulating primary source archival material and in-depth expert interviews in order to answer how it was possible and why the United States constructed a paradigm that would have significant repercussions for Afghanistan and international security more broadly. The chapter maintains that constructivism is the most useful theoretical framework to explain the Bush administration's practices in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. In order to test competing claims, one would expect from a constructivist approach an emphasis on the Bush presidency's sense making and discursive construction of a new paradigm in the aftermath of the 9/11, which would intertwine with US (militarised) practices and (geo-) political objectives. There are other relevant approaches such as structural Marxism, which would place the importance on Washington's strategic need for mineral resources. One would therefore expect to see US energy companies and the United States' geo-political position benefiting from the Afghan intervention. Realists also stress the relevance of geo-politics but make the claim that the United States should only have a limited interest in Afghanistan, and that state building would go against Washington's national interest. Moreover, since realism is state-centric it would be sceptical of the relationship between transnational actors such as Al-Qaeda and a state actor harbouring this movement, as the costs would be too high for the rational state actor in question.

### *The Bush Administration's Strategic Choice and Framing*

The Bush administration proclaimed the terrorist acts on September 11 'an act of war' (Bush, September 11, 2001 Bush, September 13, 2001; Public Law 107-40, September 18, 2001). A specific choice of defining the attacks as an act of war

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played a vital role in how Washington proceeded (Holland, 2014, pp. 104-105). This framed narrative meant the United States' decision on how it took on the phenomenon of terrorism became a militarised one that challenged some of the tenets of international law. It meant that Washington would repeatedly articulate the relevance of 'exceptional measures' to take on this new danger. A 'brave' United States would be the leading actor in this endeavour (Croft, 2006; Jackson, 2005). Via the mass media, President Bush and leading Cabinet officials continually articulated – in the aftermath of the attacks – the United States' right to take on the perpetrators of these horrific attacks in a militarised capacity. A new path regarding US national security policy emerged.

One archetypal moment in the aftermath of the tragedy was President Bush's largely spontaneous speech to the rescue workers on the site of Ground Zero on September 14, 2001. The symbolism of standing with 'brave' and 'heroic' individuals in contrast to the cowardly ones who had carried out these attacks was orchestrated for maximum effect. Moreover, Bush's speech also articulated a strong sense of retribution and anger to overcome and defeat the perpetrators of these attacks: *'I can hear you! I can hear you! The rest of the world hears you! And the people – and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon.'* (Bush, September 14, 2001) Major chants of 'U.S.A.! U.S.A.!' from the rescue workers directly followed these words.

President Bush also expressed his adamant resolve in taking on a 'global war on terror'. He argued the United States needed to rid the world of terrorism in a ruthless and overarching way (Clarke, 2004, p. 24). It was therefore the most pressing issue for his administration and for the world. The United States would

with its allies take on this scourge and defeat it. Nothing less would suffice, as Bush stated: *'Now's an opportunity. To do generations a favour. By coming together and whipping terrorism. Hunting it down. Finding it. And holding them accountable. The nation now must understand, this is now the focus of my administration. I will very much engage in domestic policy, of course. I look forward to working with Congress on a variety of issues. But now that war has been declared on us, we will lead the world to victory. To victory.'* (Bush, September 13, 2001)

The Bush administration repeatedly articulated and used for clear strategic purposes the idea that the world had become far more dangerous and the United States more vulnerable (Jackson, 2005; Croft, 2006; Holland, 2014). The approach became one of constantly enunciating a major threat – alongside major US and international media outlets showing the horrific images of 9/11 on innumerable occasions until the threat became taken for granted.

In conjunction with this, transnational actors such as Al-Qaeda, the perpetrators of the attacks, and their state harbourer, the Taliban, were directly implicated. The Bush administration also argued that 'rogue states' – especially Iraq – had or sought to have a direct linkage with transnational terrorist actors. Washington therefore had to do whatever it took to prevent WMDs falling into the 'wrong hands'. This had the additional boon of making, once again, the United States the 'indispensable nation' that would lead in a selectively multilateral capacity the 'global war on terror'.

In the post 9/11 context, Washington's global, militarised response has prioritised Afghanistan and Iraq. The Obama administration particularly focused on Afghanistan. However, understanding the United States' relationship with Afghanistan is also important from a recent historical context. There is a general consensus amongst the national security establishment that America's general neglect of that country in the 1990s – both the George H W Bush and Clinton administrations – meant a certain 'taking the eye off the ball' in regard to the misfortunes of what afflicted the country.<sup>59</sup> As Vanda Felbab-Brown, a security expert at the Brookings Institute pointed out, there was a clear change in thinking regarding US national security in the aftermath of 9/11. This was in clear contrast to the Clinton administration's more distanced approach to counterterrorism:

*'The overriding and dominant US objective has been to punish what happened on 9/11 and prevent future terrorist attacks originating from the area. The decision very much came both because of the trauma of 9/11 but also with a sort of deeper understanding that a distance approach to counterterrorism, which the Clinton administration deployed to Afghanistan in the 1990s wasn't sufficient.'*<sup>60</sup>

The United States' general abandonment of Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal meant Washington largely looked away from the developments in that

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<sup>59</sup> It is a commonly shared narrative in Washington that this neglect meant Afghanistan descended into chaos. This gave 'space' for the rise of the Taliban, which provided sanctuary to significant remnants of Al-Qaeda in the lead up to 9/11.

<sup>60</sup> Author's interview with Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown on April 24, 2014 in Washington D.C. Felbab-Brown is a senior fellow with the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution. She is an expert on international and internal conflicts and nontraditional security threats, including insurgency, organized crime, urban violence and illicit economies.

country. A very brutal civil war broke out after the Peshawar Accord was signed on April 24, 1992. This accord attempted to establish a multi-party, transitional power sharing agreement leading to a general election. It failed from the outset. The various actors started to pummel key Afghan cities – including Kabul – with the ostensible purpose of taking over the country. In 1994, a small and disparate band of Muslim clerics and religious students – who had been radicalised in large part, whilst studying and living in Deobandi Madrassas over the border in Pakistan – emerged as a potent force in the southern part of the country.

The *Taliban* managed to create an authoritative socio-political movement – with a large amount of aid and support from Islamabad<sup>61</sup> – and after capturing the very significant Kandahar in November 1994, started to proceed towards the capital (Saikal, 2004, p. 221). By 1996, this group had overcome the various groups including Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami and Massoud's Jamiat-e-Islami<sup>62</sup> in order to instigate the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The Taliban argued it would create order out of chaos and this was the crucial reason why it was the 'rightful leader' of Afghanistan. A number of warlords had abused their position by raping young girls, stealing land and committing other terrible crimes. Consequently, the Taliban sought to present itself as a movement

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<sup>61</sup> As stated in the previous chapter, Pakistan's relationship with radical, Islamist elements was very well established during the 1980s. Islamabad continued to back radical movements to give it 'strategic depth' vis-à-vis India. Supporting Hekmatyar and subsequently the Taliban meant continuity with the most extreme elements in Afghanistan. Indeed, Benazir Bhutto's administration gave logistical and financial support to the Taliban in order to help it take over the country (Rashid, 2000, pp. 26-30).

<sup>62</sup> This group included prominent Afghan figures: Abdul Dostum, Burhanuddin Rabbani, Mohammed Fahim, Abdullah Abdullah, and Ismail Khan in Herat, who were wholly or partially connected with Massoud.

that would put a stop to these heinous incidents (Crews and Tarzi, 2008, p. 8). With wind in its sails it ventured to bring stability under the leadership of Mullah Omar to a fractious Afghanistan. It received support from some local communities, especially in the Pashtun heartland, who had had enough of the internecine fighting. Local concerns and understanding of this factor made the Taliban brand an initial powerful movement (Canfield, 2008, p. 218).

A main spotlight on the country during this period (1996-2001) nearly always connected with the Taliban's horrendous treatment of women and its extreme zealotry regarding a variety of social issues. Rashid (2000, p. 111) has argued the Taliban's preferred type of governance is traceable to a group of orphans and rootless individuals who initially made up a large part of the movement's foot soldiers. These 'students' had been brought up in the Madrassa, an all-male environment, under very austere conditions, involving a literalist interpretation of the Koran. From this rationale, the movement saw the complete subjugation and control over women as an assertion of their manhood and in line with Jihadist teachings (Ibid.).

This did not prevent the Clinton administration and the major US energy company Unocal (subsequently a subsidiary of Chevron) from trying to cultivate economic ties with the triumphant Taliban. During this period, Unocal argued it could provide the expertise, investment and manpower in creating a reliable source of energy from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan into Pakistan.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> This project has struggled to get off the ground and currently includes India. A route from the gas rich Turkmenistan, via Afghanistan, into Pakistan and India (known as TAPI) was signed on April 25, 2008 with the aim to supply gas by 2017. This is a geostrategic area that major powers –

The continuing instability in Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and the wider Central Asian region was a clear problem for the administration though. This was coupled with human rights actors putting pressure on the Clinton Presidency due to the Taliban's appalling treatment of woman (Crews and Tarzi, 2008, p. 8). Finally, Clinton's decision to bomb Bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan on August 20, 1998 in retaliation for Al-Qaeda's murderous blasting of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania meant the deal between Unocal, the Taliban and Pakistan was all but called off (Rashid, 2000, p. 175).

The Clinton administration attempted to capture Bin Laden in 1999 (Woodward and Ricks, October 3, 2001). However, Washington's more significant concern in the region involved two highly important geostrategic countries – India and Pakistan – and a potential nuclear standoff. The perceived threat of Al-Qaeda and its sanctuary in Afghanistan did not therefore play a major national security role in the pre-9/11 context.

Nevertheless, Washington played a leading role in putting sanctions on the Taliban with the remit that the Islamic Emirate should hand over Bin Laden to the 'appropriate authorities', and stop allowing the territory to be used as a base for planned terrorist operations (Clinton, 2004, pp. 865-866). The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1267 was put in place in order for the international community to put clear pressure on the Taliban regime. In 2000, Washington and

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the United States, Russia, the European Union and China are drawn into. However, this should not be exaggerated in terms of resources and there are a number of other energy pipelines that also concern the major powers. Continuing instability in Afghanistan plays a role in making this route a precarious one (Foster, June 19, 2008). This TAPI pipeline could benefit Afghanistan due to transit fees, access to energy and more regional integration.



Moscow increased the grip on sanctions. This though may well have had the opposite desired effect. According to this rationale, Washington pushed Mullah Omar and the other main Taliban leaders further into the clutches of Al-Qaeda (and to a lesser extent other associated Jihadist, militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba). As Marvin Weinbaum, the leading State Department Intelligence Official on Pakistan and Afghanistan argued:

*'Well, the more we put sanctions on them; the more we pushed them into Al-Qaeda's hands. I in fact was a dissident voice in the State Department at that time. I argued that the sanctions were meaningless. The kind of sanctions that they were didn't bite. And the more we squeezed them. This is the way that I remember phrasing it, "the more we squeezed them, the more they felt they were being tested in their true belief." And so it was having no real impact. Mullah Omar was pretty incognito most of the time.'*<sup>64</sup>

#### *Continuing Bipartisan Consensus on America's Global Leadership Role*

At this late 1990s juncture, the United States arguably stood at the pinnacle of its powers. Washington had successfully brought the Cold War to an end and extended its relationships throughout the globe. In light of this 'unipolar' moment, there was a largely speaking general agreement on aims, if not means, between

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<sup>64</sup> Author's interview with Dr Marvin Weinbaum. Weinbaum served as analyst for Pakistan and Afghanistan in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research from 1999 to 2003. He is currently scholar-in-residence at the Middle East Institute. The author interviewed Dr Weinbaum at his office on April 9, 2014.

Democratic and Republican Presidencies regarding the creation and extension of this leadership role (Lebow, 2003, pp. 310-359).

Washington has a historically informed bipartisan consensus about its global purpose. In this way, there has been an elite level, 'common sense' understanding that the United States should be the world's leading actor due to its ideological, political, economic, military capabilities and qualities (Kissinger, and Vance, 1988, pp. 899-921; Parmar, 2012, p. 17; Lieven, 2008, pp. 435-436).<sup>65</sup> Irrespective of whether a Republican or Democratic administration is in power, the United States deems it right that it has the preeminent role and responsibility for the world. This internationalist approach advances American interests and 'helps' other actors in the process. As Clinton's second term Secretary of State Madeleine Albright opined *'but if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future than other countries, and we see the danger here to all of us.'* (Albright, February 19, 1998).

Into the breach of replacing the Clinton administration came a group of conservative officials many of whom had cut their teeth in the Republican administrations of Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan and George H W Bush. The most prominent of these were Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and to a somewhat lesser extent, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, who believed strongly in the primacy

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<sup>65</sup> The Gramscian term 'common sense' refers to the embedded beliefs, norms and values in a society that the ruling elite, and more broadly, the bourgeoisie have successfully promoted. This helps maintain the status quo. However, in this context and for the purpose of the thesis, the author refers to it as US political elites who have taken for granted America's global leadership role.

of the United States.<sup>66</sup> However, it was the events of 9/11, which created a policy that would turn this belief into a clear and actionable phenomenon.

What the calamity of 9/11 provided was a reference in which crucial strategic leaders – Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld – could implement their own conservative vision of how the United States ought to ensure it was the ‘indispensable’ nation. In their line of reasoning, Washington would lead from the front and work with those allies that accepted the United States’ hegemonic position. There was within this somewhat of a relinquishment of the pre-9/11 mantra regarding its foremost geostrategic rivalry with Russia and China.

### *The Bush Doctrine: Continuity and Change*

The major perceived change and evolution of threat in the post-9/11 climate engendered the Bush Doctrine. This doctrine consisted of four key components (Jervis, 2005, p. 79; Renshon, 2007, p. 2; Cui, 2004, p. 241; Bush, September, 2002). The first related to the liberal adage that one’s domestic regime impacts on how a nation-state conducts its foreign policy. Therefore, the United States had a central

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<sup>66</sup> Not all these officials were in each of these administrations. Due to her relative youth Condoleezza Rice was clearly not a part of the Ford or Reagan Presidential team. On the other hand, Rumsfeld also played a role in the Nixon administration and was personally unpopular with President Nixon’s foreign policy inner circle that included Kissinger and Haldeman. Rumsfeld was then ironically a somewhat dovish figure who ran the Office of Economic Opportunity bureau, an anti-poverty outfit, as well as having a place in Nixon’s executive team. Rumsfeld argued in early 1971 – the winding down of the war in Vietnam should happen as soon as possible. An anti-war advocate is intriguingly how James Mann portrays Rumsfeld at the start of his book *Rise of the Vulcans* (Mann, 2004, pp. 1-20). Thus demonstrating in this case how bureaucratic politics can matter.

role and responsibility in changing the domestic structure of any country inimical to Washington. In particular, a grand US strategic design in transforming global politics became perceived as relevant. The Greater Middle East was the central area of focus for this to take place.

The Bush administration emphasised its identification with a liberal democratic order that promoted political and economic liberty at home and abroad. The United States' own conception of its country as the harbinger of 'freedom' and 'civilised' values and a promoter of democracy where it can take root was stressed. In this respect, the muscular Wilsonian approach to the Greater Middle East was an extension of a 'benign' United States, which believed that intervening and having deeper relations with other states/societies would help – in the medium and long term – bring about greater benefits for all parties concerned. In this way, it would also benefit the respective countries in question due to an increase of political and economic liberalisation. As Robert Lieber, an academic and foreign policy advisor to several Presidential campaigns argued, leading US policymakers have had a long-term bipartisan agreement on these key issues:

*'...There's a belief that it would be a better, safer world, more stable, more peaceful, if more countries were democratic. But there too if you unpack it, the reality of both the NSS [The National Security Strategy] and of US policy were much more subtle than the critiques were. The gist of criticism both at home and abroad was that Bush was going around the world trying to push people towards democracy at the point of a bayonet. And that's just no relationship to reality...He [George W Bush] makes it crystal clear – and by the way – in language that's almost unmistakably similar to Democratic and Republican Presidents to the extent if you put sentences from*

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*different inaugural addresses, one after another, you would be hard pressed to figure out if they were coming from Kennedy or Reagan or Clinton or whomever. Harry Truman for that matter. And basically it said we support it but it's up to them to do it, we can help, it can be a work of generations and so forth.'*<sup>67</sup>

A second part to the Bush doctrine was the importance of acting decisively in order to defeat the new terrorist threat whether of a national and/or transnational kind. If this meant acting preventively then the Bush administration would take that decision. Pre-emption is (arguably) acceptable under international law as it aims to avert or prevent the imminent, deadly attack of another actor when there is clear and incontrovertible evidence. On the other hand, preventive war aims to prevent harm from a more distant threat. It is seen in both the Just War tradition and international law as illegal partially because the idea of knowing another actor's short or medium term intentions is fraught with uncertainty and undermines the Westphalian system. The Bush administration disregarded the pre-emptive/preventive distinction, as their argument was that it is always up to the United States to first and foremost defend itself no matter what any international body or forum might think.

The third part to the doctrine referred to the importance of selective multilateralism. This could be applied to other Presidencies, but the Bush administration, especially in the first term and the Iraq War took the importance of unilateralism in US foreign policy to its logical extreme. At the same time, as Lieber, Renshon, Leffler and Jervis all argue, the overemphasis on Iraq and the

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<sup>67</sup> Author's interview with Professor Robert Lieber at his office on April 16, 2014.

Bush administration's focus on developing 'improved' international institutions – with the US being the leader of a liberal global order – made the Bush Presidency not too dissimilar from previous ones (Renshon, 2010, pp. 50-53; Leffler, 2005, pp. 395-413; Jervis, 2006, p. 17).

A final part to the doctrine was the salience of US primacy. This related to how the United States was the world's leading country that needed to maintain this role with a formidable military. In this domain, Washington outspent other major countries by a very large amount (Perlo-Freeman et al., April, 2013, p. 2).<sup>68</sup> A tactically flexible US was seen as the right approach and this helped ensure US political and economic interests (Department of Defense, September 30, 2001; Department of Defense, February 6, 2006).

An important distinction needs to be made in that a Presidential Doctrine is only a statement of intent and an administration's behaviour varies over time due to the complexities of real world crises. A doctrine is also used to threaten others. However, this publically articulated approach to the world also gives an understanding into how the Bush administration thought and by extension leads to an emphasis on the psychologically reinforcing element of one's own motives and actions, as Robert Jervis explicates '*...there is a tendency for people to act in accord with the explanations they have given for their own behaviour, which means that the Doctrine could guide behaviour even if it started as a rationalization.*' (Jervis, 2005, p. 79)

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<sup>68</sup> This exorbitant military spending is a bipartisan phenomenon, which aims to continue US primacy.

One significant feature about the Bush Doctrine was the idea of primacy. It was the case the Bush administration underlined this factor more than the George H W Bush, Clinton and Obama administrations. However, it was not solely a conservative, Republican President that believed and acted upon this idea. The Clinton and Obama Presidencies have also argued for the continuing relevance of American primacy and global leadership (Clinton, June 16, 1995; Obama, May 22, 2010).

In this instance, this type of thinking can also connect with neo-realist and liberal institutionalist approaches. Indeed, hegemonic stability theory refers to the relevance of a dominant actor in the international system that through its overtly powerful position can provide incentives and enforce the rules of the road for other states to follow whether on the political, security or economic front. This helps produce collectively desirable outcomes (Snidal, 1985, p. 579; Keohane, 2012, p. 117). Without this, according to the theory, the world becomes a more unstable and dangerous place (Kindleberger, 1986, p. 289). The role of 'Pax Britannica' in the nineteenth and early twentieth century global order and subsequently 'Pax Americana' is therefore a net benefit. Thus, to take the case of the post-Second World War context, there has needed to be a collectively held belief in the relevance of America playing this part. In this way, Washington has a prevalent bipartisan consensus view that a leading United States should and does play the crucial role in the world due to its liberal and universal values (Calleo, 2009, p. 4; Bacevich, 2005). This directly connects with a dynamic American economy and security apparatus that can defend its perceived interests. As Obama argued:

*'In fact, by most measures, America has rarely been stronger relative to the rest of the world. Those who argue otherwise – who suggest that America is in decline, or has seen its global leadership slip away – are either misreading history or engaged in partisan politics. Think about it. Our military has no peer. The odds of a direct threat against us by any nation are low and do not come close to the dangers we faced during the Cold War. Meanwhile, our economy remains the most dynamic on Earth; our businesses the most innovative. Each year, we grow more energy independent. From Europe to Asia, we are the hub of alliances unrivaled in the history of nations. America continues to attract striving immigrants. The values of our founding inspire leaders in parliaments and new movements in public squares around the globe. And when a typhoon hits the Philippines, or schoolgirls are kidnapped in Nigeria, or masked men occupy a building in Ukraine, it is America that the world looks to for help. So the United States is and remains the one indispensable nation. That has been true for the century passed and it will be true for the century to come.'* (Obama, May 28, 2014)

#### *US Leadership and a 'We Feeling' between America and its Allies*

The Democratic Party criticised George W Bush's administration partly because of its particularly hawkish personnel. However, prior to this, George H W Bush's administration included Dick Cheney (Secretary of Defense), Colin Powell (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and Paul Wolfowitz (Undersecretary of Defense for Policy). The difference between these actors was only in tactics rather than overall global strategy. Whether working for George H W Bush or George W



Bush's administration, all believed in the primacy of security issues for dealing with the world and the importance of having a strong United States, which could achieve its major interests (Mann, 2004, p. 218). At the same time, the bipartisan aspect of US foreign policy and belief in American global leadership means that there is an element of continuity between administrations regardless of whether it is a Democratic or Republican Presidency (Bacevich, Op. cit.).

For instance, at the end of George H W Bush's tenure, the Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney (and future Vice President in George W Bush's administration) issued a strategic analysis 'Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy' in which it argued strongly for US democracy promotion, primacy and safeguarding access to Middle Eastern oil (Cheney, January, 1993). In the case of democracy promotion, Cheney's words are completely in tune with the Clinton Doctrine of 'Engagement and Enlargement' in which democracy promotion and free markets would go hand in hand with a more prosperous international system that benefited the United States and its 'allies' (Cheney, January, 1993, p. 1). Moreover, this gives strategic depth for the United States against any of its 'foes'. Cheney's clear use of a 'we feeling' in the following passage provides a sense of a 'shared community' that empowers the United States and its political alliances, which goes well beyond a purely realist project:

*'Our alliances, built during our struggle of Containment, are one of the great sources of our strength in this new era. They represent a democratic "zone of peace," a community of democratic nations bound together by a web of political, economic, and security ties. This zone of peace offers a framework for security not through competitive rivalries in arms, but through cooperative approaches and security*

*institutions... This will require us to strengthen our alliances and to extend the zone of peace to include the newly independent nations of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, as these now-fragile states succeed in their struggle to build free societies and free markets out of the ruin of Communism... Where the stakes so merit, we must have forces ready to protect our critical interests.'* (Cheney, 1993, p. 1)

The Secretary of Defense's *primus inter pares* argument connects with the Clinton administration (Clinton, February, 1995, p. i). Indeed, the leaked document known as the 'Defense Planning Guidance' to the New York Times in 1992 – Wolfowitz argued for US primacy, a prevention of any rival matching the United States, and direct access to oil in the Middle East<sup>69</sup> – is not so controversial when considering US foreign policy in the Cold War and especially post-Cold War perspective (Tyler, March 8, 1992; Leffler, Op. cit.).

The aftermath of the Cold War provided Washington with a clear global leadership role. The Clinton Doctrine emphasised 'Enlargement and Engagement' and this was premised on three factors: sustaining a world leading military; prominence given to economic liberalisation and interdependence of global trade; and democracy promotion (Clinton, February, 1995, p. i; Lake, September 21, 1993).

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<sup>69</sup> President Franklin D. Roosevelt's relationship with the Saudi Arabian King Ibn Saud was an important one. In 1943, Roosevelt declared the defence of Saudi Arabia an essential national interest (Klare, 2004; Yergin, 2008; Lieber, 2005, p. 128). Moreover, in 1945, an agreed oil-for-security pact illustrated the United States' official acknowledgement of the great strategic importance oil would have in the post-Second World War context. The Carter Doctrine of January 23, 1980, stated the US would use any force necessary to protect the Persian Gulf region shows the relevance of oil being a long-term concern for Washington. Therefore, George W Bush's administration was certainly not unique in acknowledging and acting upon this perceived interest.

Values and interests intertwined in order to 'aid' and 'improve' a US-led global order.

Subsequent leading officials of George W Bush's administration – including Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz – gave Clinton a clear prescription regarding Iraq as illustrated in their co-signatures of the Project for the American Century letter on January 26, 1998. In this letter to Clinton, there was an emphasis on decisively overthrowing Saddam Hussein's-led Baathist regime. It argued that Iraq's threatening and aggressive practices were clearly having a destabilising element in the Middle East due to the Iraqi leader's insistence on acquiring WMDs. According to this rationale, since the Baathist regime was not a rational actor, it could not be contained (Project for the American Century, January 26, 1998).

The Republican Party's emphasis on overthrowing the Baathist Iraq was in place during the pre-9/11 context. Elements of George W Bush's administration may have had the idea of regime change in relation to Iraq pre 9/11 and the tragedy of these events meant their plans could be operationalised sooner. However, there are certain questions this poses: Why did George W Bush's administration not have a clear game plan for Iraq in place pre-9/11? How was it possible the 9/11 attacks either aided or sped up the process for the case of a war in Iraq? Why did the administration concentrate much more on its major strategic rivals pre-9/11? Why was containment of Iraq seen as correct approach before the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon?

*The Meaning of 9/11*

That is to argue, the events of 9/11 played a clear role in the discursive position of the Bush administration, especially through the *meaning* it provided. There was already a desire to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime but the calculus of a 9/11 world tilted the balance in the direction of an invasion (Jervis, 2005; Renshon, 2007, p 8; Litwak, 2007; Lieber, 2005). An invasion of Iraq could have happened without these tragic events but it was now an opportune moment for the administration to argue and put in place a plan for ousting a hostile dictator in a significant geo-economic region.

Being able to win support of public opinion is an important element to whether an administration follows through on a substantial foreign policy decision. Indeed, this also should be a reason for treating with a touch of scepticism the complete *prima facie* connection between Project for the New American Century's letter to President Clinton and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It is easy to make the case for a war but being in government creates a whole load of responsibilities and complex situations, which an administration needs to take on board before being able to commit to any major decision.

The meaning attributed to 9/11 largely changed the rules of the game for US policymakers and public opinion (Fierke, 2007; Booth and Dunne, 2002, preface). Even the United States was now perceived as vulnerable to physical attack on its mainland. This meant for the Bush administration, the traditional deterrence model – favoured by realists – did not provide a sure fire way of keeping the US public safe (Leffler, 2003, pp. 1048-1049). Washington would be 'proactive' in taking on transnational terrorism, which involved the Iraq invasion. A new and

clear perspective came into place. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made this point:

*'The coalition did not act in Iraq because we had discovered dramatic new evidence of Iraq's pursuit of WMD; we acted because we saw the existing evidence in a new light – through the prism of our experience on 9/11. On that day, we saw thousands of innocent men, women and children, killed by terrorists. And that experience changed our appreciation of our vulnerability – and the risks the U.S. faces from terrorist states and terrorist networks armed with weapons of mass murder.'*  
(Rumsfeld, July 9, 2003)

The Bush administration argued the perceived threat had changed. It made the case for a global counterterrorism mission, which needed the support of the American people. Bush wanted to secure the country from any further potential attacks (Rice, 2011). In this way, President Bush was adamant the protection of US civilians – whether on a domestic or overseas basis – would be a top priority. The President immediately started to argue forcefully for a 'robust response' and a capturing of the perpetrators of the attacks (Bush, September 11, 2001). This was to get Congress on board and generate support from its allies and the US public.

Bush repeatedly stated the United States was the essential country of progress, freedom and democracy. Within the first hours of the attacks, the Bush administration was adamant the attacks were the actions of radicalised terrorists who especially hated US freedoms. A very quick binary distinction between 'us' and 'them' pervaded the narrative and it was the 'responsibility' of all governments and peoples to be on the side of the leading 'civilised' force in the

world (Rowley and Weldes, 2008, pp. 184-207; Der Derian, 2002, p 102; Burke, 2007, p. 130). This resulted in Washington taking a heavily militarised path. Moreover, the President argued that due to its exceptional qualities the United States was attacked and for this reason it would steadfastly take on the mantle of defending 'freedom' and 'goodness' in the world:

*'America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.... None of us will ever forget this day. Yet, we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world. Thank you. Good night, and God bless America.'*

(Bush, September 11, 2001)

The interweaving of values and interests is part and parcel of the complex dynamic that makes up US foreign policy (Leffler, 2003, p. 1050). This has a historical dynamic that continues up to the present. To entirely separate these two factors is a false dichotomy. As one of the opening quotes of this thesis demonstrated, George W Bush administration's National Security Advisor and subsequent Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice articulated the complete interchanging of values and interests in her Wriston Lecture of October 1, 2002, in part to explain and justify the Bush Doctrine, and to elucidate upon the real intricacies and flexibility a policymaker needs to have when approaching important foreign policy matters.

Washington's geo-strategic goal of having an important footprint in the Southwest Asian region and to some extent promoting development, governance and security in Afghanistan is a clear illustration of the forceful aspect between these two

elements. Trying to expand markets, territorial influence and democracy throughout the globe – whether in a direct or indirect way – is something Washington promotes in an ideologically committed way in order to achieve its perceived goals (Smith, 2012; Williams, 1972, pp. 13-16). This difficult and disquieting dynamic continues as the United States' relationship vis-à-vis Afghanistan makes abundantly clear.

### *George W Bush Administration's Initial Priorities pre-9/11*

The Bush administration did not prioritise the threat of Al-Qaeda and its sanctuary in Afghanistan pre-9/11 (Woodward, 2002; Clarke, 2004). There were a number of previous warnings on the perceived threat emanating from transnational terrorism, which had little impact at the beginning of the Bush Presidency's tenure (Milne, 2015, pp. 433-434; Coll, 2004, pp. 546-548). For example, on January 25, 2001, the National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Counterterrorism Richard Clarke, sent a memo to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, requesting an immediate meeting with the National Security Council. This was in order to discuss and come up with a deliberate and comprehensive plan vis-à-vis the threat of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and the wider world.

In the memo, Clarke recommended the United States work more closely with the Northern Alliance, as the Taliban was not only a brutal theocracy but in many ways – pertinently enough as it was clearly stated by an experienced leading government official – dependent on Al-Qaeda support. In conjunction with this,

Clarke stressed the importance of neighbouring Uzbekistan and whether it should be provided counterterrorism aid.<sup>70</sup> There was also the question of Al-Qaeda's sanctuary in Afghanistan and the role of Pakistan and the Taliban in aiding this transnational actor. Furthermore, Clarke asked whether there should be increasing funding for the CIA in counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda and new drone flights. The other major point in the memo related to the importance of dealing with the *USS Cole* attacks in Aden, Yemen of October 12, 2000 and what the new administration ought to do in this regard (Clarke, Memo, January 25, 2001). His request for a Principals Committee meeting was unsuccessful as it only took place on September 4, 2001 (Clarke, 2004, p. 237).

Initial thinking for the incoming Bush administration was focused on hostile regimes that were attempting to obtain ballistic missiles for use against US cities and especially the challenge of strategic competitors – China and Russia (Coll, 2004, p. 547). This latter type of 'realpolitik' thinking played an important role for the administration, as it wanted to increase in relative terms, the United States' military and economic strength.

### *The 'Global War on Terror', Afghanistan and US Exceptionalism*

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, though, the US reoriented its objectives. Washington continually articulated the threat of terrorism as the key global phenomenon that the United States, its allies and even strategic competitors

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<sup>70</sup> At this present time, the exact operational detail has been redacted due to the CIA's intervention.



would have to defeat. This laid the groundwork for a policy that would involve an enormous amount of resources and manpower. A linkage of transnational terrorism, WMDs and rogue states was instigated most forcefully in this post-9/11 context. The Clinton administration had fully conceptualised the contentious term 'rogue state', but it was now the Bush Presidency that decided on a policy, which would link these three significant elements in order to argue the magnitude of the threat to the 'civilised' world. Bush claimed these states could not be deterred due to the inherent nature of the regimes, as outlined in his State of the Union address in 2002: *'States like these and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.'* (Bush, January 29, 2002)

It was a pivotal speech that aided the eventual implementation of the Bush Doctrine. Up until this point the United States had accepted the widest possible support – including Iran – vis-à-vis the military operation in routing out the Taliban and attempting to destroy Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The Bush administration and Congress – via the transmission belt of the mass media – successfully used political rhetoric in a way that helped construct a taken-for-granted 'reality' wherein the US was fighting a 'global war on terror'. This State of the Union Address solidified and helped make actionable the administration's foreign policy objectives (Croft, 2006, pp. 111-112).

Afghanistan was previously only indirectly linked with the rogue state doctrine. It

was more perceived in the post-Cold War milieu as either a 'failed state' or within the purview of Washington's foreign policy community, a 'forgotten one'. It lacked direct strategic relevance. With the attacks of 9/11, though, the Bush administration assembled a vast degree of support domestically and internationally. This was translated into getting political backing from the main opposition actors within Afghanistan – an important consideration for the upcoming 'Operation Enduring Freedom'.

In the aftermath of the attacks, President Bush most forcefully iterated the tragedy that had afflicted the United States of America. A country that was the epitome of 'freedom', 'decency' and 'civilisation' had been attacked for precisely these reasons: *'Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this Chamber, a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.'* (Bush, September 20, 2001)

This particular speech on September 20 emphasised how the Bush administration would take on and defeat global terrorism. Bush's stress on Bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda network meant any state actor that harboured, financed or supported this entity would also be attacked as it was on the side of 'barbarism'. A central factor laid down in this speech was the importance of making the distinction between a civilised 'us' and a barbaric 'them'. This meant the Bush administration could construct a policy that was retributive, but at the same time argue it was a legitimate one as it was on the side of justice. Maintaining America was hated precisely because of its 'greatness' meant the United States needed to be ready for

the long haul, in order to have a just global order led by a 'courageous' and 'freedom loving' US. As Bush opined, in this major tragedy the United States had discovered its new mission:

*'Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger, we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depends on us. Our nation, this generation, will lift the dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail.'* (Bush, September 20, 2001)

Bush's speech expressed the predominant uniformity of international opinion regarding the terrible attacks of 9/11. In this regard, President Bush was correct. An overwhelming majority of nation-states including ones that were seen as hostile – Iran, Libya and North Korea – expressed their condolences and in many cases outrage at the calamitous events (New York Times, September 12, 2001; KNCA, September 12, 2001; Time Europe, September 18, 2001). *'Nous sommes tous Américains'* ran *Le Monde's* editorial on September 13 to show French solidarity with the American people (Colombani, September 13, p. 1).<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the day after the attacks on September 12, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1368, in which it stood firmly with the United

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<sup>71</sup> The author had a wide-ranging interview with His Excellency Abdulla Ali Al-Radhi, the former Yemen Ambassador to the UK at his official residence on June 16, 2013. Al-Radhi made the salient point that Russia and China were particularly supportive for two reasons: firstly, it was a terrible loss of life; secondly, both Moscow and Beijing related it to their own perceived domestic terrorist threats.

States in its tragedy and that terrorism was a threat to international peace and security. An action plan was outlined in this resolution, which had the full cooperation of the international community to bring the perpetrators to justice. Indeed, Bush identified the 'collective will' of the world to the United States' cause. Moreover, the President made this subsequent announcement of strikes on specific targets in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001 resulting in the start of 'Operation Enduring Freedom':

*'On my orders, the United States military has begun strikes against Al Qaida terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. These carefully targeted actions are designed to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime.'*

*We are joined in this operation by our staunch friend Great Britain. Other close friends, including Canada, Australia, Germany, and France, have pledged forces as the operation unfolds. More than 40 countries in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and across Asia have granted air transit or landing rights. Many more have shared intelligence. We are supported by the collective will of the world.'* (Bush, October 7, 2001)

In his prior address of September 20, to a Joint Session of Congress, Bush made an appeal in the widest possible way to get support for any upcoming decisions on the 'war on terror'. The President's inclusive use of groups from a whole host of nations and religious beliefs made the case that the United States would lead the 'civilised' world against what was the terrible scourge of global terrorism.

Throughout the September 20 speech, President Bush also sought to differentiate the vast majority of Muslims who were peaceful, decent and law abiding. Moreover, he stressed the United States' admiration for Afghanistan and the Afghan people. The amount of humanitarian aid from the 'generous' American people to those in need was 'testimony to this fact'. Bush even made an initial distinction between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The Taliban had two choices: one was to collaborate and join with the 'civilised world' by handing over the key leaders of Al-Qaeda. This was non-negotiable. The other option was the direct connection the Bush administration would make between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in which case the Taliban regime would be overthrown and defeated. As Bush stated:

*'Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, and hand over every terrorist and every person in their support structure to appropriate authorities. Give the United States full access to terrorist training camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating. These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. The Taliban must act and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate.'*

(Bush, September 20, 2001)

### *Operation Enduring Freedom and Getting Important Actors on Board*

The Bush administration had the goodwill of the international community and would make full use of it vis-à-vis the military campaign of Afghanistan commencing October 7, 2001. This subsequently became known as 'Operation

Enduring Freedom' and was a major part of the wider 'war on terror'. Despite this level of professed support by a whole swathe of countries – including the United Kingdom, which offered to do almost anything required – the Bush administration decided it would be a completely US-led operation. Any country that wanted to come on board would have had to fully accept US leadership and command. The Bush administration argued it did not want to have another 'war by committee' as evidenced by NATO's performance in the 1990s Balkans 'fiasco' (Burke, 2011, p. 48; Dumbrell, 2006, p. 153).

The initial naming of the campaign as Operation Ultimate Justice and Bush using the 'crusade' term caused uproar in many parts of Europe and the Islamic world (BBC News, September 25, 2001). As Bush stated: *'This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while, and the American people must be patient. I'm going to be patient. But I can assure the American people, I am determined.'* (Bush, September 16, 2001) It was not the first time a President had used the term 'crusade' against an international adversary. Ronald Reagan used it numerous times, as did Dwight Eisenhower in his World War Two memoir *Crusade in Europe* and also when referring to the importance of the National Committee for a Free Europe to win 'freedom' for those countries in the Soviet bloc (Eisenhower, March 27, 1956). It was though a deeply unfortunate and historically insensitive remark when examined in the light of a potential 'clash of civilizations', which the Bush administration was doing its upmost to avoid.

Washington decided after 9/11 it had to get two crucial actors on board for its upcoming military campaign in Afghanistan. The first was Pakistan. In the days following the attacks, the Bush administration emphasised the adage that *'either*

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*you are with us, or you are with the terrorists*'.<sup>72</sup> This became immediately evident. On September 12, the Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage gave a clear ultimatum to the visiting director of the Inter-Services Directorate Intelligence (ISI) Mahmud Ahmed that Islamabad had to choose sides (Martinez, U.S. Department of State, Cable, September 12, 2001). The demand – not captured in these US diplomatic cables, although never denied in Washington – was the clear threat Armitage made to General Mahmud. This subsequent message is conveyed to President Pervez Musharraf who recounted it in his autobiography: *'If we [Pakistan] chose the terrorists, then we should be prepared to be bombed back to the Stone Age.'* (Musharraf, 2006, p. 201; Islam, 2012, p. 89)

A subsequent phone conversation between Secretary of State Colin Powell and President Musharraf further iterated the importance for Pakistan to be fully on board. Powell argued that due to Islamabad's *'unique relationship with the Taliban, it has a vital role to play.'* There was also an indirect, diplomatically coercive statement made to Musharraf pressing the importance of having a completely engaged Pakistan: *'As one general to another, we need someone on our flank fighting with us. And speaking candidly, the American people would not understand if Pakistan was not in the fight with the U.S.'* (U.S. Department of State, Cable, September 13, 2001).

On the following day, using the same binary language, the US Ambassador to Pakistan Wendy Chamberlin told President Musharraf that the *'rules of the game'*

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<sup>72</sup> Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) made use of this type of uncompromising language on September 13, 2001, in an interview with Dan Rather on CBS Evening News. President Bush used the exact terminology a week later at his address to the Joint Session of Congress.

had changed and Pakistan needed to take an unequivocal stance in its relationship with terrorism. World history was taking place. Musharraf subsequently stated full support for the United States and argued that Pakistan knew very well what sacrifice and resolve was needed (U.S. Embassy (Islamabad) to SecState, Cable, September 13, 2001).

President Musharraf's strong statement of purpose was consequently put into concrete, realistic steps with the second meeting between Armitage and General Mahmud on September 14. In the meeting, Armitage outlined the Bush administration's insistence on the support of key demands that included: publically condemning terrorism; giving full military and logistical support to the United States; incorporating blanket landing rights, a clear military focus of facing down Al-Qaeda; and breaking off its ties with the Taliban (unless this movement offered unconditional support) (U.S. Department of State, Cable, September 14, 2001). A number of these main areas have plagued US/Pakistan relations in the post-9/11 context, but at this point in time, Musharraf agreed to all the demands (U.S. Embassy (Islamabad) to SecState, Cable, September 14, 2001; Bush, 2010, p. 188).

The Northern Alliance was the second important actor the United States got on board. This multi-ethnic, socially diverse movement was a predominately anti-Taliban alliance that came into being in 1996 in opposition to the Taliban ruled Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Mujahideen and warlords that turned on each other in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal – which led to the eventual rise of the Taliban – were a part of the alliance. The *de facto* leader of the movement pre-9/11 was the charismatic military commander in the resistance against the Soviet

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Union – Ahmed Shah Massoud – who had become a thorn in the side of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and Pakistan’s ISI. Russia, India, Tajikistan and Iran all supported Massoud ‘the Lion of Panjshir’ and his disparate outfit, the Northern Alliance.

A couple of Tunisian civilians, Al-Qaeda inspired suicide bombers, assassinated Massoud on September 9, 2001. This was a preparatory strike for the upcoming attacks in Washington and New York. Bin Laden and his associates calculated that with Massoud out of the way it would put them and the Taliban in a stronger position should the ‘cowardly’ US retaliate (Burke, 2011, pp. 515-516; Anderson, 2002).<sup>73</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin telephoned President Bush after the assassination of Massoud on September 9 to express his major concern about the significance of this act. This was documented in the BBC documentary, “Iran and the West”, as Putin stated: *‘Mr Bush and I spoke. I said that Massoud the leader of the Northern Alliance had just been killed. I told my American colleague, “I’m very worried. Something big is going to happen. They’re planning something.”’* (Iran and the West: Nuclear Confrontation, BBC, 2009)

After 9/11, the Bush administration had the Northern Alliance completely on board. The unity it displayed in overthrowing the Taliban would quickly change. Once again it split into many different political movements and parties after Hamid Karzai was chosen to lead an interim government at the Bonn Conference of December 2001 (United Nations Security Council, December 5, 2001). The

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<sup>73</sup> Burke makes the point that the Taliban leadership was adamantly against Al-Qaeda carrying out any US homeland attack (Burke, 2011, p. 516).

subsequent 'Emergency Loya Jirga' in June 2002 – a type of grand council of major Afghan individuals and parties with shifting loyalties – voted on key constitutional issues. This included extending Karzai's mandate until Presidential elections in 2004. The United States and its allies firmly backed a new path, which included a democratically elected (and pluralistic) National Assembly and President.<sup>74</sup>

### *Inter-Agency Disagreements over Operation Enduring Freedom*

With the run up to 'Operation Enduring Freedom', starting October 7, 2001, two different tactics were considered. The CIA as well as the Commander of the campaign and head of CENTCOM General Tommy Franks – in opposition to the Department of Defense under Rumsfeld <sup>75</sup> – was sceptical of the Northern Alliance's level of capability, reliability and performance. The State Department also expressed concern about what would happen in a post-Taliban Afghanistan. This meant an agreement on another tactic. To support a 'southern strategy' in which local tribes in southern Afghanistan, would rise up against the Taliban, as it was in this part of the country where the Pashtun-led Taliban had the bedrock of its support.

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<sup>74</sup> This did not rid the country of various warlords. However, it did at least provide a more pluralistic political forum.

<sup>75</sup> In contrast to the Weinberger/Powell Doctrine, Bush and Rumsfeld believed that with the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) of the 1990s, the United States generally needed to have a 'light footprint' and stealth tactics in overseas campaigns, particularly for Operation Enduring Freedom (Dodge, 2013). This policy though would evolve with the Bush and Obama administrations becoming increasingly committed to state-building resulting in an enormous increase in civil-military expenditure and presence in Afghanistan. Eventually the counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy became too expensive and difficult to sustain. There was a clear return of emphasis to the overall counter-terrorist approach.

The CIA would work on two fronts: firstly with the Northern Alliance coming from the north of the country downwards and secondly to concurrently provide funding for the southern strategy. There were those within the Bush administration and intelligence community who (at least initially) took on board Islamabad's concerns regarding the Northern Alliance. Pakistan was uneasy about the Northern Alliance potentially taking control of the country, as it wanted to maintain influence on future developments in Afghanistan (Burke, 2011, p. 49).

The Bush administration perceived its initial intervention in the country a successful one (Rohde and Sanger, 2007). This was evidenced with the routing of the Taliban and the dispersion of key Al-Qaeda operatives within the space of a couple of months. The difference of tactical opinions meant the twin track of supporting the Northern Alliance with Special Operation Forces and concomitantly continuing to encourage Pashtuns to rise up fully against the Taliban in the south and east of the country. This created a slightly more drawn out process. In particular, the clear challenge of getting on board significant tribes in the south that would support the United States' intervention.

This twin track policy had critics – Rumsfeld and other senior leadership at the Department of Defense – who saw the need for patience regarding a 'southern strategy' as a needlessly time-wasting process. The Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) meant the Pentagon favoured precision/smart bombing and other devices in order to 'shock and awe' local militias and anyone who harboured them. This connected with a 'light footprint' approach as the United States wanted to prevent mission creep (Jones, 2010, pp. 110-115 and pp. 131-133; Rumsfeld, 2011, p. 398). This had initial broad support within Bush's cabinet, with the partial exception of

the State Department under Powell. However, towards the end of Bush's second term and the perceived successful results from the surge in Iraq, a change in thinking regarding stabilisation and state building took place. Rumsfeld opposed this throughout his tenure as Secretary of Defence due to a belief that RMA provided the tools for achieving the United States' national security objectives. Steve Coll elucidated on this particular point:

*'Rumsfeld I think was consistent and powerfully consistent in his scepticism about stabilisation and nation building.... it was connected at least in part with what had preoccupied him before in 2001, which was the transformation of warfare and this kind of Andy Marshall, technological transformation that large land armies and large military systems, even naval systems were going to be increasingly irrelevant. As globalisation, precision and cyber and satellite weapons defined military power from an offshore platform to a much greater extent than in previous eras of warfare. So he was envisaging a kind of turning point in military affairs that might be analogous to the birth of airpower.*

*And he saw land armies and stabilisation operations as antithetical, especially if they were longer than two or three months, to build a relief in the case of a hurricane, or a Tsunami. So that was the second factor, his philosophy. His vision, which he retained even after 9/11, challenged the premise by calling attention to the dangers of ungoverned spaces that might only be governed if they were stabilised first.'*<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Author's interview with Pulitzer Prize winning author Professor Steve Coll, former managing editor of the Washington Post, ex-President of the New America Foundation and currently Dean of Columbia Journalism School.

In regard to the Afghan campaign, the US media largely ignored the reporting of casualties and it was portrayed as a success due to the 'rapid collapse of the Taliban' (Rogers, 2008, p. 164). Senior leadership at the Pentagon continually made the tactical argument that it could more easily achieve its objectives using precision bombing – this policy was carried out in its entirety once the southern strategy had been put on the back burner due to the Northern Alliance's promise it would not enter Kabul (Burke, 2011, p. 56).<sup>77</sup> At the same time, as Anthony Cordesman, a leading US national security analyst/advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies persuasively argued: *'carelessly seeking immediate tactical advantage at the cost of major strategic risks and penalties is stupid and dangerous. Creating more enemies than you kill is self-defeating; making it politically and ideologically impossible to end a war and so is spreading new levels of anger and hatred to other countries and/or factions.'* (Cordesman, July 31, 2006)

#### *Finding Key Leaders of Al-Qaeda and a Missed Opportunity*

The intervention was a double-edged sword. It overthrew the Taliban and dispersed leading Al-Qaeda operatives. However, as the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations report of 2009 argued, the lack of capturing key leadership personnel was a 'lost opportunity'. It created a negative trajectory regarding the eventual resurgence of an Afghan insurgency and provided Bin Laden with the opportunity of being a symbolic 'role model' for a number of transnational Al-

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<sup>77</sup> The Northern Alliance broke this promise when it took control of Kabul on November 10, 2001.

Qaeda and other similarly inspired Jihadists who wanted to emulate their 'hero' (US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, November 30, 2009).

The Committee made the case that the beginning of 'Operation Enduring Freedom' was a wasted opportunity in its failure to capture Bin Laden and other vital Al-Qaeda figures. A consultation of various sources including the US Special Operations Command report, 1987-2007, spelt out how the CIA received clear reports, which stated leading Al-Qaeda operatives (including Bin Laden) would flee to the Spin Ghar mountain range: *'Analysts within the CIA and CENTCOM correctly speculated that UBL [Usama/Osama bin Laden] would make a stand along the northern peaks of the Spin Ghar Mountains at a place then called Tora Gora. Tora Bora, as it was redubbed in December, had been a major stronghold of AQ for years and provided routes into Pakistan.'* (United States Special Operations Command, 2007, p. 93)

A number of key Al-Qaeda and Taliban personnel escaped into Pakistan – whether into the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA), the Khyber Pakhunkwa, or Balochistan, Quetta<sup>78</sup> – and would from these bases coordinate insurgent attacks on Coalition and Afghan National Security Forces. At the time of the Tora Bora Campaign, though, December 12 to 17, 2001, the Bush administration had a light footprint tactic with only the elite Special Forces alongside various Afghanistan warlords and mercenaries. This meant the fight against Bin Laden in the Tora Bora – with overhead precision bombing taking place – was not enough to prevent key

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<sup>78</sup> And most famously of all – Abbottabad – where Bin Laden was finally killed on May 2, 2011 in an operation codenamed 'Operation Neptune Spear'.

Al-Qaeda operatives from slipping away (Bergen, 2009).

The CIA Director George Tenet has subsequently argued that a lack of US ground troops may well have been another factor as why Bin Laden managed to escape (Tenet, 2007, pp. 191-206). Indeed, Gary Bernstein, the main CIA operative of this specific mission stated that Tommy Franks turned down his request for an additional several hundred army rangers (Berntsen and Pezzullo, 2006). The White House and Franks rejected the idea of a supplementary thousand troops to fight and block the southern passage of the Tora Bora, as there was a widespread belief in a 'light footprint' and that the Afghan commanders were up to the mission, since they were the 'experts' regarding the territory.

### *The Problem of Binary Thinking in the Afghan Environment*

It was a binary struggle of 'good' versus 'evil' that made the United States sure of the mission against Bin Laden and his key operatives. However, Afghan commanders did not share this US narrative and had another perspective in which to understand the mission. A historical overview meant the local commanders would try to maximise their power and influence vis-à-vis other competing actors due to a lack of resources. As Jason Burke perceptively noted in a Hobbesian formulation: *'In a society where reaching adulthood was already an achievement and where communities were unwilling to waste precious lives, war was more often a negotiating tool in the perpetual bargaining for scarce resources rather than a means of annihilating opponents. The 1980s had taught the Afghans a bitter lesson about fully industrialised warfare and at Tora Bora they had logically reverted to*

*older customs designed to preserve life more than take it. Most of the Afghan troops were neither professionals nor ideologically motivated.'*<sup>79</sup> (Burke, 2011, p. 68)

The Bush administration's understanding of a war in Afghanistan was premised on a clear and binary premise of an 'evil' Taliban, which did not deserve the most elementary of rights under the Geneva Conventions and a de facto 'good' Northern Alliance. The subsequent close alliance with Karzai's administration demonstrated an overly simplified distinction the United States made in relation to this conflict. Washington's lack of historical understanding – particularly in light of its relationship with Afghanistan in the 1980s – was partially to blame for this remiss. As Jason Campbell of the RAND Corporation explained, a cultivation of certain warlords also meant a clear taking of sides in a conflict that would only worsen with time. This impacted on the US/ISAF's own room for manoeuvre within the country:

*'Yeah, I think we learned on very early, right away we were working with some pretty notorious Warlords. Dostum and Ismail Khan; basically any members who were anti-Taliban, and held sway in the region. That was useful at least in the short term because we were able to achieve some military victories, in so far as we were able to push the Taliban out of areas, clearly dethroned. But it's always been that balance of do you want the expediency of maintaining some level of control or security in an area, if it means partnering with someone who is not elected; not seen by certain*

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<sup>79</sup> Stathis Kalyvas's (September 2003 and 2006) work on the Greek civil war – and how the local dynamics and narratives on the ground are often different to the 'master narrative' of an overall war – is a useful study in this regard.



*parts of the constituency as being legitimate; or in the case of the Afghan government being predatory. I mean that was something – we took sides.’<sup>80</sup>*

The Northern Alliance had a number of warlord commanders and eventual government ministers, which included General Dostum. They were involved in a number of heinous crimes after overthrowing the Taliban. This included the raping, pillaging, murder and general ethnic cleansing of Pashtuns living in the predominantly Tajik and Uzbek northern part of the country, as well as the brutal murder of hundreds if not thousands of Taliban prisoners due to an extreme form of torture and asphyxiation (Mann, 2005, p. 141; Risen, July 10, 2009; Gall with Landler, January 5, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 2005; Physicians for Human Rights, February 7 to 14, 2002; Human Rights Watch, June, 2002). A general refusal to face up to these serious charges and the simplistic formulation that any male who fought against the alliance was either a member of the Taliban (or even Al-Qaeda) played into the dangerous factor of misunderstanding the complexity that exists on the ground in Afghanistan.

### *Institutions, the Bonn Agreement and What Comes Next*

There was though some demonstrable progress made in the aftermath of the Taliban rule. This meant a subsequent free and (relatively speaking) fair Presidential election in 2004 and Parliamentary election in 2005, whereby a

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<sup>80</sup> The author interviewed Jason Campbell on April 14, 2014. Campbell is an associate policy analyst at the RAND Corporation, where he focuses on issues of international security, counterinsurgency, intelligence, and measuring progress in post-conflict reconstruction. This quote comes directly from the interview.

record number of female MPs were successfully elected.<sup>81</sup> In addition to this, a flood of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) took place in 2002 with millions of refugees coming back to Afghanistan.<sup>82</sup> Gross Domestic Product (GDP) doubled and a general degree of optimism for the future of the country occurred (Porter, 2009, p. 147; Burke, 2011).

A key event that sealed the new political order in Afghanistan took place during the Bonn Agreement in December 2001. In this regard, the Northern Alliance managed to obtain a number of key ministerial posts – Defense, Interior, Foreign Affairs and the Intelligence Services (Dorronsoro, 2005, p. 329). Even though the Presidency went to Hamid Karzai – a Pashtun and member of the Durrani, a chief tribal confederation – it was seen as a snub to the Pashtun south and east.<sup>83</sup> This was because Karzai's key alliances would be primarily with non-Pashtun ministers and ministries.

The Bonn Agreement also established with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386 – the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) – under a NATO-led umbrella in which the United States and its key allies (including some non-NATO members) would help set up a transitional government and provide a

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<sup>81</sup> Karzai tried to disempower the Parliamentary elections by insisting on candidates running as independents, thereby undermining the importance of political parties.

<sup>82</sup> A large amount of the 4.5 million refugees returned predominantly from Iran and Pakistan. The newly set up United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) made this estimate (Burke, 2011).

<sup>83</sup> The Ghilzai is the other major Pashtun tribal confederation. According to Barfield, the Ghilzais have often been at the forefront of Afghanistan leadership in times of war. On the other hand, the art of peace making is something the Durrani confederation has been better versed in (Barfield, 2010, p. 285).

foundation of security, at least in the capital.<sup>84</sup> Over time, from October 2003 onwards, this remit extended beyond the capital into the rest of the country with major NATO countries – Germany and Italy – taking charge of the ISAF Regional Command North and West respectively. The role of the international community expanded exponentially gradually going beyond the ‘light footprint’ model due to the support and training of the Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF) and an aiding of the government and the country’s reconstruction efforts, in part through Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) (Dodge, 2013, pp. 1189-1212; Rice to Cheney et al., January 18, 2005, Rice, 2011, pp. 109-110).<sup>85</sup>

The United States was adamant it would have a major say in who governed Afghanistan particularly in the aftermath of the Taliban. This much became evident during the Loya Jirga of June 2002, which included 1,501 delegates casting their vote on who they wanted to be their future, two-year interim President. The Bush administration put pressure on the former King Zahir Shah – who was seen as a somewhat popular candidate amongst the delegates – to step aside and give his support to Hamid Karzai (Dorronsoro, 2005, p. 330).

It was at this stage though that the United States (and the United Kingdom) started to shift focus on its ‘war on terror’ to Iraq – a country it saw as more pressing in terms US priorities and perceived strategic interests (Barfield, 2010, p. 333; Jones,

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<sup>84</sup> The head of ISAF has always been an American Commander and the US role amongst ISAF whilst formally equal is more a case of *primus inter pares*. Moreover, the United States has also had the flexibility to independently operate its counter-terrorist actions in the country.

<sup>85</sup> This is not to argue that development projects have had a major benefit on local Afghans. Predominantly private-military contractors, the Pentagon, corrupt political elites in Kabul and the provinces, and to some extent NGOs were the main benefactors (Sarwari and Crews, 2008, pp. 311-355).

2010, pp. 124-128; Zakheim, 2011, pp. 156-171). The United States had established a certain amount of international presence in Afghanistan. Even if this became temporarily more problematic when significant NATO allies – France, Germany and Turkey – were more reluctant to commit resources to Afghanistan due to major disagreements on the impending Iraq war.

A lack of resources spent on Afghanistan at this point meant the country was losing out on a number of fronts:<sup>86</sup> the central authority did not have the remit outside of Kabul to instigate and provide basic and essential services (something that remained an issue); the Afghan National Security Forces had a tiny fraction of needed trained personnel and it was predominately Tajik led, which had implications when operating in the southern and eastern part of the country;<sup>87</sup> the United States' use of favouring certain tribes over others was a decision that also had negative consequences, even if at the time it appeared a useful way of re-establishing some sort of political order and stability.

### *The Tragedy of 9/11 and the Bush Administration's Strategic Social Construction*

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<sup>86</sup> George W Bush and his National Security Advisor (and subsequently Secretary of State) Condoleezza Rice stated in their respective memoirs wariness in repeating the historical mistakes of the British Empire and Soviet Union in which the Afghans saw them as an 'occupying force'. This meant an initial light footprint in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Taliban. However, Bush went on to add the Afghan mission actually needed far more military and civilian resourcing to 'complete the job' and this only became evident a number of years later (Bush, 2010, p. 207).

<sup>87</sup> Levels of corruption and specifically the Afghan National Police (ANP) being violent and inept are the more important reasons for the lack of popularity state officials have had in the Pashtun heartland rather than identity per se. The politicisation of identity means there is sometimes discord between the varying ethnic and tribal groups. However, this should not be exaggerated, firstly because it can easily lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy and secondly Afghans often do not use the label of 'Tajik', 'Uzbek' or 'Pashtun' as it fails to capture the complex, myriad realities that exist on the ground and within each group (Barfield, 2010, p. 279).

Amongst the American political elite, the mass media and general public, a level of trauma and sense of retribution was firmly associated with the tragedy of 9/11. As the chapter has shown, this gave the Bush administration space to discursively construct the major threat of transnational terrorism and a new sense of purpose for US foreign policy. An initial shock and framing of the events as an attack on 'civilisation' and 'freedom' meant Washington constructed and eventually institutionalised a policy that would have enormous implications for global security and Afghanistan. The Bush Presidency set a very clear path, which has had major repercussions on the future trajectory of US national security.

The Bush administration had intervened in Afghanistan with the premise that a 'light footprint' would be sufficient in terms of preventing Al-Qaeda from gaining a safe haven in which it could conduct its operations. This approach became seen in Washington as largely discredited towards the end of Bush's tenure as an increasingly powerful, Taliban-led insurgency took hold (Riedel, 2011, p. 94). In the next chapter, there is an exploration of how and why the insurgency and Afghanistan's stability became perceived as central for the Obama administration in combating regional and global terrorism.

## **The Obama Administration and the Renewed Relevance of Afghanistan**

*'So, no, I do not make this decision lightly. I make this decision because I am convinced that our security is at stake in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is the epicenter of violent extremism practiced by al Qaeda. It is from here that we were attacked on 9/11, and it is from here that new attacks are being plotted as I speak. This is no idle danger; no hypothetical threat.'*

Barack Obama, Remarks at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, December 1, 2009

The incoming Obama administration perceived the imminent danger of transnational militant groups – on either side of the Durand Line – and sought to rectify a major national security challenge. Washington's prioritisation of Afghanistan meant it re-emerged as an important country for US policymakers. As Obama argued in the above epigraph the United States' security – both domestic and international – was wrapped up in the fortunes of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Obama's identification with this perceived existential threat laid the ground for his administration's response to a globalised 'threat'. In this respect, 9/11 provided the key frame of reference for Washington's continuing security concerns.

The chapter elucidates on the varying scale Washington placed on counterinsurgency (COIN) over a purer form of counterterrorism (CT) in achieving its aims in the country and how this tactical preference did not lead to a real change in fortunes for the United States. The Obama administration's purpose in using COIN was largely to avert the Taliban from overthrowing the Afghan

central government and thereby preventing a militant transnational actor such as Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups from establishing a safe haven in Afghanistan. This worst-case scenario for Washington would have meant an opportunity for Al-Qaeda to plan and coordinate attacks on the US homeland, its overseas interests, and its allies.

In the chapter, it is posited that the Obama Presidency's discursive construction of the existential threat of Al-Qaeda and the idea of a 'safe haven' would lock the administration into this evolving counterinsurgency policy. For this reason, the main policy shift was a geographical focus from Iraq to the Afghanistan/Pakistan tribal areas. Realists would postulate that with a new administration there would be a clear break from the Bush administration's heavy-handed approach to international politics, which had involved the invasion of two nation-states. This would equate to the Obama administration not undertaking state building as it was highly expensive and did not serve the objectively understood national interest. A Marxist approach would define the Obama administration's re-orientation towards Afghanistan as evidence that there was a clear geo-economic and geo-strategic plan in place. This could be linked to the Eurasian region in which the United States (and its NATO allies) would want to have the dominant role.

In order to understand the Obama administration's critical first two years in office vis-à-vis Afghanistan this chapter asks the following questions: Why did the Obama administration largely believe in the global war against transnational terrorism? Why did Washington argue the conflict in Afghanistan was pivotal to global security? How does Pakistan fit into this? What was the relevance of

deciding upon and instigating COIN? Why was the effective use of strategic communication significant? How did Washington's policy develop?

### *9/11 and Path Dependency*

The Bush administration's discursive construction of the 'war on terror' through the use of language and practices solidified a national security approach that became taken for granted. This aspect of human agency, order of events, institutional context and historical processes plays an important role in understanding how US foreign policy evolves (and any other complex social dynamic) as it helps explain how the past impacts on the present (Pierson, 2004; North, 1990; March and Olsen, 1989; Mahoney and Schensul, 2006, pp. 454-471; Barnett, 1999, pp. 5-36).<sup>88</sup> The relevance of norms in socialising actors demonstrates how practices become routinised and habitual. Norm internalisation leads an actor to take actions that it considers appropriate within the social structure and it helps create a taken for granted reality (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 895 and p. 904). This generates a large amount of continuity in policy. On the other hand, a strategic social actor can in the right circumstances change policy whether this is through critically engaging with its own actions or because of how it strategically interprets and uses a crisis or a perceived seismic event that takes place such as 9/11.

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<sup>88</sup> The author would like to thank the German scholar Professor Michael Zerr for his insights on path dependency. The expert interview took place on April 24, 2013 in Karlsruhe, Germany.



In this way, the Bush administration's level of agency in constructing meaning from the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon became seminal in understanding global security in the post 9/11 era (Booth and Dunne, 2002, preface). The Bush Presidency created significant domestic and international institutions, which set a path that would make any real change of direction for its successor challenging and cumbersome. The major paradigmatic aspect of 9/11 heavily fed into what the Obama administration could do. Moreover, the Democrats took on board the arguments and underlying assumptions of the Bush administration in fighting global terrorism and reducing the threat to the US mainland, which had the added and crucial effect of reproducing this structural factor (Obama, January 22, 2009b; Obama, June, 2011; Clinton, September 9, 2011; Parmar, 2009, pp. 203-204; Bentley and Holland, eds., 2014; McCrisken, 2011, pp. 781-801).

Obama had inherited a couple of major conflicts – Iraq and Afghanistan – and the resources committed meant continuity from the previous administration. American diplomatic, political, security and financial agreements with Iraq and Afghanistan made any course of change a difficult process. However, the incoming administration made the successful case that Iraq could be wound down and that it would reorient the global fight against 'Al-Qaeda and its Affiliates' towards Afghanistan.

An increasingly powerful insurgency in Afghanistan played a full role in the Obama administration's thinking and a partial one in the latter stage of George W Bush's second term in office. The Bush administration's previous shifting of focus and resources to Iraq meant a retrenchment of priority and support for stronger

political, economic and social institutions in Afghanistan (Barfield, 2010, p. 313). Bush's close bilateral ties with Pakistan and India was also to the detriment of Afghanistan.<sup>89</sup> This sense of 'mission accomplishment' occurred after the routing of the Taliban and fleeing of significant Al-Qaeda operatives over the Durand Line. It strongly indicated a half-hearted focus on the country and would have subsequent negative implications (Riedel, 2011, p. 3).

The United States' leading role in Afghanistan was juxtaposed with an increasing proliferation of international institutions and organisations, alongside the strengthening of a highly centralised political regime. However, Afghanistan continued (and continues) to have a weak state apparatus that since 'The Great Game' of the nineteenth century, and especially from the Soviet intervention of 1979 onwards, has had regional and global powers directly interfering in its affairs. The Bush administration's lack of focus created an ironically somewhat similar situation to the one of the Reaganite policy of the 1980s in which Pakistan would be accorded an important role in the future fortunes of Afghanistan (Green, 2012, pp. 218-219; Rashid, 2008, p. 289).

In the post 9/11 context, the Bush administration treated Pakistan and Afghanistan as allies and did not pay much heed to the historically fractious relations, especially in regard to the Durand Line. Kabul distrusted Pakistan and

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<sup>89</sup> George W Bush's administration initiated a civilian nuclear energy deal with India, which President Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh publically declared in a joint statement on July 18, 2005 (Bush/Singh, July 18, 2005). After Congressional approval, Bush signed it into law on October 8, 2008. The Bush administration forged closer, overall bilateral relations with New Delhi. At the same time, Bush maintained good personal relations with President Musharraf of Pakistan, in part because of a belief in the importance of supporting a military leadership that would be a key ally and '*act as an effective proxy in the War on Terror, but it has not.*' (Rubin, 2008, p. 430)

firmly believed that Islamabad was behind a great deal of the unrest in the country. On the other side of the equation, Pakistan continued to be weary of encirclement from Afghanistan and India, with a powerful New Delhi playing a major role in its perceived strategic concerns (Dalrymple, June 25, 2013).

President Bush's visit to the region in March 2006 cemented the burgeoning Washington/New Delhi relationship and provided a further level of insecurity in Islamabad. The increasing aspect of militants operating out of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and frontier provinces in Pakistan, which infiltrated into Afghanistan added fuel to the fire – this though was not fully acknowledged (at least publically) in Washington, as Pervez Musharraf and Hamid Karzai were seen as staunch US allies in the 'war on terror' (Rubin, April 10, 2006, pp. 231-234).

Pakistan's perception of India as a major threat is important in understanding the political and (especially) the military leadership's strategic and tactical relations with militant groups. In this way, Islamabad's objective of having strategic depth in Afghanistan against New Delhi is relevant (Lieven, 2011, p. 186). During the 1980s, Pakistan supported the Mujahideen against the Soviet Union, and its subsequent backing of the Taliban during its rise and takeover of the country in the 1990s, illustrates a long-held conviction in the importance of maintaining a strong hand with what it perceives as useful actors (Rashid, 2000, pp. 26-30).

In the post-9/11 setting, under Musharraf's leadership this was dampened down. However, the Pakistani state had a confluence of interests with remnants of the Taliban leadership (Lieven, 2011, p. 193). Pakistan was also reluctant to crack down on the Haqqani network – a not-so-insignificant militant/insurgency group

in the Waziristan area – that had spread its operations, over the border in the Loya Paktia provinces (Dressler, 2010).

Islamabad continued to believe in the necessity of a relationship with militant groups – the Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and the Quetta Shura Taliban. This connected with the relevant idea that the US withdrawal gave India an ‘upper hand’ due to its connection with Karzai and the overall Northern Alliance movement (Lieven, 2011, Op. cit.). At the same time, this relationship with these various non-state actors is a fluid one and fraught with complication.

Pakistan has perceived the need to play a ‘double game’ in supporting aspects of counter-terrorism and is helpful in trying to prevent attacks on the US and Europe. Islamabad’s professed problem is a regional one with India as central (Dalrymple, June 25, 2013). For this reason, Islamabad has supported, or at the very least tolerated, a harbouring of militant groups on its territory, which also continued to order or carry out attacks on US/ISAF forces over the border in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2008, pp. 349-373).

A major spike in violence took place from 2007 onwards (Cordesman, February 9, 2012; Jones, Spring, 2008, pp. 7-8). The Bush and Obama administrations evolving perception of threat regarding the Afghan insurgency and the possibility it could overthrow the central government – and thereby provide a safe haven for Al-Qaeda – meant Washington took serious note. Correspondingly, the close connection between the United States and the Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) also fed into a perception – especially in the south and east of the country – that the US was more interested in achieving its own interests and those of the political elite in Kabul. Washington argued it supported the

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development of institutions that would facilitate an improvement in Afghan lives. However, a very inefficient and badly funded legal system and lack of address for individuals meant the Taliban took strategic advantage. The Taliban provided security and their alternative rule of law in order to influence the local populace.

In the post-9/11 milieu, the Taliban wanted to win the 'hearts and minds' of the Afghan public and become a more flexible movement, which it argued supported all Afghans against a 'corrupt' and 'alien' occupying force. President Karzai was portrayed as an American stooge and these perceived factors – alongside Pakistan's harbouring and support of the movement – meant the Taliban's attacks became increasingly problematic for the central government and the United States (Barfield, 2010, p. 327).

There was though a problem for the Quetta Shura Taliban. A foreign actor – Pakistan – was increasingly seen in Afghanistan as important to its own level of success. Therefore, the conflict included a large amount of perceptions about 'who' and 'what' actor was seen as more 'legitimate' and could provide localised services throughout the country. The Obama administration attempted to make the Afghan central government a more legitimate actor in the eyes of its own people (Rice, March 18, 2010).

Prior to this, the Bush administration continued to insist on fighting the 'global war on terror' on a multiple of fronts due to the inextricable linkage between different theatres of conflict, which included Iraq and Afghanistan. The Bush Presidency also publically argued the 'exceptional' United States had helped instigate successful Parliamentary and Presidential elections in Afghanistan. Alongside this, education (especially for girls), a stronger civil society,

developments in health, infrastructure and the overall economy had been the United States' number of 'gifts' to this war-weary nation. According to President Bush, there were still 'bumps on the road' but the eventual result would be a society that achieved 'liberty' and in this way become a role model for other warring countries. In this line of reasoning, Afghanistan had come a long way since the attacks on 9/11 due in large part to the 'benevolence' of the United States:

*'In Afghanistan I am proud to report that the United States of America, thanks to a brave military, liberated 25 million people and gave them a chance to realize the blessings of liberty. Since liberation from the Taliban and since Al Qaida was routed out of that country, where they no longer had safe havens to plot and plan an attack, the people of Afghanistan voted for a President; they voted for a parliament; girls now go to school; highways are being built; health clinics are being constructed around the country.'* (Bush, January 31, 2008)

Bush went on to praise the US military and emphasised the United States' 'exceptional' qualities. He argued it was in both American identity and interest to spread 'freedom' via elements of market liberalisation and democratic elections. In this way, the United States took on a violent and fundamentalist regime – the Taliban – and restored the 'hapless' Afghans to a life of dignity and respect. Bush further expounded:

*'These thugs [the Taliban] didn't believe in freedoms; they didn't believe in women having equal status; they didn't believe young girls should be educated. And if you dared express your opinion that didn't mesh with theirs, you'd be whipped in the public square or killed. These are brutal people. That's the vision that these folks have for the world. That's what they want. Some Americans probably just missed that and*

*say, "Oh, that's just a pipedream, pie-in-the-sky on their part." I think the United States needs to take that vision seriously. I think it's in our interest to liberate people. I think it's in our interest that when we find human suffering, we help deal with it.'* (Ibid.)

Despite a lack of acknowledgement of an ever more powerful insurgency, the Bush administration did eventually publically state that Pakistan was not pulling its weight in preventing terrorist havens on its territories (Bush, June 16, 2008). Through the lens of 9/11 and a 'global war on terror' this was naturally seen as having a negative impact on levels of security in Afghanistan.

The Bush administration orchestrated two factors that played an initial helpful role for Obama vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Firstly, a decision in January, 2007 to instigate a 'surge' of US ground troops in Iraq meant – regardless of the subsequent plethora of possible reasons for a reduction in violence – there was at least a helpful, temporary turnaround for US fortunes in that conflict. Secondly, the US-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement, which included US troops leaving all cities by June 31, 2009 and the whole of the remaining US forces leaving the country by the end of 2011 (U.S. Department of State, November 17, 2008). A debate on whether a minimal amount of troops should remain in Iraq was therefore averted and meant the new administration would be able to fully reorient its focus and resources (Mann, 2012, p. 119).

*The Perceived Critical Relevance of Afghanistan for Combating Transnational Terrorism*

The incoming Obama administration discursively (re-) constructed the major threat of transnational terrorism and how the Afghanistan/Pakistan tribal areas were especially dangerous (Obama, February 17, 2009). As a Presidential candidate, Obama had argued for the importance of Afghanistan as it was from there the threat emanated. The eradication of Al-Qaeda elements, defeat of the Taliban and the capturing of Bin Laden were vital components in his list of priorities (Green, 2012, p. 219). With Obama's inauguration, there was an almost immediate action in prioritising Afghanistan as the most pressing concern in the US national security domain (Barfield, 2010, p. 330).

President Obama ordered a comprehensive review in which Afghanistan and Pakistan were treated as inextricably linked. The relevance of resolving the Afghan conflict was also therefore premised on a regional one. In addition to this, the Obama administration insisted that Islamabad had to be part of the 'solution' (Ibid.). The creation of a special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan illustrated the Obama administration's perception that ending the Afghanistan conflict intertwined with Pakistan. Richard Holbrooke, a veteran diplomat who was instrumental in the Dayton Peace Accords in the 1990s was appointed for this role, somewhat at the behest of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (Obama, January 22, 2009; Clinton, February 6, 2009; Clinton, 2014, pp. 138-141).

From the outset, the Obama administration was absorbed with the most severe global financial crisis since the Great Depression and the major fiscal stimulus that would rapidly gain congressional approval. It was though concurrently focused on establishing a *raison d'être* for a strategic refocus on Afghanistan. In this regard, the tying together of Afghanistan and Pakistan meant the strategy involved the



explicit aim of routing Al-Qaeda and other militant groups in the border regions with Pakistan. An important emphasis was placed on the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan in order to prevent it from providing future sanctuary for any transnational terrorist movement.

Via the paradigm of 9/11, the Obama administration took on the vital underlying assumption that transnational terrorism was the most important danger to US national security. This thinking deeply informed its strategy and what it deemed possible. Obama also promised that through the ideals and leadership of the US there would be a defeat of this terrible global phenomenon. By underscoring the continued historical relevance of American leadership, Obama was once again recommitting the United States to its 'rightful' role as 'the main force for good in the world' (Obama, January 22, 2009b):

*'All right, with those three Executive orders and this memorandum, the message that we are sending around the world is that the United States intends to prosecute the ongoing struggle against violence and terrorism, and we are going to do so vigilantly, we are going to do so effectively, and we are going to do so in a manner that is consistent with our values and our ideals. And all of the individuals who are standing behind me, as well as, I think, the American people, understand that we are not, as I said in the Inauguration, going to continue with a false choice between our safety and our ideals. We think that it is precisely our ideals that give us the strength and the moral high ground to be able to effectively deal with the unthinking violence that you see emanating from terrorist organizations around the world. We intend to win this fight. We're going to win it on our terms.'*

(Obama, January 22, 2009a)

### *Key Debates within the Obama Administration*

Inside the Obama administration there was a vigorous debate about what approach needed to be taken with Afghanistan. Obama insisted on a full review of possible options and amongst his leading cabinet officials in the National Security Council there was disagreement on how to achieve US policy goals. In these debates, Vice President Joseph Biden was strongly supportive of a purer counter-terrorist approach due to the fact that the perceived main 'enemy' was Al-Qaeda. From this perspective, in order to achieve US objectives it needed to increase the use of drone attacks in Pakistan and by the same token include a number of special operations raids in order to capture and kill the top leadership (Sanger, 2012, pp. 29-30). Over the border in Afghanistan, at least two major bases – Bagram and Kandahar – were operational for Special Operation Forces (SOF) to navigate around the country, with human intelligence networks, and an elite small force of CIA trained Afghans, Counter Terrorism Pursuit Teams (CTPT) hunting down and finding leading hard-line Taliban members. Biden and his team strongly advocated this approach and saw it as the best of a difficult situation, something of an improved alternative to state-building (Woodward, 2010, pp. 159-160; Mann, 2012, p. 127).

After 2010, the purer counterterrorism approach became more central to the Obama administration due in large part to the conviction that counterinsurgency was too expensive and complicated to carry out effectively. Increasingly after this time, Washington used drone attacks and special operations, especially over the Durand Line in FATA and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. However, at this stage, major

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officials in the administration including the Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Navy Admiral Michael Mullen and especially the head of the US Central Command (CENTCOM) General David Petraeus – the key architect and author of the influential Counterinsurgency Field Manual (3-24 and 3-24.2) – all advocated a counterinsurgency (COIN) approach, which was subsequently implemented (Baker, December 5, 2009; Sanger, 2012, p. 31).

Counterinsurgency in the Afghanistan conflict was a fundamentally different way of framing the war. A ‘population-centric’ approach was undertaken and the support of the local populace deemed very important in reversing and defeating the insurgency (McChrystal, August 30, 2009; Flynn et al., January, 2010; Kilcullen, 2009). This meant the US/ISAF alliance wanted a greater understanding of the human terrain and an improvement in levels of good governance, security and development. In this respect, both the idea and perception of who was considered a more legitimate actor – and how this actor gained support through its interaction and ability to protect and provide for Afghans – was deemed vital. The United States was determined it would help facilitate an improvement in the lives of Afghans and strengthen the legitimacy of the central government as the relevant conduit of this process.

The perceived long-term benefit of a close United States/Afghanistan relationship and supporting Afghan institutions was connected with the idea of ‘hybrid interventionism’. It was pursued with greater ambition at the end of the Bush tenure and for the incoming Obama administration. Supporters of this approach argued that the United States could have with Afghanistan a similar linkage that it

has had with other long-term relationships – Colombia, the Philippines, Turkey and Egypt. Washington would help train and resource the security forces with the objective of the host country being able to take on increasing responsibility for its own security and welfare.<sup>90</sup> In the short term, Washington believed this overlapped with a purer form of counterinsurgency because the US needed time to train the Afghan National Security Forces up to a point where it could realistically hand over responsibility to the Afghan government. As Steve Coll explicated:

*I think you had the Petraeus school that would emphasise classic counterinsurgency techniques looking back to colonial examples as models and then you had more sort of hybrid interventionists, they were still heavy interventionists and willing to spend and see stabilisation and governance as an objective but they would look to less militarised strategies that relied on more capable hosts/governments and host forces...so the two sides met on the observation that if you wanted to pursue the Colombia, Philippines, Egypt model, twenty year resourcing of an indigenous government and military, you nonetheless need to bridge with your own forces because there was no Afghan Army capable of playing that role and there was no Afghan government capable of credibly backing that army. So you needed the counterinsurgency for three to five years in order to get to a place where you could*

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<sup>90</sup> Dr Seth Jones of the RAND Corporation made this point during our expert interview. Jones explained that for the US and its allied partner, there is a mutually beneficial aspect to it on the social, economic, security and political realms. Jones pointed out this is the type of relationship the United States and Afghanistan ought to have in the post-2014 context.

*make a long, twenty-year investment in stability. And so that was what brought the two sides together.*<sup>91</sup>

As the Obama administration argued, the increasingly powerful insurgency and a resurgent Taliban enhanced fears that it would take over the country and thereby provide a safe haven to transnational militant actors. In particular, the porous Afghanistan/Pakistan border with militants of all stripes fighting to undermine the legitimacy of the central government in Kabul was concentrating the minds in Washington. For a number of the key militant groups, the historical context of fighting the Soviet Union and the Afghanistan Communist Party from their base in Peshawar in the 1980s was pivotal (Coll, 2004). The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan from the mid-1990s onwards – with crucial support from Islamabad – is another factor in this trajectory (Rashid, 2000). After 9/11 and the overthrow of the Taliban, there was a lull in violence but with the Bush administration diverting attention and resources to Iraq, a number of significant actors over the Durand Line started to threaten the newly established institutions and central government in Kabul.

In this regard, the most relevant actors were the Quetta Shura Taliban, Haqqani network and Hezb-e-Islami-Gulbuddin who all wanted to overthrow the central government. These movements have a radical Islamist or neo-fundamentalist bent and in the case of the Haqqani network helped provide a significant protection of leading Al-Qaeda members including Bin Laden, in the FATA region, after its post-9/11 expulsion from Afghanistan. A wide range of attacks on Karzai's regime and

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<sup>91</sup> Author's interview with Professor Steve Coll, author of *Ghost Wars*.

coalition forces together with the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) became the order of the day.

IEDs consist of vehicle attacks, roadside bombs and suicide bombings. The asymmetric nature of the conflict meant the insurgent groups used this destructive tool for strategic and tactical purposes in order to disrupt and fight against the United States/ISAF and the GIRoA/ANSF. However, the insurgency's particular approach departed from the Taliban rule of 1996-2001, as the battle to 'win the support of the population' was a major motivational driver for both sides in the conflict. Therefore these attacks were predominately carried out on coalition forces and the ANSF.

The United States understood that the kinetic nature of IEDs and their own military arsenal were only a part of the picture. A whole range of tools – economic, military, ideational and diplomatic – was needed in a multidimensional and multinational way in order to defeat the insurgency. In the process, a cultural revolution of sorts had temporarily taken place. The United States civil-military leadership argued it had to understand the dynamics in the various provinces and districts throughout Afghanistan, with the south and east of the country especially emphasised (McChrystal, Op. cit.).

In this way, the United States and ISAF undertook a change in its thinking (at least in a provisional way) and insisted on trying to understand the local grievances, norms, and who the important actors were, in order to reverse the insurgency's momentum and fortify the legitimacy of the central government. The strengthening of the ANSF was also deemed necessary as the United States insisted on the Afghans eventually taking full responsibility for their future.

In Washington, Obama asserted a strategic review of US policy towards Afghanistan for the National Security Council (NSC), which was undertaken within his administration's first sixty days in office. The relevance of having a clear policy in place meant the NATO meeting on April 9, 2009 would provide the Obama administration with a clearer idea of its own demands from the rest of this alliance.

By March 27, 2009, after deliberating on the Riedel-led strategic review, President Obama made a formal public announcement indicating the United States' new focus on Afghanistan in fighting global terrorism. Pakistan was directly linked to this new strategy and there was an increasing of deployment US troops into Afghanistan. Obama's announcement also highlighted the importance of fighting terrorism in all its guises and building up institutions for the benefit of local Afghans.

The Obama administration articulated a clear strategy, which included a large element of counterinsurgency. At the same time, there would be a regular amount of progress reports and evaluations in order to determine that important metrics were being met. However, as Jason Campbell associate policy analyst at the RAND Corporation explained, the methodological rigour to these evaluations was highly suspect and to some extent called into question what the 'facts on the ground' actually were:

*'And you know these colour-coded maps are my favourite, the district by district. And I've heard from a lot of people that were involved in that process, that this was supposedly some objective process, you know computing numbers, and then they get a map and some commanding officer will look at it and go "no that shouldn't be red, make that yellow, or make that orange." And then they would because a commander*

*told them to. Yeah. And this supposedly scientific, objective process, in an instant was made, "no, that's a different colour." And that was just it; you just kind of shrugged and said, "Okay, that's it.""*<sup>92</sup>

Obama's speech on March 27 attenuated the 'exceptional' United States and its leading role in aiding Afghanistan and Pakistan in its own fight against terrorism. The United States was 'bound to lead' and create a brighter future for these countries and its allies in ensuring a more 'peaceful' and 'just' world. A major emphasis on the potentially imminent danger of Al-Qaeda on global security – including directly on the United States – was stated boldly at the beginning of this speech. According to Obama, the United States' role in Afghanistan was to support the decent Afghans to defeat a very real enemy. There was a clear use of 'us' and 'them' when arguing the US and the vast majority of Afghans and Pakistanis were on the same side against violent extremism. Identification was made with a 'benevolent' US on the side of justice that helped less powerful nation-states. In this major new policy announcement, Obama made the point that his administration was going to defeat terrorism in all its guises and make sure the United States (and its allies) would prevail:

*'As President, my greatest responsibility is to protect the American people. We are not in Afghanistan to control that country or dictate its future. We are in Afghanistan to confront a common enemy that threatens the United States, our friends and our*

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<sup>92</sup> Author's interview with Jason Campbell of the RAND Corporation on April 14, 2014. In a previous position at the Brookings Institution, Campbell co-authored *The Iraq Index* and established *The Afghanistan Index* and *The Pakistan Index* projects.



*allies, and the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan who have suffered the most at the hands of violent extremists.*

*So I want the American people to understand that we have a clear and focused goal to disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaida in Pakistan and Afghanistan and to prevent their return to either country in the future. That's the goal that must be achieved; that is a cause that could not be more just. And to the terrorists who oppose us, my message is the same: We will defeat you.'* (Obama, March 27, 2009)

At this point in time, the recently perceived success of the US troop surge in Iraq (and subsequent withdrawal) meant COIN had gained ascendancy in Washington policymaking circles. The Obama administration decided to use this approach in a time limited and focused way vis-à-vis Afghanistan. According to this rationale, it would then be able to fully hand the reins over to the Afghan government and security forces. In this regard, Obama and his inner circle were aware of US public opinion and the electoral cycle. However, what was particularly challenging for the Obama administration lay in the perceived clear difference of circumstances regarding Iraq and Afghanistan.

### *The Challenge of Making Counterinsurgency Work in Afghanistan*

Afghanistan had faced continual conflict since the Soviet intervention and a number of its bureaucratic institutions were virtually decimated in the ensuing period. Being able to help the country in the areas of health, education, agriculture, trade and infrastructure would be a tall order that needed time and good resource allocation. There were significant obstacles that included very high levels of

corruption, drug trafficking, a major conflict raging, a lack of economic revenue, a weak governmental apparatus and Afghans seeing the US/ISAF as an 'occupying force', which was culturally oblivious and very prone to an overuse of force.

The United States' COIN advocates emphasised a Strategic Multi-layered Assessment (SMA) and an understanding of the human terrain on a local level with wide swathes of ethnic, tribal, sub-tribal lineages, especially in the Pashtun heartland (McChrystal, Op. cit.; Johnson and Mason, 2008; Johnson and Mason, 2009; Jones, 2008). This was needed in order to reverse the insurgency's momentum and empower over time the central government, in order for the US to leave a more stable and independent Afghanistan (Jones, Ibid.; Flynn, et al., January, 2010).

Counterinsurgency was extremely complicated to implement. The challenges it faced were numerous. One of the US/ISAF major problematic assumptions was that it could win the support of the homegrown population via its relationship with the central government. In the first place, the insurgency used the narrative of the US/ISAF as an 'occupying force' with foreign mores to powerful effect (Dorransoro, June 15, 2011, p. 15). Secondly, the central government continued to include a number of corrupt warlords, who economically benefited – from an international presence – substantially more than their fellow Afghans as was evident in the various provinces and districts throughout the country. Thirdly, the legitimacy of the Afghanistan executive and legislative branches, its rigged Presidential elections and lack of legal redress was another area the insurgency could attack. In the fourth place, the international contractors – their large resources and substantial lack of results especially on a local level was highly

problematic. This only further encouraged the idea that rural Afghans were not being included in the process and the international community alongside corrupt government officials were the real beneficiaries (Stewart, 2004, p. 248; Stewart, September 21, 2012). A final factor, whereby US officers, who did not have the cultural expertise, were expected to understand a district or village dynamics and how to effectively distribute resources, without alienating important actors, was a major test (Tomsen, 2011, p. 657).

### *Counterinsurgency: The Importance of Perception and Legitimacy*

Leading COIN thinkers and practitioners argued for the salience of perception and legitimacy in winning over the support of the local population (McChrystal, Op. cit.). This could be extended to winning the support of US public opinion to believe in the strategic relevance and humanitarian aspect of Washington's counterinsurgency policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan. In this way, it was not entirely the case of what happened on the ground but how the audience in question understood the conflict. This played handsomely into the notion that the purpose of the Afghan conflict was a 'benign mission' that reinforced and institutionalised certain types of practices, as Benjamin Friedman of the CATO Institute expounded:

*'That sort of thinking still remains, what interests me most about it is the counterinsurgency doctrine is kind of a PR shtick, a cover for killing people, which is what warfare is ultimately all about. And the way to make a prolonged war, more palatable to liberals in an old sense, a progressive liberal electorate that has only esoteric things to fear from the political disposition of the places where we're doing the doctrine. In large part it winds up being sales, but I think it's also interesting to*

*think about the dichotomy between what we've actually done and what we say we're doing, in terms of counterinsurgency doctrine, those are not the same... Operation Phoenix in Vietnam, in the dead of night killing campaign, assassination of Special Operations campaign led by Joint Special Operations Commander, Stan McChrystal in Afghanistan. The ethnic resettlement that helped limit violence in Iraq by separating combatants. I mean the brutal movement of people, which has historically been a contributing factor to the settlements of insurgency campaigns. So sort of the notion that it was this sort of expansion of the rubric of the state, to do services, is a nice theory but it's not historically, I don't think there's very much to it. And so there's always been a lot of violence and I think emphasising those other aspects is I think another way of explaining to the American people that what we're doing is consistent with their values, in helping them endorse it, it's not a war anymore, it's more of an aid project.'*<sup>93</sup>

The US/ISAF had a number of COIN objectives, which included strengthening the Afghan central government (especially for a complete long-term transfer of power); supporting a localised governance structure; socio-economic development; a building up of the ANSF and attacking corruption were all seemingly contradictory but necessary steps the US/ISAF needed to implement in a determined and focused way (McChrystal, Op. cit.). This also illustrated the real intricacies in taking on a counterinsurgency approach.

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<sup>93</sup> Author's interview with Benjamin Friedman on April 9, 2014. Friedman is a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the CATO Institute. He writes about U.S. defense politics, focusing on strategy, budgeting, and war. Friedman has co-edited two books and published in *International Security*, *Political Science Quarterly*, *Foreign Affairs*, and the *New York Times*.

Biden and Obama's political advisors support for a purer form of counterterrorism did not entirely ignore some of these factors but was far more inclined to attack the problem in a direct way by going after Al-Qaeda. This was instead of the more aforementioned state-building approach. During Obama's tenure the balance clearly shifted in the direction of a purer form of counterterrorism. However, at this point in time, counterinsurgency was the more accepted approach. This was due in part to the perceived 'successful' surge in Iraq and whether this could be replicated in Afghanistan despite the crumbling security situation.

The Obama administration decided on an increase in troop levels before the NATO meeting of April 4, 2009 in Strasbourg/Kehl. A meeting with its allies on the situation and strategic options in Afghanistan deepened its commitment to the country, at least in the short term. The symbolism of having allies on board also recreated the idea of the US as the leading actor in a coalition of countries with shared values and strategic objectives.

This idea was imprinted on major European leaders – Angela Merkel, Gordon Brown and Nicholas Sarkozy – who articulated their favourable view of the new administration and stressed their support for a world order based on shared democratic values and fighting extremism. In this regard, President Sarkozy's reference to terrible events of 9/11 was a telling one in understanding why and how an idea can be reproduced in order to gain parliamentary and popular support. Sarkozy appealed to shared democratic values and how world leaders were responsible for preventing further terrorist attacks in the name of 'freedom' and 'democracy':

*'Well, we totally endorse and support America's new strategy in Afghanistan. And I want to say to my fellow Frenchmen that when New York was crucified, this could have happened in any other capital city of any democratic state. It wasn't New York that was being targeted, it was democracies at large. Now, either we as democracies stand by our allies in the face of extremists and terrorist and fanatics – and we will win. And that is what is at stake there.'* (Sarkozy, April 3, 2009)

General Stanley McChrystal's promotion to commander of US/ISAF forces in Afghanistan in May 2009 was due to the personal backing of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen and CENTCOM Commander David Petraeus. It was another indication the United States would apply counterinsurgency with the most experienced team (Renshon, 2010, p. 219). McChrystal had worked as head of American Commandos in their pursuit of Taliban militants over the Durand Line and – alongside Petraeus – particularly emphasised a change from an 'enemy centric' approach to a 'population centric' one (McChrystal, Op. cit.).

One caveat to the counterinsurgency approach is the amount of time it takes to potentially succeed. The often-cited successful 'Malayan Emergency' (1948-1960) is contentious as the British Commonwealth armed forces committed a whole host of atrocities (Siver, September 3 to 6, 2009; Townsend, April 11, 2009). However, the effective coordination of political, military, ideological and economic tools combined with strategic communication meant it achieved British objectives, even if it took a whole decade. COIN strategists and tacticians advising the Obama administration needed to factor in the complexities and sheer amount of resources and manpower that was needed. The administration came into power

with a determination to take on the transnational threat and the linkage it had with Afghanistan and Pakistan. It would provide a large amount of financial support for a civilian-military nexus in Afghanistan. However, the Obama Presidency was also adamant that its major commitment could only be for a limited amount of time.

In this respect, the Obama administration had a number of pressures from domestic constituencies, Congress, other national security challenges and especially the precarious US economy. The decision to introduce a surge in Afghanistan and the ensuing changes in strategy was a defining feature of the Obama administration's national security approach. In conjunction with this, President Obama and his inner circle – Biden, Rahm Emanuel, David Axelrod, Thomas Donilon, Denis McDonough, and John O. Brennan – were cognisant of needing to achieve certain clear results for national strategic purposes and with Presidential elections of 2012 firmly in mind (Mann, 2012).

Obama used a timeline in which the United States would start to level back on troops levels in July 2011, with the ultimate goal of handing over security arrangements to the Afghan government and ANSF by late 2014.<sup>94</sup> Obama expressed his commitment to Afghanistan but did not want the US to get bogged down in a conflict, with economic burdens weighing in. This was another important concern in the varying scale of a more counterinsurgency or counterterrorism approach.

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<sup>94</sup> The 'Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan' signed May 2, 2012, was a framework to provide a stable and secure handover after the US/ISAF combat troops leave in late 2014. It also guaranteed support in the economic, security, and civilian realms.

Obama instigated a major three-month review, which led up to his December 1, 2009 announcement at West Point in which the 'surge' was formally announced. The review was largely based on an executive led, inter-bureaucratic debate regarding what was the right level of increased troop level and how this could be successfully applied in Afghanistan. In this way, McChrystal's initial and negative assessment on the current progress in the conflict was leaked to the press in September (McChrystal, Op. cit.; Woodward, 2010). This changed the remit of policy discussions and led to a certain fissure between the White House and leading DoD personnel. President Obama's private rebuke of Gates and Mullen in October and his belief the Pentagon was effectively carrying out a public relations campaign – which argued for a large increase in troop levels – was symptomatic of this (Mann, 2012, pp. 135-136).

#### *Obama's Belief in the Legitimacy of the Afghanistan conflict and in Using Force*

The case that Obama was battling the military, the Republican Party, the relevant bureaucratic institutions for political advantage needs to be taken with an important caveat though. This is because President Obama largely believed in the legitimacy of the war in Afghanistan (Mann, 2012, p. 141). It is this central factor that explains some of the administration's overall foreign policy decisions and their implementation vis-à-vis Afghanistan and Pakistan in the ensuing years.

As a State Senator of Illinois, and a subsequent Senator and Presidential candidate Obama was clear about Afghanistan being the key country in combating terrorism (Obama, July-August, 2007). A sense of 'revenge' was also palpable in his framing



of the events of 9/11 and the importance of going after the vital Al-Qaeda elements, in the Afghanistan/Pakistan tribal areas. It was seen in his steadfast determination to bring some sort of 'retribution' and 'justice' for the American people. Contrary to many expectations across the US political spectrum, Obama was no dove. He would though be more 'determined' and 'smarter' in taking on the phenomenon of terrorism and make the US more secure in the process. As Obama argued:

*'For while Senator McCain was turning his sights to Iraq just days after 9/11, I stood up and opposed this war, knowing that it would distract us from the real threats we face. When John McCain said we could just "muddle through" in Afghanistan, I argued for more resources and more troops to finish the fight against the terrorists who actually attacked us on 9/11, and made clear that we must take out Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants if we have them in our sights. John McCain likes to say he'll follow bin Laden to the Gates of Hell – but he won't even go to the cave where he lives.'* (Obama, August 28, 2008)

The Democrats have often had to fight the perception in Washington that they are weak on national security issues. This was considered an important reason why the Obama administration needed to implement an increased military presence in Afghanistan. President Obama's previous criticism of the Iraq War as a 'dumb' war and his campaign promise to mount a surge in Afghanistan – in order to combat terrorism – was seen as structurally hemming him in. In this line of reasoning, Obama had to continue and implement this policy as promised during the Presidential campaign (Obama, July 15, 2008). Furthermore, the lack of choice provided by the leading military personnel also played a role in 'forcing his hand' (Woodward, 2010). The reasoning on these issues was premised on the idea that

Obama did not see the strategic purpose and legitimacy of the war in Afghanistan. This goes against what the White House discursively constructed. Obama always stated his own personal conviction that war was needed in certain crucial cases. Due to the 'safe haven' aspect, Afghanistan was a war of necessity:

*'As I said when I announced this strategy, there will be more difficult days ahead. The insurgency in Afghanistan didn't just happen overnight, and we won't defeat it overnight. This will not be quick, nor easy. But we must never forget this is not a war of choice, this is a war of necessity. Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which Al Qaida would plot to kill more Americans. So this is not only a war worth fighting, this is a – this is fundamental to the defense of our people.'*

(Obama, August 17, 2009)

Understanding that Obama believed in using force in appropriate cases was evident even in his Nobel Peace Prize speech. This speech was ten days after his administration's announcement it would send 30,000 extra troops to Afghanistan. In the speech, Obama praised Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi for their articulation and use of non-violence in order to achieve real social and political progress. Obama tempered this fact though by suggesting as Commander-in-chief he had the moral 'responsibility to protect' the American people and its alliances in fighting 'evil' (Smith, 2012, p. 375). In this speech, Obama referenced Nazi Germany and the contemporary case of the transnational, Al-Qaeda network, which was a further manifestation of why the United States could not 'sit idly' by when there was 'evil' in the world. His belief in fighting this major transnational threat and the use of 'Just War' theory was Obama's version of a Niebuhrian

approach to the world. This directly involved the 'exceptional' United States as it was up to Washington to play the leading role in fighting Al-Qaeda on a global scale. Obama made the case:

*'But as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism – it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.'* (Obama, December 10, 2009)

Within Obama's inner circle it was noted that the President was not afraid to use force when absolutely necessary (Mann, 2012, p. 141). The stepping up of the war in Afghanistan, drone strikes in Yemen, Somalia and especially Pakistan, indicated Obama's clear willingness to engage in kinetic action, even when it meant a large percentage of civilian deaths in these attacks (Cavallaro, Sonneberg and Knuckey et al., September, 2012; Bergen and Tiedemann, 2010).

A 9/11 paradigm meant Obama and his cabinet accepted the Bush administration's underlying rationale of fighting transnational terrorism. At the same time, the Obama administration argued it would be smarter in how it implemented its foreign policy (Clinton, January 13, 2009; Clinton, September 9, 2011; Armitage and Nye, 2007). Obama's decision to follow Bush administration's path meant there was more continuity than change vis-à-vis general and overarching national security considerations.

### *West Point Speech and Its Aftermath*

President Obama's major decision to send 30,000 extra US combat troops was publically announced at his West Point speech on December 1, 2009. Secretary of Defense Gates and Secretary of State Clinton clear and joint position on the troop increase played an important role in aiding McChrystal's request (Lizza, May 2, 2011). The upper echelon of the US military was happy with this part of the arrangement.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, President Obama supported the increase as a war of necessity, but also insisted on very strict criteria in terms of what exactly the military's remit was – as well as specific results – and a clear timetable for the gradual drawdown of combat troops. The surge would be on the Commander-in-chief's terms (Milne, 2015, pp. 478-481).<sup>96</sup>

The element of announcing a timetable for troop withdrawal was criticised for 'signalling' to the Taliban and other militant actors that fighting against the US/ISAF led coalition forces only needed 'patience' and 'waiting it out'. Indeed, various leading military and civilian personnel argued to the Obama administration that it would be read in Kabul and Islamabad in a very different light to how it was intended (Sanger, 2012, pp. 33-34). As Marvin Weinbaum

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<sup>95</sup> Although much less so with the idea of a specific timetable as leading DoD officials believed it aided the 'enemy' if it knew exactly when the US and ISAF were leaving.

<sup>96</sup> Robert Gates's autobiography *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* is very critical of the 'highly centralised' decision making process in the Obama administration. Secretary Gates argued the White House largely took the key national security decisions and that the President and especially Vice President Biden did not believe in the Afghan surge or trust the leading military personnel. However, it is not clear from this why President Obama would have risked a major surge, if he did not have at least some belief in it.

argued, this would provide the militant groups with a boon of hope and signal to all significant regional actors that the United States was leaving:

*'And then what makes his West Point speech in December, so important, is that on one hand we were going with our allies to come up to one hundred and fifty thousand [troop presence], but on the other hand this was not an indefinite commitment, which many of us recognized was how it was going to be read as simply we were going in but we announced we were leaving. And some of us were in the White House the day of that speech, earlier for a briefing and I and one or two others, pointed this out. "Whatever you think you're doing, the way it's going to be read in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is the US is leaving."'*<sup>97</sup>

Obama's justified this cause of action in part because his administration acknowledged the multitude of conflicting perceived interests and systematic constraints, which the United States has on a domestic and international level. His Presidency would provide what was needed in Afghanistan with the caveat that it had to be operational, specific and effective in stabilising the country.

The Obama administration argued that giving a clear and specific timeline to the Afghan central government would force the agenda in building up the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). In turn, the central government needed to 'step up to the plate' in terms of helping provide essential services and work on its large bout of corruption. For the Obama Presidency, the relevance of the ANSF being fully trained and having the relevant troop level was essential in getting

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<sup>97</sup> Author's interview with Dr Marvin Weinbaum on April 9, 2014. Weinbaum was the leading State Department intelligence analyst on Afghanistan and Pakistan. He is currently scholar-in-residence at the Middle East Institute in Washington D.C.

Afghanistan to a position of stability and having a semblance of independence. In the short-term this provided the Afghans with the incentive to get on with the job at hand. In the long run, it would reduce American and allied investment and create a strong United States/Afghanistan relationship. As Coll observed, this seemed counterintuitive at the time:

*'In hindsight, for those, if anyone did argue for it, on the grounds that you needed to snap the ANSF project into a position fast enough so that it could get from here to there in a politically plausible – referring now to Western domestic politics – a politically plausible period of time, it turns out that was correct. I don't think whatever the ANSF turns out to be, whether it cracks up this month, three years from now, or not at all, it has a measure of strength that exceeds some people's predictions, even today in 2014, and I don't think that would have been achieved if he hadn't announced there was a time limit.'*<sup>98</sup>

Obama's pragmatic and highly deliberative style illustrated the relevance of 'multiple advocacy' in how his administration carried out important decisions. A variety of strong opinions from the Secretary of Defense and State, and especially his own White House team – including Vice President Biden – demonstrated a preference for an airing of differences between the relevant actors in front of the President (Pfiffner, June, 2011, p. 247). In turn, the President methodically prodded his team with numerous questions (Baker, December 5, 2009). Obama's only clear rule was the importance of consensus after he took the final decision (Woodward, 2010, p. 374; Pfiffner, 2011, p. 258).

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<sup>98</sup> Author's interview with Professor Steve Coll.

Another important reference point for the Obama administration was US exceptionalism (Fitzgerald and Ryan, 2014, p. 74). The United States' leadership role in maintaining global order, as well as enabling others to benefit from the 'generosity' of American actions and values was connected with the relevance of getting the 'job done' in Afghanistan. Indeed, the means of achieving the Obama Presidency's objectives in Afghanistan was bound up with American identity and collectively held narratives. This was demonstrated with Obama's West Point speech on December 1, 2009 regarding the announcement of 30,000 extra troops being deployed to Afghanistan. Obama argued that the United States needed to (re-) establish a common purpose for the 'necessary war' and the President did this with reference to the values and political history of an 'exceptional' nation:

*'It's easy to forget that when this war began, we were united, bound together by the fresh memory of a horrific attack and by the determination to defend our homeland and the values we hold dear. I refuse to accept the notion that we cannot summon that unity again. I believe with every fiber of my being that we, as Americans, can still come together behind a common purpose. For our values are not simply words written into parchment, they are a creed that calls us together and that has carried us through the darkest of storms as one Nation, as one people.'* (Obama, December 1, 2009)

#### *Counterinsurgency and its Limited Results*

The Obama administration's strategic goals meant a further increase in the US/ISAF civil-military nexus was promoted and advanced. Washington strongly advocated an increased military presence in Afghanistan especially in crucial

Southern provinces – Helmand and Kandahar (the Taliban's birthplace) – in order to directly take on the insurgency. It attempted to provide assistance and training to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) as well as help provide the reconstruction teams with more opportunity to build up the Afghan infrastructure and economy.

However, the positive aspects of development projects and concomitantly providing for more security would only work if there were clear changes and improvement on the ground. A problem for the US/ISAF was the continuing corruption that existed in some of the significant provinces and districts. Kandahar's Governor Torkyal Wesa, Ahmed Wali Karzai (President Karzai's half-brother), and their business cronies benefited enormously from internationally funded investment projects, as well as licit and illicit trading activities (Gopal, 2013, p. 21; Risen, October 4, 2008; Forsberg, April, 2010). An Afghan 'administrative kleptocracy' profited from the international presence – power brokers largely interlinked with the central government became very wealthy.

In order for counterinsurgency to work, the United States and ISAF needed to facilitate the building up of certain institutions and the 'legitimacy' of the central government was sacrosanct in this process. The US/ISAF continued though to work with fundamental power brokers in the provinces and this did not result in improved governance. This had implications for levels of support from Afghans. In this way, an extremely complex terrain, in which enduring instability, economic challenges (there were some slight improvements in this area) and corruption meant COIN only had very limited results.



The US/ISAF support for significant leaders engaging in widespread corruption and bouts of violence was only part of the problem. Counterinsurgency was premised on protecting the local population and reversing the gains of the Taliban. However, the myriad of power brokers meant this binary distinction of supporting one side against the other would over time break down. Washington subsequently understood that in order to have any chance of a stable situation all actors (including the Taliban) would need to be negotiated with as part of the overall political solution (Coll, February 28, 2011).

A further difficulty for the US/ISAF operations was the negative perception Afghans especially had of the Afghan National Police (ANP). This outfit consisted of predominantly illiterate members who in many cases had direct ties with warlords and other militias. They often engaged in bouts of corruption, narcotic dealings and occasional predatory attacks on local civilians (Perito, August, 2009, p. 7). A lack of accountability due to a very weak prosecution system meant these actions were never directly punished – something that aided the Taliban in its own bid to win the support of the populace. In contrast, the Afghan National Army (ANA) had a comparatively speaking positive reputation amongst Afghans. At its best, it was increasingly seen as a legitimate actor that represented the security aspirations of the general public. The Obama administration built up this institution with the expectation it would become self-sufficient by the time of US/ISAF combat troops exit in late 2014.

*Strategic Communication amongst Key Actors in the Conflict*

Strategic communication was highly significant in the conflict. Indeed, another challenge for the United States/ISAF was the idea that it was an 'occupation force'. Historical foreign interference in the country meant that Afghans were wary and suspicious of outside powers. This was not the full story though. Afghans were and are against 'broken promises' in the social, political and economic realms, rather than being 'xenophobic' per se.<sup>99</sup>

There was an almost insurmountable difficulty in gaining support from local people. Enormous levels of corruption amongst major power brokers in the Afghan government put paid to that. Also, the United States and ISAF night time raids with heavy-handed military operations did not help matters. Indeed, the Taliban could point to the large US/ISAF security presence, which was culturally insensitive to Afghan norms. The Taliban effectively exploited this narrative.

At the same time, President Karzai was also critical of US/ISAF presence and actions, in order to bolster his 'nationalist' and 'independent' credentials (Rosenberg, October 8, 2013; Hakim, October 7, 2013). In this regard, Karzai was playing a 'double game' that Afghan leaders have played for over a century. Washington's perception of Karzai as irrational and loath to making statements that were not in the realm of reality needed also to be partially understood within this context.

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<sup>99</sup> The idea of independence is important for Afghans. There is a partial acceptance of an international presence providing it leads to an improvement in the lives of ordinary Afghans in key areas including education, employment, infrastructure, governance, security, health and peace. This though ultimately should be for the Afghans themselves to work through and make a reality. These points were iterated a number of times during the extensive amount of interviews the author carried out (via an interpreter) circa the streets of Kabul, Afghanistan, January 2010.

Karzai had cultivated a close relationship with the US/ISAF. It led over time to an exponential increase in the number of foreign troops stationed throughout the country and development aid. This made Karzai's criticism of the United States a somewhat hollow gesture and won him no favours with either the international community or Afghans (Horton, May 21, 2010; Barfield, 2010). A perception of 'who' was the legitimate actor in this context became crucial.

The Taliban effectively used strategic communication. They argued that they were essentially a 'national liberation' movement against foreign occupation and influence. A key device in this area was the emphasis on the symbolic value of Islam to cultivate closer ties with local communities throughout the country. Genuine scepticism about the central government's achievements and its close ties with the US/ISAF made the Taliban's outreach to Afghans, especially in the southern and eastern regions, a powerful phenomenon. Marvin Weinbaum made this pertinent point:

*'Let me stop you there because one of the powerful narrative that increasingly gained traction was the Americans and others being seen as occupiers. That did not exist as a theme if you go back certainly to the first four or five years. But that increasingly gained resonance there so that by the end of the decade if we were fighting anything in particular, it was that notion, because we had been there for a while, we were there as "occupiers."'*<sup>100</sup>

The Quetta Shura Taliban used this simple and effective narrative of being a 'national liberator' to full effect. This movement emphasised its Islamic credentials

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<sup>100</sup> Author's interview with Dr Marvin Weinbaum of the Middle East Institute.

to bolster its standing amongst local civilians and this became more powerful due to the perceived prolonged aspect of the US/ISAF presence in Afghanistan. The insurgency used the Afghan scepticism of foreign powers and their presence in the country in order to attenuate the Taliban's own national legitimacy. A case of similar binary logic was used to bring a somewhat simplistic but effective communication message. Moreover, Islamabad gave the Quetta Shura Taliban and Haqqani network clear sanctuary and this illustrated a fallacious claim of being 'independent' from foreign influence. However, it was perceptions that largely mattered.

At the same time, the very large international, civilian-military nexus in Afghanistan helped provide a 'rentier state' for Afghan elites to mushroom off large amounts of international aid in return for a close relationship with the international coalition (Dorronsoro, 2009, pp. 16-17). This created new political processes that operated on preferential treatment (Kratochwil, 2008, p. 453). A lack of legal redress for local people provided an unlikely situation whereby the Taliban would dispense legal justice in a swift and brutal way. This was especially developed in the Pashtun hinterland where, incrementally, the Taliban developed its alternative legal system and provided recompense against overzealous local commanders and warlords (Dorronsoro, 2009, p. 19). Vanda Felbab-Brown illuminated on how Afghan civilians saw the conflict in a somewhat different light to the US military in terms of what mattered on the ground:

*'With the [US] military, security was measured as the number of Taliban attacks. For many of the locals though, the Taliban attacks would not necessarily impinge on their lives, and in fact an area liberated from the Taliban run by a pro-government*

*official might be more threatening than even a situation of either Taliban contestation or Taliban rule. And essentially what would determine Afghan people's sense of security was the difficulty or ease, instability or stability of the everyday negotiations they had to engage in to go about their everyday business. A very different measure to the number of Taliban attacks.'*<sup>101</sup>

The Taliban's stated end goal of removing the 'foreign occupation' remained an effective message (Dorronsoro, Op. cit.). This included a commonly accepted, historically based belief in the importance of protecting Afghanistan's cultural integrity and sovereignty against 'malevolent' foreign forces (Kissinger, 2010). In this line of reasoning, Afghanistan was only a tool for major powers and it was now the 'historical turn' of the exploitative United States. A clear 'counter-imperialist' narrative fed into the Taliban's effective strategic communication campaign. It would provide a 'brave resistance' in the face of major onslaught, which had accompanied the previous British and Soviet 'failed' plans to 'take over' the country. Seth Jones made this point succinctly:

*'And the Taliban message in response was pretty simple. It was to highlight some of these deficiencies in the government and then to combine that with an argument that in addition to a poorly functioning government, this was what the narrative said, "They're illegitimate, they're puppets of a foreign occupier."'*<sup>102</sup>

This fed into the further narrative of an independent and proud Islamic nation. A continuing idea of the insurgency fighting for Islam whilst certainly not believed

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<sup>101</sup> Author's Interview with Dr Felbab-Brown of the Brookings Institution.

<sup>102</sup> Author's interview with Dr Seth Jones of the Rand Corporation.

by many Afghans, acquired more resonance as the central government was seen as 'morally bankrupt'. A whole remit of change in the US/ISAF approach – with a more 'population-centric' approach – was likely to fail if it did not achieve real progress in the different areas of security, governance and development (McChrystal, Op. cit. pp. 1-2).

### *Counterinsurgency in Helmand: An Important Case*

Operation Moshtarak in February 2010 was an application of the McChrystal ethos of a population-centric, counterinsurgency approach to the war in Afghanistan (Farrell, June, 2010). Moreover, Operation Moshtarak involved the largest military operation of the Afghanistan conflict up to that point. Its aim was to take control of Marja, an unincorporated district of Nad Ali, in the centre of Helmand, with strategic significance as a major cultivator of opium and a Taliban stronghold (Chivers and Filkins, February 12, 2010). The premise of COIN was largely connected with a 'clear, hold, build, transfer' campaign: 'clear' the tactical point of ridding the area of the insurgency; 'hold' the next stage in establishing government authority and protecting the local population; 'build' the next step in winning over the support of the populace by providing improved governance and development; 'transfer' – the crucial premise of the surge – in transferring full control to the Afghan government and ANSF (Cordesman, February 18, 2010).

This COIN operation was a military success but political failure, especially if one notes the objective was to win support of the population. Perceptions in the district and overall Helmand province were negative regarding the lack of

coordination between the military and civilian realms, as well as a deeply ineffective counter-narcotics policy (Jackson and Kamminga, September/October, 2010, pp. 23-24; The International Council on Security and Development, May, 2010; Chivers, 2010). The ISAF-led campaign meant an influx of displaced people into the Lashkar Gar refugee camp, civilian casualties and a deep suspicion of US actions. This was all an indication that the Taliban could continue to recruit through propagandistic purposes against a 'foreign occupier' (Jackson and Kamminga, Op. cit.).

The US/ISAF and GIRoA/ANSF also had a major issue with the supposed unidirectional aspect of a clear, hold, build, transfer policy. Indeed, the test cases of the significant operations in Helmand province got to the hold phase but never beyond. As Bob Woodward observed: *'The model had become clear, hold, hold, hold, hold, and hold. Hold for years. There was no build, no transfer.'* (Woodward, 2010, p. 349)

The Obama administration was prepared to give the predominantly COIN-led approach a limited amount of time. A difficulty of not getting close to the transfer stage meant a certain adjustment in its overall sights regarding the Afghanistan conflict. The idea of the US/ISAF being able to win over the indigenous population and (especially) transferring control to the ANSF and central government was still seen as an aim, but it was becoming a more distant one. Without being able to transfer control, even in an area where a large amount of US/ISAF troops operated, indicated the sheer challenge of the whole nationwide COIN enterprise.

*Taking COIN to the Taliban's Spiritual Heartland*

Kandahar – the Taliban’s spiritual heartland – was the next important test. An essential battleground for the perceptions of whether the US/ISAF and the ANSF could turn around the momentum of the insurgency and succeed in an area that had strategic and historical significance for this neo-fundamentalist outfit.<sup>103</sup> It was from this province in 1994 a fledgling movement of Talibs – with the support of Islamabad – started its major and successful sweep across the country. With the eventual takeover of the country, Kandahar became the capital of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Sinno, 2008, pp. 63-64; Rashid, 2000).

The post-9/11 overthrow of the Taliban and the installation of a new political regime in Kabul meant only a temporary respite for the influence of this movement in Kandahar. Indeed, the Taliban exponentially regained some influence and authority in this province as it became especially noticeable from 2006 onwards. Furthermore, the Quetta Shura Taliban indicated its clear goal of taking over the capital of the province – Kandahar City – through a process of encirclement. This would be achieved by taking the various districts – Arghandab, Zhari, Panjwai and Spin Bolak – before advancing on the capital (Forsberg, December, 2009).

The Taliban’s discursive formation of its Islamic, nationalistic and local credentials were played an important role in how gained it territorial success. Important factors for this movement also included establishing a shadow, alternative judiciary system that Afghans largely saw as considerably less corrupt than the

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<sup>103</sup> Over the border in Pakistan, Deobandi Madrassas had taught and trained the fledgling Taliban of this period. Saudi Arabia provided significant funding for these endeavours (Canfield, 2008, p. 231).



officially sanctioned state system (Sarwary, February 2, 2012). This helped garner the support of local recruits for its military campaign against the foreign 'infidels'. These 'infidels' consisted of the US/ISAF forces and its ongoing support for the ANSF and Karzai's regime, which in some quarters was discredited for having a symbiotic relationship with the 'occupying forces' and for its major bouts of corruption.

The campaign in Kandahar was a vital test of the COIN approach. General McChrystal was determined it would help cement in the eyes of North American and European public opinion – as well as leaders on the ground in Afghanistan and regionally – that the reversibility of the insurgency was a reality. It was also premised on the idea of the central government being able – over time – to build a more stable and sustainable order that would benefit a whole swathe of Afghans.

At the same time though, the Bush and Obama administrations military-led aspect to the reconstruction of the country and the relevance of working directly with and through significant power brokers meant an overreliance on these same actors in any policy it would try to implement. The level of legitimacy was a major concern as there was still the perception, amongst a sizable amount of Afghans that the central government and its foreign backers were more concerned with their own interests.

Before the Kandahar operation took place there were already lessons to be learnt from the Marja campaign. A full swoop military operation meant the results on the ground, especially in relation to the clear, hold, build, transfer aspect had not considered enough local Afghans perceptions of these actions (Cordesman and Lemieux, June 23, 2010). The rapaciousness of the Afghan National Police and its

treatment of Afghan citizens only served to undermine some of the tactical successes of the US and Afghan National Army.

There were delays in the Kandahar operation precisely for the reason that the United States was not regarded in a positive light. A continuing difficulty for the central government and ANSF was their perceived 'secondary status' and the conduit role they played in aiding US/ISAF interests. This coupled with its level of corruption, and the network this involved, only added fuel to the fire.

These were all challenges the United States wanted to overcome. This was problematic because certain tribal groups had either been ignored or largely left out of the economic spoils leading to resentment in certain quarters and some support for the insurgency. The US operation commanders understood their 'foreign presence' might not always be an asset. Therefore, the US/ISAF wanted to be accompanied with a relevant ANSF team and when possible not be the sole or even main actor in dealing with tribal leaders or elders.

A further point of issue for the US/ISAF was its ability to hold major population centres but very little outside of this. The whole point of COIN and winning over the 'will of the people' was its need to gain support from the rural areas, which still made up the vast bulk of Afghanistan.<sup>104</sup> The Obama administration continued to emphasise the idea of securing lines of communication and significant cities, and yet there was a genuine wariness in trying to win over the rural parts of the

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<sup>104</sup> The population census is notoriously unreliable in Afghanistan. This is due to over thirty-five years of conflict, displacement, and even the methodological challenge of being able to find out how many people live in each household. There have been conflicting estimates regarding the overall population but in nearly all studies the rural population is calculated at above 75% (The World Bank, 2013; UN Data, 2013).

country, as it would mean committing far greater resources and a longer time line. This meant the Obama Presidency spelt out a clear message of a specific, conditions based approach, including the transferring of power to the central government and ANSF (Woodward, 2010, p. 386).

Winning support of the local people for the COIN operation was deemed necessary but it only really took place in the more urban areas where the political, social, economic and cultural elites resided. The swell of support for the various insurgent groups remained in the rural areas. Despite the United States' attempt to communicate its aims at supporting development, governance and security, this was not having a major impact with the 'facts on the ground'. Moreover, not being able to protect the rural areas gave the Taliban and its other offshoots an advantage as it surrounded important towns. The movement made the populist argument of how it genuinely supported the needs of Afghans in contradistinction to the US/ISAF and the Karzai regime operating out of Kabul (Goodson and Johnson, 2011, pp. 577-599).

A further major challenge for COIN was the lack of US civilian and military convergence on this issue. Karl Eikenberry, the US Ambassador to Afghanistan and former top military commander, strongly disagreed with the COIN approach. The Ambassador saw Karzai's administration as highly corrupt and not a genuine strategic partner. According to Eikenberry, the option of increasing levels of US military troops and providing an exorbitant amount of funding for security, governance and development projects would only exacerbate the situation and

make the Afghan government more dependent on Washington (Schmitt, January 25, 2010).<sup>105</sup>

### *Washington's Guarantees to Afghanistan*

The Karzai administration's perception – that the US would almost ad infinitum continue to operate its military bases out of Afghanistan in the global fight against terrorism and for regional considerations – were further reasons it would not need to abandon its current modus operandi. Indeed, leading actors in the Obama administration continued to give iron clad assurances it would not abandon Afghanistan the way it had after the Soviet withdrawal and subsequent collapse. Washington argued it would commit to the long-term security of Afghanistan. *"How strong is your commitment?" Karzai asked at one point.... "We're not leaving Afghanistan prematurely," [Robert] Gates finally said. "In fact, we're not leaving at all."* (Woodward, 2010, p. 354). A further factor for Karzai not to have an incentive to reform. The Obama administration continued to make promises to Karzai in private and public that the US would be there in the long run for joint security and development purposes. As Obama stated:

*'Finally, as we pursue our shared strategy to defeat Al Qaida, I'm pleased that our two countries are working to broaden our strategic partnership over the long term. Even as we begin to transition security responsibility to Afghans over the next year, we will sustain a robust commitment in Afghanistan going forward. And the*

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<sup>105</sup> Eikenberry was also sceptical of the reintegration and reconciliation process of previous insurgents for precisely the same reason of 'perverse incentives'.

*presence here today of so many leaders from both our Governments underscores how we can partner across a full range of areas, including development and agriculture, education and health, rule of law and women's rights.'* (Obama, May 12, 2010)

McChrystal's ignominious exit from the Afghanistan conflict was due to his imprudent remarks on the Obama strategy in a Rolling Stone magazine article (Hastings, 2010). President Obama duly fired McChrystal. General Petraeus was his replacement. The change in personnel did not change the policy of COIN especially as its main architect in the Bush and Obama administrations took the helm as lead commander in Afghanistan. However, the tide of how to implement it and the relevance of counterinsurgency as a fundamental operational tool in Afghanistan was losing influence.

Washington's belief it could turn the war around – by gaining legitimacy for the central government and reversing the gains of the insurgency – was becoming a perceived fallacy. American military leadership had made certain promises to Obama at the ease in which it could have certain 'positive' results in Afghanistan, and this was proving to be largely inaccurate. As General Petraeus's comment to Obama – just prior to the President's West Point speech of December 1, 2009 – illustrated: *"Obama asked Petraeus, "David, tell me now. I want you to be honest with me. You can do this in eighteen months?" "Sir, I am confident we can train and hand over to the ANA [Afghan National Army] in that time frame."* (Alter, 2010, p. 390)

The Kandahar operation finally took place in the summer and autumn of 2010 with a certain amount of military accomplishment for the US/ISAF and ANSF. On the battlefield it reversed Taliban momentum and managed to secure some major

districts, especially around the capital (Forsberg, December, 2010). However, the civil-military nexus, the campaign was built upon, did not achieve a high level of coordination to make it a more comprehensive success.

Major power brokers in the province remained firmly in control of their domain and for certain tribes there was a continuing sense of alienation and resentment at being left out of the political spoils. There was also the on-going case that the insurgency was only temporarily defeated and without any significant change in the political climate throughout the country, it would remain a dangerous 'foe' (Dorransoro, April 26, 2011).

The Obama administration used the Lisbon NATO Summit meeting of November 19 and 20, 2010 to announce that US/ISAF combat troops would leave Afghanistan at the end of 2014. At that stage, the Afghan central government and National Security Forces would take full responsibility (NATO, November 20, 2010, Para 3 and 4). Obama reassured the political leadership of the NATO alliance that a clear and specific timeline was concretely in place (Clinton, 2014, p. 159). Equally, if not more importantly, it was also used as a further bargaining tool against the Taliban that had generally believed the US/NATO would be out of the country by July 2011. The Taliban had perceived the time-limited nature of the US/NATO operation as a boon in its own potential in possibly retaking the country. The US/ISAF believed this would help gain Afghan support for the GIROA and ANSF.

North American and European leaders were publically aware of all this and therefore pledged their support for continued assistance to the Afghan government and its security forces. The combat troops would remain in Afghanistan for a longer period. The Obama administration argued it needed to

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flesh out in further detail how it would proceed after the first withdrawal date. Washington remained the key actor in this process.

In this regard, the United States stated its specific timeline. However, it would not be drawn into what the potential and possible role of US Special Forces and trainers would be in Afghanistan post-2014. President Obama was strategically sizing up the insurgency and articulating his desire to provide security for the US mainland and keep an eye on the overall international environment. Afghanistan continued to be perceived as a major security concern. Moreover, the Obama administration made the sacrosanct claim that it would do everything in its power to protect the American people. A sense of *purpose* that gave the Afghanistan war an added urgency. Obama was adamant the overarching point of the conflict was in achieving a more stable and developed Afghanistan for Washington's perceived security concerns:

*'Well, your last point was "if necessary," and so let me start there. My first and most important job as President of the United States is to keep the American people safe. So I'll always do what's necessary to keep the American people safe. That's true today; that will be true for as long as I'm President of the United States.'* (Obama, November 20, 2010)

### *9/11: Significant Framing of Events*

Both realist and structural Marxist approaches struggle to explain why a country with marginal geo-political and/or geo-economic importance for the United States should have played such a prominent place in the first two years of the Obama

Presidency. In this way, the paradigm of 9/11 continued to be the significant framing of events for the Obama administration. Obama agreed with and followed the path of what his immediate predecessor had set (Krebs, September, 2015, pp. 840-841; Krebs, 2015, pp. 273-275). The perceived threat of terrorism was another challenge for Washington but one amongst many in the global realm. However, as this chapter has demonstrated, the Obama administration's discursive constructing of it as the central national security test became an overarching factor in how the United States operated and provided a fillip to change the situation on the ground in Afghanistan.

A perception of this danger gave the US a certain amount of leeway, primarily with its own citizens, in developing a policy that continued to be global in its remit. At the end of 2010, the Obama administration saw Afghanistan – the key country of focus in terms of fighting transnational terrorism – as being in an insecure state. The 'battle' for Afghanistan and the search for Al-Qaeda leaders and operatives in the Pashtun hinterland continued to take up a great deal of US resources and prestige. The future cause of action was still premised on the rationale of combating terrorism. This gave the Obama administration a pause for thought in how (and whether) it would extrapolate itself from Afghanistan having accomplished certain goals, which included a relatively stabilised country and with its 'head held high'. In the following chapter, the evolving perceived threat became especially significant in how Washington continued to think about and operate vis-à-vis Afghanistan.



## A Parlous Present: Obama and Afghanistan

*'Today, the core of Al Qaida in Afghanistan and Pakistan is on the path to defeat. Their remaining operatives spend more time thinking about their own safety than plotting against us. They did not direct the attacks in Benghazi or Boston. They've not carried out a successful attack on our homeland since 9/11. Instead, what we've seen is the emergence of various Al Qaida affiliates. From Yemen to Iraq, from Somalia to North Africa, the threat today is more diffuse.'*

Barack Obama, Address to the National Defense University, May 23, 2013

In the post-9/11 milieu, the United States has perceived Afghanistan as a pivotal country in its global counterterrorist strategy. A key assumption underlying this has been the relevance of stabilising Afghanistan so that it does not become a state that once again harbours and gives sanctuary to transnational terrorist actors. Within this discursive formation, the Obama administration early on in its tenure emphasised the almost existential aspect of a stable Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan. Yet, the end of 2014 saw the withdrawal of US/ISAF combat troops and no clear end in sight for the stabilisation of the country. Correspondingly, as Obama's above epigraph emphasises, the perceived threat has changed. In light of all this, this chapter explores these questions: how and why did the Obama administration's policy shift in relation to Afghanistan? And why has the perceived threat emanating from Afghanistan become downsized to a policy of containment?

The arguments in this chapter regarding the evolution of the Obama administration's approach vis-à-vis Afghanistan are threefold: firstly, there has been a discursive decoupling of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and that the real 'threat'

is the latter entity. In the second place, remnants of Al-Qaeda leadership in the Afghanistan/Pakistan tribal areas are now largely 'on the run'. Thirdly, the perceived threat of 'Al-Qaeda and its Affiliates' is a far more disaggregated global one.<sup>106</sup>

Hypothecating the thinking of rival schools regarding the evolving US policy in Afghanistan can throw further light on constructivist ideas. Realists would expect to see the US having at best a limited presence in the country, before fully withdrawing its forces and focusing its resources on more significant geo-political challenges. They would also envisage a regional solution to the conflict. Structural Marxists would expect to find a clear US/NATO presence with the United States establishing military bases and having direct access to mineral resources. This would directly benefit major American companies and establish US supremacy in the Eurasian region. Constructivists, by contrast, understand the focus of the Obama administration's policy shift 2010 to 2011 as a discursive (re-) construction of the perceived threat of terrorism, with more emphasis placed on how the major danger was increasingly decentralised. They would also postulate that as the language and practices of the global war on terror remain in place, there would be a continuing US presence in Afghanistan. In their schema, too, there would be increasing use of other counterterrorist tools (such as Unmanned Aerial

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<sup>106</sup> There are other factors concerning Washington's evolving policy that have included the US economy, public opinion, as well as other more pressing international economic, political and diplomatic issues. This will be referred to in the chapter. However, in the specific case of Afghanistan, these three above stated components have been the most important.

Vehicles) that would get rid of the 'cancerous terrorist elements', in order to make the United States and its allies safer, more prosperous and stronger.

As the previous chapter demonstrated, Washington has had a widespread, bipartisan belief in the necessity of fighting and preventing the Taliban from getting back into power. This has largely been to stop Afghanistan from becoming a 'safe haven' for transnational militants. The Obama administration initially put a great deal of resources in the fight against this neo-fundamentalist movement. However, the evolution of the administration's policy included the possibility of encompassing certain elements of the Taliban in peace talks to facilitate a full resolution to the conflict (Coll, 2011; Roy, February 1, 2009). This was to enable a withdrawal of US/ISAF troops and for Washington to have the maximum amount of leverage in this process. The US wanted to find a balance between the various major Afghan security actors and prevent the country from becoming a refuge for international militants (Dorronsoro, September, 2012).

Thus, by late 2010/early 2011, Obama highlighted the relevance of a political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan (Obama, November 7, 2010). This was to secure the country and ensure a smooth transition post-2014. However, this has been fraught with difficulties as the constantly evolving situation in the country and the role of significant militant actors has brought an element of unpredictability to the outcome. The Obama administration argued it would continue to support Afghanistan in the security realm and insist on the importance of improved governance (Obama, June 22, 2011).

The end of 2014 transition point was – contrary to received opinion – not a case of the United States entirely leaving the country on its own, à la end of the Cold

War. A limited amount of Special Forces, trainers and military bases have remained in place to support further 'stabilisation' of the country and to carry out counterterrorist actions in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Raghavan, September 30, 2014; Lander, May 27, 2014; Lieven, April 4, 2013; Schmidt, February 21, 2015). Nonetheless, the Obama administration reviewed its long-term goals and the aspect of continuing its support of Afghanistan was premised on the US achieving its perceived interests. In this regard, the government in Kabul needed to have some degree of perceived legitimacy. A complete withdrawal would have been the alternative option (Mazzetti and Rosenberg, July 8, 2013).<sup>107</sup>

#### *Counterterrorism Coming to the Fore*

By the end of 2010, the Obama administration's counterinsurgency slant was starting to wane in large part due to the conviction it was too expensive and complicated to carry out effectively. Concomitantly, the White House increasingly believed in a purer counter-terrorist approach, as the perceived 'real' enemy was Al-Qaeda. This evolution of policy continued to push for the salience of being tough on terrorism. Indeed, the underlying assumption of the threat emanating from the Pashtun hinterland remained, as Seth Jones further clarified:

*'...It became clear by 2011 that the increasing number of forces, the surge, including on the civilian side was not having a quick approach of defeating the insurgency. And*

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<sup>107</sup> Within this premise, there is also the understanding that national and regional stability amongst the key state and non-state actors can be partially achieved.

*by quick I mean if you look at the efforts in 2006 in Iraq, during the awakening, there was a relatively quick Sunni push back, against Al-Qaeda in Iraq, in provinces like Al-Anbar. That did not happen certainly as quickly as some had indicated in the Afghanistan context. So by the late 2010/2011 period, there was a recognition that a number of Americans were dying, American support levels for the war for a whole range of potential reasons were not high and were declining. The surge while it was increasing some control of territory was not seriously undermining the insurgency and defeating it.... So that shifted towards decreasing the number of forces there, decreasing the blood costs and the economic costs and focusing on the threat to the US homeland and US interests including attacks to US Embassies. So that's mostly a CT threat. So I think there was a bit of a circle.'*<sup>108</sup>

A drift in thinking and perception took place amongst important actors in Washington. This included the White House, senior members of Congress, opinion formers, and veteran military officers (Wood, June 22, 2011; Haass, 2010; Bumiller, 2012; Dowd, 2010).<sup>109</sup> The 'generosity' of US goals – with a leap of faith in COIN – to help facilitate an improved situation in the lives of Afghans started to look overly ambitious.

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<sup>108</sup> Author's interview with Dr Seth Jones. Jones is director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation.

<sup>109</sup> Vice President Biden was nearly always sceptical of the COIN approach in Afghanistan. An alternative 'counterterrorism-plus' (CT-Plus) involved an emphasis on Special Forces' operations and drones in the Pashtun hinterland with a focus on the real 'enemy', Al-Qaeda (Fair, January 11, 2011; Woodward, 2010, pp. 159-160; Beinart, 2013). This CT-Plus approach also involved continuing training of the ANSF and support for Afghan civilian institutions. One difference therefore was the minimal amount of ground troops needed, as a 'light footprint' was deemed more effective for US objectives.

Various US media outlets and opinion formers argued that counterinsurgency or 'nation-building' in Afghanistan was incoherent (Gentile, August 17, 2010; Gelb, 2011; Pape, October 18, 2010; Zakaria, October 4, 2010).<sup>110</sup> They contended it was not contributing in any meaningful sense to the reduction in transnational terrorism, and in the process was an enormously expensive endeavour. Whatever the case, according to Vanda Felbab-Brown, COIN was an enormously complex undertaking that entailed a long-term commitment of resources, and it depended on effective governance:

*"There was very much a craving, I think, for national rule, nonetheless there was a lot of contestation over who should be the national ruler, the Pashtun/Tajik issue certainly. The policy was pushed by different actors, go local or go national, as if one could replace the other and ultimately both turned out problematic. And so you have the White House that's sitting and saying, "oh you know, see we told you what a foolish task, it's all hopeless, and it's all complicated. We can never pull the strings on this." This was not always the case, I think there were instances of successes, but it often took a great deal of diligence, monitoring and levers. And the successes just did not arise easily.'*<sup>111</sup>

Consequently, the Obama administration refocused its actions more in the counterterrorism direction. It realised an overall lack of real progress in development, governance and security issues meant its COIN objectives could only

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<sup>110</sup> The correct term is 'state-building' rather than 'nation-building', as it is a question of developing Afghan institutions. It is solely that the term 'nation-building' has gained widespread usage.

<sup>111</sup> Author's interview with Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown who is a senior fellow in the Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Security and Intelligence in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institute.

be partially achieved. There were very high levels of corruption within the Afghan central government and ANSF, as well as the US/ISAF haphazard approach to defending the population. This was all coupled with the changing domestic and international context. US policymakers increasingly believed in the narrower remit of directly fighting transnational terrorism. COIN had at least provided the possibility of reversing the Taliban's momentum and helped to build up certain institutions, especially the ANSF, which gave the United States a (potential) long-term strategic partnership with Afghanistan.

The United States' approach to Afghanistan continued to support various institutions including a democratically elected government. There was an important professed role for the rule of law and free market, which was premised on the idea that Afghanistan would develop its economy and become less dependent over time on international aid. In conjunction, the US/ISAF build-up of the ANSF was another crucial determinant for the Obama administration in giving Afghanistan the best possible future. As Biden argued, Washington would not abandon the country:

*'The United States, if the Afghan people want it, are prepared, and we are not leaving in 2014. Hopefully we will have totally turned over the ability... to the Afghan security forces to maintain the security in the country, but we will – we are not leaving, if you don't want us to leave. And we plan on continuing to work with you, and it's in the mutual self-interest of both our nations.'* (Biden, January 11, 2011)

The US/ISAF were strong advocates of Afghanistan developing its institutions. This was to make the country more independent. The actual results were mixed. Opinion formers saw the original intervention in the country and genuine

optimism amongst the international community and especially Afghans as an opportunity lost (Rubin, January-February, 2007, p. 66; Rashid, 2008).<sup>112</sup> Significant lessons were subsequently learnt and the civil-military nexus – as the post-9/11 decade unfolded – was an attempt to regain the initiative. However, the lack of progress on the security and development fronts, even after the Obama administration's surge, was for many Afghans evidence that the United States and other ISAF countries were in the country for narrow self-interest. The Taliban used the narrative of 'national liberator' that it has continually employed in the post-9/11 conflict (Dorransoro, June 29, 2009).

The United States' 'peace building' mission in Afghanistan grew over time. There was an initial light footprint in which state building was largely eschewed. However, the US/ISAF exponentially increased its authority and presence in the realm of a civil-military nexus. Top-down state building was often emphasised over the bottom-up approach, but whether it was a formal or informal response, the international community had moved in a direction where throwing more resources at the problem became the perceived solution. In this way, key NATO leaders used the argument that the stakes in Afghanistan could not be higher and an international presence was therefore essential (Sarkozy, April 3, 2009; Obama, December 1, 2009).

Washington maintained that the construction of a political order in Afghanistan, which upheld women's rights and especially the rule of law were important

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<sup>112</sup> Dr Barbara Elias of the National Security Archive emphasised this at the end of our telephone interview.



factors for the country's development. Nevertheless, the United States and its allies took a militaristic approach at times of heightened tension. Good governance and development were heavily encouraged, but not at the expense of going after the insurgency and principally the terrorist havens in the Pashtun hinterland (Suhrke, 2011, p. 225). Washington continued to perceive the fight against transnational terrorism as highly pertinent and Afghanistan as central.

The Bush administration set the path of fighting terrorism and directly linked the Taliban with Al-Qaeda. This was largely continued under Obama's tenure. However, by 2011 there was a clear acceptance and understanding that the Taliban needed to be brought in from the cold in order to have a comprehensive agreement amongst the vital actors in the country. The question of 'who' represented the Taliban was a complex one and how this would play out amongst other important political actors, which included remnants of the Northern Alliance, made the overall piece of the jigsaw fragmented and liable to further setbacks and violence.

### *Washington's Binary Thinking and Militarised Approach to the Conflict*

President Bush put a clear focus on 'us' and 'them' regarding the situation on the ground in Afghanistan. The Obama administration largely continued with this discursive approach. This was despite the fact that significant actors in Afghanistan – including major warlords nominally on the side of the US/ISAF – continued to commit violence and human rights abuses in order to advance their own interests. As a result, the United States ended up 'taking sides' due to Washington's overall counterterrorism objective. As Vanda Felbab-Brown, an

international and internal conflicts and non-traditional security threats expert at the Brookings Institute explained:

*'The whole governance issue was severely complicated by much of the military. Anti-Taliban and anti-Al-Qaeda operations were taking place through the help of very, very problematic Afghan powerbrokers, whether this is Maitullah Khan, Ahmed Wali Karzai, or people like Gul Agha Sherzai or Abdul Raziq ultimately the saviour of Kandahar. These people were very brutish, very self-interested, often thugs. And so there was some inconsistency in the policy of how much thuggishness was forgiven for the sake of them delivering on counterterrorism objectives. And the larger state-building effort was always subordinated and extremely difficult to calibrate these immediate short-term imperatives of killing the "bad guys".'*<sup>113</sup>

A labelling of one side as the epitome of evil meant certain constraints were put in place on US foreign policy. Washington saw warlords (at least nominally) as being on their side. A genuine desire to improve the situation in Afghanistan was therefore often circumscribed with one side being demonised, which eschewed any substantive negotiation until much later in the conflict. Indeed, the Bush and Obama administrations consistently held binary thinking neglected to account for the variety of competing narratives the various international and domestic actors were articulating in order to win influence with the Afghan people. In this way, the importance of being perceived as a legitimate actor operating in the country was crucial. The question of 'which' actor was most benefiting Afghans therefore became a widely dispiriting cacophony of noises.

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<sup>113</sup> Author's interview with Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown.

This importance of collectively shared meanings is produced through social practices, narratives, interactions, expectations, and how actors interpret what they want and who they are (Wendt, 1999; Finnemore, 1996; Adler, 2002, p. 100). This has provided the United States with a frame of reference that sees itself as the leading actor in taking on the scourge of transnational terrorism, whilst supporting other countries in the process. Moreover, Washington's interpretation of which actors it can trust has led to certain relationships being given preferential treatment, reinforcing the social, economic and political structures within Afghanistan.

US policy towards Afghanistan has evolved in a fragmented way. The complexity of operating in the country and all the myriad actors – domestic and international – following their perceived interests are important factors in this regard. In addition to this, the actions of the Bush and Obama administrations have contributed to the complexity of the state of affairs. A lack of attention to Afghanistan in the first few years and a subsequent major increase in resources with a continual heavy handed and militaristic approach added to a fuelling of the conflict. The irony of the situation meant a systematic bias of an ever-deeper involvement in the country and this was justified because of its 'centrality' to a 'global war on terrorism'.

#### *Obama and the symbolism of the Bin Laden Raid*

The death of Osama Bin Laden on May 2, 2011, in Abbottabad, Pakistan, was an important and symbolic event. During the 2008 Presidential campaign, Obama had promised that if elected, his administration would go to the 'ends of the earth'

to capture or kill Bin Laden. Indeed, the Obama Presidency would subsequently go further than its predecessor in its policy towards militant actors in Pakistan. The Bush administration was often at pains to point out that Pakistan was a sovereign country and that it would confer with the leadership in Islamabad regarding any special operations (Mazzetti, July 8, 2007). Obama believed in the central relevance of the United States fighting terrorism and the heart of this threat was perceived to come from the Pashtun areas. Pakistan sovereignty would therefore be compromised if necessary. As the then Presidential candidate and member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Barack Obama stated:

*'I understand that President Musharraf has his own challenges. But let me make this clear. There are terrorists holed up in those mountains who murdered 3,000 Americans. They are plotting to strike again. It was a terrible mistake to fail to act when we had a chance to take out an al Qaeda leadership meeting in 2005. If we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets and President Musharraf won't act, we will.'* (Obama, August 1, 2007)

In very distinct contradistinction to both his conservative detractors and to a swathe of supporters, Obama was in this instance even more willing to use American hard power in order to pre-empt any deadly attacks. Thus, the idea of the Obama administration being dovish is misleading. Moreover, a bipartisan, historically informed belief in the nature of a 'benign' US and its global leadership role in a plethora of multilateral fora would not restrain Washington from acting in a unilateral regard when needed (Obama, May, 2010).

The centrality Obama put on capturing or assassinating Bin Laden started in relation to his initial meetings with the CIA, in which he placed the capture or

killing of the Al-Qaeda leader at the top of his administration's security priorities (Mann, 2010, p. 303). As soon as there was evidence of Bin Laden's whereabouts, the President was adamant that the CIA and DoD should collaborate in order to give real and actionable options.

The element of bounded rationality, whereby a decision maker only has partial and incomplete information that is open to interpretation and a finite amount of time is relevant in this case (Simon, 1972, pp. 161-176; Tversky and Kahneman, September 27, 1974, pp. 1124-1131; Stein, 2008, pp. 101-116; Chang, 2010, pp. 168-177). It was not clear-cut from the CIA's studies and estimations that Bin Laden was or would be in the compound. Levels of uncertainty and possible outcomes meant there was a whole swathe of contingency planning should the raid take a turn for the worse. Obama took the final decision to authorise the raid despite a variety of divergent opinions within his National Security Council team (Mann, 2010, p. 309; Gates, 2014; Allison, May 7, 2012).

The announcement of Bin Laden's death was greeted with very widespread euphoria in Washington and amongst the American public at large. Bin Laden was the symbol of the traumatic 9/11 attacks. The raid and killing of this individual elicited a sense of retribution and added weight to the notion that the 'exceptional' United States would protect and ensure the safety of its own people and those of its allies. It provided a rare amount of bipartisan praise for Obama who was perceived as decisive in his conduct before and after the raid (Dwyer, 2011).

Obama stressed the importance of a brave military and intelligence services to the success of the Bin Laden operation. The global war against transnational terrorism would continue with the United States protecting its homeland and providing

support to its allies across the globe (Allison, September 7, 2012). In particular, Obama pronounced the exceptional aspect of America, which promoted its values overseas, as well as the significance of 'sacrifice' to the whole counterterrorism project:

*'And tonight let us think back to the sense of unity that prevailed on 9/11. I know that it has, at times, frayed. Yet today's achievement is a testament to the greatness of our country and the determination of the American people. The cause of securing our country is not complete. But tonight we are once again reminded that America can do whatever we set our mind to. That is the story of our history, whether it's the pursuit of prosperity for our people or the struggle for equality for all our citizens, our commitment to stand up for our values abroad and our sacrifices to make the world a safer place.'* (Obama, May 1, 2011)

#### *US 'Sacrifice' in the Time of War and Peace*

The aspect of 'sacrifice' is an age-old factor that US political leaders continuously articulate in order to emphasise why its military is essential to the preservation of fundamental freedoms on the domestic and international stage. A constant evocation of this idea illustrates how the United States believes it takes on any relevant major foreign policy challenge – whether it is defeating Nazism, Communism, or even transnational terrorism – for the sake of both the US and the whole of humanity (Roosevelt, October 25, 1941; Nixon, December 24, 1971; Ford, October 7, 1974). This provides a clear frame of reference for various

administrations to justify why young service-personnel should sacrifice their lives for 'freedom'.

The constant articulation of an American creed that is striving for perfection and sacrifices to ensure future freedoms was often made during the Afghan conflict. Importantly enough, more US citizens supported the 'sacrifice' needed in Afghanistan compared to the Iraq war, which had very rapidly lost the majority of American public opinion (Dogan, Gallup, June 12, 2015; McCrisken, 2012, pp. 1000-1002). The Obama administration effectively argued for that the 'global war against terrorism' emanated from the Pashtun hinterland. In this way, Obama had a long held conviction on this matter. Indeed, in the previously cited August 1, 2007 speech, at the Woodrow Wilson Center, the then Illinois Senator and Democratic Presidential candidate was determined the United States would take on and defeat this threat especially because of the 'safe haven' aspect. As demonstrated in this quotation, Obama (subsequently) tied the United States' national security fortunes to Afghanistan in order to make America safer and stronger:

*'As 9/11 showed us, the security of Afghanistan and America is shared. And today, that security is most threatened by the al Qaeda and Taliban sanctuary in the tribal regions of northwest Pakistan. Al Qaeda terrorists train, travel and maintain global communications in this safe-haven. The Taliban pursues a hit and run strategy, striking in Afghanistan, then skulking across the border to safety. This is the wild frontier of our globalized world. There are wind-swept deserts and cave-dotted mountains. There are tribes that see borders as nothing more than lines on a map,*

*and governments as forces that come and go. There are blood ties deeper than alliances of convenience, and pockets of extremism that follow religion to violence.*

*But that is no excuse. There must be no safe haven for terrorists who threaten America. We cannot fail to act because action is hard.'* (Obama, August 1, 2007)

Levels of support for President Obama increased substantially after Osama Bin Laden's death. However, the US military – for its involvement and sacrifice – got nearly universal support. A Gallup poll taken in the aftermath of the event illustrated the high esteem with which the military was held. Eighty-nine percent of respondents believed the armed forces should take great credit for its role in the raid and capture of Bin Laden (Gallup, May, 2011). The military's standing in US public life continues to be at a very high level. There is not complete support for the institution. Indeed, in recent history there have been genuinely diffuse social movements that mobilised against it such as the anti-war demonstrations in the context of the Vietnam and Iraq wars. However, the aspect of it receiving great support is something Republican and Democratic administrations take on board.

During the War in Afghanistan (2001-2014), the Bush and Obama administrations continued to emphasise how the war was pivotal to the national identity of a 'brave' United States, which helped underwrite global security. Moreover, the idea of sacrifice has come up time and again in US political history (Obama, March 12, 2009). Indeed, the major factor of doing something for the sake of others is recurrent in American political discourse and plays into the values of an 'exceptional' United States that stands for 'freedom' in all its guises (Kennedy, January 20, 1961; Preston, 2012).



This aspect of a higher value is something that motivates many other state and non-state actors throughout history though. The challenge of the war in Afghanistan and overall 'global war on terror' is the multitude and cacophony of voices arguing that their group or movement is fighting for a righteous cause. For this reason, a state or non-state actor would pay the 'ultimate price' in order to advance one's own perception of what is 'right' (Atran, 2010).

The indispensable aspect of sacrifice is emphasised as part and parcel of something that a 'heroic' US stands for. It is another key feature of US national and cultural identity that it is the 'exceptional' country. In this line of reasoning, America takes on the world's aggressors, whilst in the process helping others. However, US national identity can become a 'sacrifice trap', as the Afghan conflict became increasingly expensive and fraught with difficulties. The co-founder of General Systems Theory, economist and peace activist Kenneth E. Boulding expounds on this concept:

*'This is a phenomenon which I have identified as the 'sacrifice trap'. The most absolute non-economic value is the sense of personal identity – our image of who we are. Sacrifice often reinforces this identity, simply because it is very hard for us to admit that past sacrifices have been in vain. We see this in the case of national identity as well as personal identity. To admit that the sacrifices that we have undergone in the name of either a personal or a national identity were actually in vain would be too great a threat to that identity itself.'* (Boulding, 1984, p. 106)

The decisions that the Bush and (especially) Obama administrations took with regard to Afghanistan contributed to the idea of 'entrapment in escalating conflicts'. Brockner et al., explain: *'Entrapping conflicts are those in which decision-*

*makers feel compelled to continue investing their resources in order to justify previous costs incurred in the pursuit of some goal.'* (Brockner, Rubin et al., 1982, p. 248) The Obama administration continued with its high level of commitment to Afghanistan due to its own reputation being on the line, which only added to the idea of 'getting the job done'.<sup>114</sup>

This social-psychological aspect of US political leadership involves continually persuading and impugning its own citizens – whether on a civilian and/or military level – to sacrifice further for a cause that is perceived as central to the national interest. In this way, a determination to get the job done – despite clearly haphazard results and in certain provinces increasing insurgency violence – meant the United States continued to pour resources into the Afghanistan conflict with minimal results.

Obama used the salience of historical memory and national myth making in order to make a partial connection between Afghanistan and the Second World War, aka the 'good war'. In the aftermath of the 'good war', the United States' construction of multilateral institutions – the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – with America as the primary actor, demonstrated its desire to be a legitimate part of the new global order (Farrell and Finnemore, November/December, 2013, pp. 22-26; Hunt, 2009, p. 216). Obama's linkage of this 'good war' concept with Afghanistan was a clear indication of how the United States argued for its right and responsibility to be the world's leading global

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<sup>114</sup> The author would like to thank Professor Herbert W Simons for his insights in this area during our expert interview of November 9, 2013 in Ghent, Belgium.

security actor. The importance of a 'brave' military was sacrosanct to this process.

As Obama stated:

*'On this National Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day, we also reaffirm our commitment to carrying on their work, to keeping the country we love strong, free, and prosperous. And as today's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan come to an end and we welcome home our 9/11-generation, we resolve to always take care of our troops, veterans, and military families as well as they've taken care of us. On this solemn anniversary, there can be no higher tribute to the Americans who served and sacrificed 70 years ago today.'* (Obama, December 7, 2011)

President Bush used the term 'victory' in a powerful moment of spontaneity at Ground Zero on September 14, 2001. The emotional outpouring of support from the American people illustrated a sense of anger, which the Bush administration used to strategically construct and implement its foreign policy. This has had wide-ranging and long-term consequences. The Obama Presidency has also repeatedly articulated the importance of 'defeating' this transnational militant phenomenon (Obama, March 27, 2009; Hansen, 2011, p. 170). This takes on a long-standing notion and cultural artefact that pervades US political and social life (USA Today, 10 July, 2011). 'Sacrifice' and 'service' being two continual refrains – one that leads to a 'brave' United States successfully taking on major global threats. As Obama argued:

*'Because of the service and the sacrifice of our brave men and women in uniform, the war in Iraq is over, the war in Afghanistan is winding down, Al Qaida is on the run, and Usama bin Laden is dead.'* (Obama, November 3, 2012)

The idea of defeating 'enemies' is a narrative the United States has called forth throughout its history, and the 'victory' over Nazism and Communism is used ad infinitum to reinforce America's national identity. In this way, there is the recurrent story of a 'heroic' US, which has taken on some of the world's totalitarian regimes, in order to spread 'freedom' across the globe. A sense of victory pervades the US and the use of symbols, rituals and tradition helps develop the notion of an 'exceptional' country (Johnson, 2008, pp. 3-5). The threat of 'terror' is something that renews a sense of purpose and mission for the United States. Therefore, fighting this transnational threat in all its guises needs to be taken on with steadfast determination. The US is 'forward thinking' and overcomes all adversaries (Panetta, December 17, 2011).

A sense of failing for the Obama administration vis-à-vis Afghanistan was seen as out of the question for reasons of prestige – on both the national and international level – as well as the highly perceived stakes of combating transnational terrorism. This defined and undergirded a foreign policy that was very muscular in taking on the perceived threat of terrorism.

### *Being 'Smarter'*

Obama's original reasoning behind identifying Al-Qaeda as a very grave threat – emanating from the Afghanistan/Pakistan tribal areas – provided a clear course of action. However, the Obama administration was going to do things differently to its predecessor and be 'smarter' in the process (Clinton, January 13, 2009; Clinton, September 9, 2011; Armitage and Nye, 2007; Krebs, September, 2015, pp. 840-

841; Parmar, 2012, pp. 222-223). Being smarter meant using US power that defended its perceived core national interests in a more focused way and in the process avoiding any overly expensive, large-scale conflict (Merica, March 3, 2013). The idea of combating terrorism was one wherein Washington would not directly intervene in other countries and thereby create new 'enemies'. Instead, it would take on the relevant challenges in a steadfast and varied capacity. In this regard, Obama emphasised the increased relevance of US Special Forces and close collaboration with host nations/local partners on counterterrorism measures in order to achieve US national security goals for the longer term (Obama, May 28, 2014). In the meantime, though, there was perceived 'unfinished business' regarding the intervention in Afghanistan, which the Bush administration had failed to address.

President Obama's decision to put Afghanistan at the top of its list of national security concerns meant a commitment that would need full implementation in order to have a chance of success. It also signified the President's national security legacy was largely tied to its fortunes in the conflict. The Obama administration had to deal with the subsequent lack of progress regarding the development of strong institutions and a very uncertain future for Afghanistan (Weinbaum, November 5, 2014). In addition, there was the methodological difficulty of demonstrating whether the United States/ISAF intervention in the country had actually 'reduced' transnational terrorism.

The Obama administration's consistent promise that the United States would 'finish the job' in a successful manner meant varying the tactics it used. Responding to a lack of progress on the counterinsurgency front, Washington

sustained and increased its counterterrorist operations in Afghanistan and especially over the border in Pakistan. The increased use of drone attacks and Special Forces' operations were deemed more effective in achieving its goals. As evidenced by the then Director of the CIA and subsequent Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's argument, this thinking and practice has informed the Obama Presidency throughout its tenure. Indeed, as demonstrated in this quote, Secretary Panetta strongly argued for the effectiveness of drone strikes:

*'But I can assure you that in terms of that particular area [Remote Drone Strikes], it is very precise and it is very limited in terms of collateral damage and, very frankly, it's the only game in town in terms of confronting and trying to disrupt the al-Qaeda leadership.'* (Panetta, May 18, 2009)

With the death of Osama Bin Laden, President Obama argued the United States successfully brought closure to the terrible events of 9/11 and justice had been served. At the same time though, the Obama administration reasoned the fight against transnational terrorism remained unabated. A continual link between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan was the administration's justification for further sacrifice and a continuing war in that country (Clinton, May 2, 2011).

There were a number of different levels to the relationship between the United States and the Taliban. During the counterinsurgency phase, the United States had identified a more multi-layered approach in which Washington would deal with the varying elements of the movement. In the subsequent counterterrorist stage the US/ISAF continued to fight the disparate elements of the Taliban, Haqqani network and Hezb-e-Islami, whilst exploring peace talks with elements within these same groups (Rosenberg and Rubin, June 18, 2013).

A somewhat symbiotic linkage of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda continued to give the point of sacrifice a sustained relevance. The US/ISAF aspect of supporting the central government – with the hope that it would reform itself – was a major challenge in creating a more stable country. There was an incessant stream of criticism taking place between Washington and Kabul. President Karzai played the ‘nationalist’ and ‘independent’ card, whilst also insisting the US and the rest of the international community continued to provide for the future development and security of the country (Nordland, September 23, 2014). At the same time, Washington was cognisant and critical of Karzai’s administration for its major bouts of corruption and kleptocracy.

The plethora of US actors operating in Afghanistan – including private contractors – resulted in a disjointed policy that has been directly detrimental to the Afghan people. In this way too, the Karzai administration successfully managed to use the ‘double game’ aspect in how it operated as it dealt with the different layers of the US government in order to achieve certain interests. The case of the CIA providing enormous amounts of cash to crucial actors and warlords in the Karzai government – on both a national and provincial level – was a clear factor in fuelling corruption (Rosenberg and Mazzetti, April 28, 2013). It also demonstrated that a specific agency would follow its own perceived interests that ran counter to overall US foreign policy goals (Allison and Zelikow, 1999; March, 1999).

### *Habituation of Certain Ideas and Militarised Practices in the ‘Global War on Terror’*

The aspect of the Bush and Obama administrations evolving approach to Afghanistan was the habituation of certain practices and ideas that the increasing

role in the country and the wider 'war on terror' entailed. A constant discursive emphasis on fighting a dangerous 'other' meant the tools used varied and eventually became accepted as a new norm. This institutionalisation helped provide the United States with a plethora of toolkits to fight terrorism. Obama and his inner circle's use of drones/Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in neighbouring Pakistan was a clear-cut case of an administration that was not afraid of using force in a variety of ways in order to kill militants in what it perceived as the most 'effective way' (Brennan, April 30, 2012).

A fighting of the treacherous 'other' helps solidify and reinforce the identity of a 'brave' United States needing to undertake a robust response against its enemies. Debates over the Obama administration's use of drone attacks were overwhelmingly centred on the usefulness of the instrument being deployed and the legality of it. The Obama Presidency saw these objects as a natural outgrowth of fighting a 'cancerous Al-Qaeda cell'. According to Washington's narrative, the United States takes action, which is done with the upmost responsibility, as this conforms to its self-identified national values.

The Obama administration's confidence in the efficacy of drones led to the assumption that it was therefore the right and correct use of its power (Hixson, 2016, p. 444). A belief in the relevance of this approach was consistently articulated and there was an understanding that it helped prevent terrorism on a subnational, national and transnational level. The sense of a 'we' was constructed to talk about the 'civilised' world fighting a shadowy and dangerous enemy and therefore entrusting the executive branch (with some legislative oversight) in this battle was the right thing to do (Brennan, Op. cit.).



A lack of details on the killing of innocent civilians and why a certain individual was deemed such an imminent threat to US national security was not part of this overall picture. In a number of cases the identity of the targets were even unknown to the Obama administration. This was due to the 'pattern-of-life' analysis in which certain individuals had 'defining characteristics' that would deem them as planning to undertake a terrorist operation. This had a very ambiguous aspect, which was heavily reliant on technology. For instance, an unspecified individual could be living in a part of the Afghanistan/Pakistan tribal areas and was targeted solely for being in an area where there was militant activity. In this regard, 'defining characteristics' has never been publically justified in the fight against transnational terrorism (Cavallaro, Sonnenberg, Knuckey, et al., September, 2012, pp. 12-14; Greenwald, 2012).

This is a new and taken for granted reality whereby leading US state officials specify, locate, and attempt to kill crucial terrorist targets through the use of a database known as 'disposition matrix' and the tool of drone attacks and Special Forces. It is fraught with ethical implications. However, from the Obama administration's perspective, the winding down of conventional warfare in Afghanistan started to place the necessity of putting additional effort on capturing or killing suspected militant anti-US elements (Miller, October 24, 2012). An institutionalisation of this practice meant the 'global war against terrorism' was further expanded into something more long-term. US national security culture evolved whereby target killing became a norm because it was perceived to 'aid' the fight against transnational terrorism.

The killing of Osama Bin Laden in May 2011 gave the Obama administration a further opportunity to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. Obama had articulated a very specific timeline at the time of the surge. This meant counterinsurgency was given a proper amount of resources and commitment – especially in the volatile southern and eastern parts of the country – but that it would only have a limited amount of time to achieve measurable results.

An official drawdown of US troops was about to take place and the Obama administration stated the US/ISAF was leaving from a position of strength. According to this rationale, the Taliban's momentum had been seriously curtailed and the training and exponential increase of Afghan National Security Forces meant the longer-term possibility of a more independent and secure Afghanistan. With the United States withdrawing 10,000 troops at the end of 2011 and another 33,000 by September 2012, the administration was appealing to its domestic audience, à la upcoming Presidential and Congressional elections, in order to show it had a game plan in which all combat troops would leave the country by the end of 2014.

The Obama Presidency's remit had narrowed, as there was a clear acknowledgement of the limitations of state building. This was entering fully into the political discourse of the executive branch. Washington's key purpose in Afghanistan remained to prevent Al-Qaeda and its affiliates from obtaining a safe haven. However, other goals would take more of a backseat due to the United States' economic and fiscal concerns, changing national security threats, and a reorientation of its overall foreign policy goals, which included a perceived

rebalancing toward the Asian-Pacific region (Clinton, November, 2011; Kitchen, 2014, pp. 70-71).

### *US Exceptionalism and the Significance of Danger*

According to the Obama administration, the relevance of the United States helping Afghanistan was another example of a 'benevolent' US (Obama, January 11, 2013). Washington continued to call for support from the American public (Cassata and Baldor, 2011). Obama argued that the 'exceptional' United States overcame adversity. America would 'prevail' because of its character and belief in human progress and perfectibility. Finishing a job it had started in Afghanistan meant completing it in the best possible way, which included helping others. At the same time, as Obama reasoned, the United States would only become stronger by gravitating in a direction where there was a 'rebirth' in its domestic economy, in order to provide the possibility of the 'American Dream' for current and future generations.<sup>115</sup> The centrality of the US military to this idea demonstrated its continuing relevance to national identity:

*'That's a lesson worth remembering, that we are all part of one American family. Though we have known disagreement and division, we are bound together by the creed that is written into our founding documents and a conviction that the United States of America is a country that can achieve whatever it sets out to accomplish.'*

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<sup>115</sup> The Obama Presidency's emphasis on economic renewal is shared with prior administrations. For example, Ronald Reagan cited this factor as key to achieving US foreign policy objectives during his tenure (Reagan, 1990, p. 333; Morgan, December, 2011, p. 30; Morgan, 2016, p. 200).

*Now let us finish the work at hand. Let us responsibly end these wars, and reclaim the American Dream that is at the center of our story. With confidence in our cause, with faith in our fellow citizens, and with hope in our hearts, let's go about the work of extending the promise of America for this generation and the next. May God bless our troops, and may God bless the United States of America.'* (Obama, June 22, 2011)

US political leaders constantly articulate a sense of 'renewal' and 'regeneration' to emphasise a relevant thread in the political history of the republic, which became the world's global power. This exceptionalist rhetoric has been used to give a sense of an imperfect country striving for perfection, and a belief that its better days are ahead. A refrain to the past gives a stronger sense of shared identity, which is used to motivate a policy of perceived altruism in its foreign policy. A 'rebirth of its ideals' therefore becomes sacrosanct in expressing how a certain administration may fall short but there is always the factor that it can, once again, restore the United States' 'rightful place' as the leader of the 'free world'. This role was consummate throughout the Cold War and continues in the post-9/11 context. The refrain of 'leader of the free world' against international communism or transnational terrorism demonstrates the response to a perceived threat that the United States 'defeats' (Leffler, 2007; Fousek, 2000).

Due to Washington's discursive practices, US foreign policy is in many instances understood as a response to danger or threat, and this becomes central to American national identity. In turn, this makes it possible for the executive to pursue a certain policy (Campbell, 1998, p. 3; Schmidt, 2008, p. 157; Hixson, 2008). David Campbell explains further: *'the constant articulation of danger through foreign policy is thus not a threat to a state's identity or existence; it is its condition*

*of possibility. While the techniques of concern change over time, the techniques and exclusions by which those objects are constituted as dangers persist.'* (Campbell, Op. cit. p. 12)

If the United States were perceived to have failed in Afghanistan it would have provided a 'boon' to transnational militancy. This type of logic is consummate with the linking of 'danger' to how the US proceeds. Indeed, the view becomes one in which the United States could only have left the country when a viable central authority with well-trained security forces was in place, which could help maintain political order and prevent any safe haven. The logic of this and the possible ramifications for a post-2014 order provided justification for the United States in a limited capacity to remain in the country for counterterrorism measures (Ackerman, 2014). This further institutionalised fighting 'global terrorism'.

#### *Washington's Decoupling of the Quetta Shura Taliban and Al-Qaeda*

The Obama administration's incremental discursive decoupling of the Taliban from Al-Qaeda was further evidence of a policy that wanted to achieve some sort of political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan (Clinton, October 14, 2010; Banusiewicz, October 14, 2010). Washington's talks with various elements of the Taliban leadership became part of the new narrative and action, which understood the difference between a national, indigenous movement and a transnational militant one. Thus, there was a new emphasis on reconciliation with elements of the Taliban in order for Washington to leave the country with its 'head held high' and to achieve some sort of political stability.

A 'talk' and 'fight' strategy remained for the United States and the tactical emphasis was to build up some momentum against the Taliban. This was to force the hand of vital elements – especially the Quetta Shura leadership – to come to the table and negotiate a comprehensive peace treaty with the multi-ethnic, central government under the auspice of an Afghan-led process.

The aspect of attempting to defeat the Taliban on the battlefield while initiating talks meant a certain emphasis on a military approach to a political solution. General David Petraeus – the US/ISAF commander in Afghanistan between July 2010 and July 2011 – was adamant that if the Taliban could be sufficiently 'degraded' then there would be far more possibilities at the negotiation table. This signified to many Afghans and the Taliban leadership that the United States was not sufficiently serious about the reconciliation process and therefore could not be trusted (Ruttig, 2013, pp. 434-435). The overstated military approach was not a way of gaining support from local people, especially with civilian casualties and the perception of an 'occupation' still major issues (Farrell and Giustozzi, 2013). As Marvin Weinbaum argued:

*'Otherwise, the resistance was not ideological. Built on a myriad of different grievances and just simply alliances of convenience and a lot of criminality, which just fused with the insurgency. But it gained a more ideological tinge when this notion, the foreigners are there, the occupiers.'*<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Author's interview with Dr Marvin Weinbaum of the Middle East Institute who was the leading intelligence official in the State Department for Afghanistan and Pakistan from 1999 to 2003.

The Obama administration pressed on with the possibility of bringing all significant actors to the table and was adamant that the 'twin track' approach could bear fruit. There was an officially sanctioned opening of a Taliban office in Doha at the end of December 2011. This gave the first public indication that back channel talks between the United States and the Taliban could possibly produce results (Rosenberg and Sahak, December 27, 2011; Philp, September 13, 2011; Coll, 2011).

The move was fraught with difficulties. One aspect of reconciling the enormous variety of Afghan actors and those that had complete disdain for the Taliban movement made it hard to implement. The Obama administration had scaled back from an ambitious, civil-military project to one in which a 'good enough' aspect would have to suffice for the conflict in Afghanistan (Suhrke, September 20, 2012, p. 488; Cordesman, May 1, 2012; Fitzgerald and Ryan, 2014, pp. 85-88).

A ten-year anniversary of the original Bonn Conference also took place in December 2011. This very multinational and intergovernmental affair involved a multitude of state actors, on both an international and regional level. Karzai's administration wanted to ensure aid in the post-2014 context and the conference brought together a number of actors who would have influence on this process.

An upbeat communiqué stressed the continued importance of democratic accountability; a prosperous future; a thriving civil society (including upholding the rights of women); and a consensus on fighting terrorism in all its guises (German Federal Foreign Office, December 5, 2011). There was also an emphasis on a self-sustaining and independent Afghanistan in the realm of economic and

social development (Ibid.; The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, November 29, 2011).

### *US Relations with Pakistan*

At the Bonn II Conference, one noticeable absentee was Pakistan. Islamabad's criticism of US/NATO-led operations and its killing of Pakistani soldiers on November 26, 2011 were reasons it boycotted the conference (Lodhi, December 19, 2011; Kronstadt, May 24, 2012, pp. 13-14). An additional difficulty of changing perceptions within the leadership of this complex triad – Washington, Kabul and Islamabad – meant a continuing lack of trust in establishing good relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The improvement of this bilateral relationship was essential for the US in facilitating a transition to an independent and more stable Afghanistan.

At the same time, there was a shared perception in certain parts of the United States' national security community of what a destabilised Afghanistan actually meant for Pakistan and how this should have been the main point of focus. In this line of reasoning, a salient factor of the US/ISAF intervention in Afghanistan was to prevent Pakistan from becoming destabilised. This was due to the variety of militant actors operating in the Afghanistan/Pakistan tribal areas and the irreplaceable danger of a transnational terrorist actor gaining possession of WMDs that could be used against Washington and its allies. As security expert, policy analyst and academic Stephen Biddle explained:



*'There's nothing particularly unique about Afghanistan as being a possible base for attacking us. Dozens of places around the world where Al-Qaeda isn't now but could be in the future are comparable threats. It doesn't make sense to invest this scale of money in just one of them. But Afghanistan is literally, geographically unique as being a base for destabilising Pakistan. Pakistan is a nuclear weapon power in the middle of a civil war that almost by all measures is going rather poorly for the Pakistan government. If they lose their war and their government collapses, their nuclear arsenal breaches containment and might very well fall into the wrong hands. And that's a unique, a globally unique security peril for the US, Britain and the rest of the west.'*<sup>117</sup>

On the other side of this equation, the complicated US/Pakistan relationship factored into Afghanistan's instability, in which a lack of perceived shared interests in the conflict meant a number of accusations from Washington to Islamabad and vice-versa. Pakistan believed the United States continued to support India as evidenced with the nuclear deal and that Washington supported a central government in Afghanistan, which was seemingly pro-New Delhi (Dalrymple, June 25, 2013). Islamabad was also threatened by the possibility of the United States working with India to contain a rising China. Conversely, Washington accused Pakistan of 'double dealing', as it was seen to have varying levels of control and influence over militant actors including the Haqqani network, the Quetta Shura Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). The Bin Laden raid conducted without Islamabad's knowledge illustrated this lack of trust. Moreover,

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<sup>117</sup> Author's interview with Professor Stephen Biddle on April 8, 2014. Biddle is an Adjunct Senior Fellow for Defense Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations and Professor of Political Science and International Relations at George Washington University.

the United States and Pakistan's lack of confluence over which actors were relevant to fight created further webs of suspicion and continuing violence. This played into a larger narrative of 'difference'. The United States' understanding of 'who' it deemed critical and dangerous diverged from Pakistan, as Seth Jones highlighted:

*'One was they had different long-term interests. Second, because of the Durand Line being such a key area of insurgent and government activity, there were shooting matches occasionally, not always intentional per se, but so the US was involved in killing Pakistan's soldiers. That created friction. Increasingly over time as Pakistan focused on the TTP [Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan], and groups like the TTP and not Al-Qaeda, the US increased its resources to collect intelligence on groups that it cared about, including Al-Qaeda and others, which caused friction in Pakistan because of the United States' intelligence capabilities in Pakistan. The US increased its drone activities in part because Pakistan wasn't targeting Al-Qaeda, though it was allowing the US to fly drones in Pakistan territory.'*<sup>118</sup>

There was though a cautious level of optimism for the United States/Pakistan relationship and how this impacted on Afghanistan. This was partially due to the supposed increasing realisation in Islamabad of its own vulnerability to an insurgency. Kabul and Islamabad could see it in their mutually perceived interest to collaborate on handing over militants. However, this was still fraught with

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<sup>118</sup> Author's interview with Dr Seth Jones. Jones is associate director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation. In 2011, Dr Jones served as the representative for the commander, US Special Operations Command, to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations.

difficulty, even if the aspect of Islamabad having its own insurgency to deal with had started to shift the thinking in Pakistan of 'who' it should support. In this line of reasoning, the United States and Pakistan were united in their desire to prevent a radical Islamist takeover of Islamabad. As the former leading State Department intelligence official Marvin Weinbaum stated:

*'And the main difference is that in the nineties they [Pakistan] didn't have their own insurgency. Now they have to worry really about the blowback. They had to see their Afghan policy through the lens of their own insurgency. So they are really caught now and on my trip to Pakistan what I tried to get across to a lot of people, "for heaven's sake will you realize that everything you can do to stabilize Afghanistan and help the next regime survive is going to be in your interest." And also to recognize, although they are still struggling with this, that to go after the TTP [Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan], the Pakistan Taliban, now they realize, it's not because we're asking them, now they realize it's in their interests. And that's a very different thing then we're telling them it's in their interests. They had to come to that conclusion themselves...it's still very difficult.'*<sup>119</sup>

A challenge for the Afghanistan transformation project as outlined in the Bonn II Conference, December 2011, was the inherent tensions and contradictions within it. An aspect of fighting a 'war' whilst aiming for 'peace' was something that made the whole process more difficult. There was still the problem of having a weak and corrupt central government that lacked legitimacy. This played into the idea that overseas contractors and political elites in Kabul – and other major cities – were

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<sup>119</sup> Author's interview with Dr Marvin Weinbaum of the Middle East Institute and professor emeritus of political science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

the real benefactors of the conflict, due to the lack of progress on the development and security fronts. Another clashing factor was the international community's demand for control of projects often superseding the Afghans who wanted 'local ownership' (Suhrke, September 20, p. 489).

### *Supporting Afghanistan and Fighting Global Terrorism in a Decentralised Way*

The United States' decision to put a conventional combat troop withdrawal deadline for the end of 2014 illustrated its evolving policy that met domestic and international expectations. It also demonstrated the centrality that Washington placed on its own role in helping Afghanistan to determine its future. Seth Jones made the case that continuing aid, a limited amount of bases for counterterrorism operations, and a number of trainers and Special Forces remaining in Afghanistan in the post-2014 context was all for the United States' perceived strategic considerations (Beattie, September 30, 2014; DeYoung, 2014; Allin, 2011, p. 67; Sanger, 2012, p. 46):

*'First is the purely self-interested objective from the US and other governments ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for terrorist groups. It is to some degree today, there is a small Al-Qaeda presence in places like Kunar, Nuristan, there are a number of other groups, TTP, which was involved in the 2010 New York City plot, the Lashkar-e-Taiba involved in Mumbai that operate in Afghanistan. So there are groups that pose a threat that exists in Afghanistan. So I think there's a need to keep a small number of forces that can deal directly with them.'*

*There's also an interest in keeping a small number of forces in place that can continue to provide training, advice and assistance to the Afghanistan government. Particularly the security apparatus, its high end units, its commandos, its direct action units and the general Afghan army and police, that are not unlike what the US has done in Colombia, El Salvador, the Philippines, and other countries. As well as key development assistance in my view that have been particularly helpful to Afghans: education and healthcare, being two examples. So I do think there is an interest.'*<sup>120</sup>

The Obama administration's perception of threat had changed. There became a clear-cut disconnection made between the Taliban, an indigenous, neo-fundamentalist actor, and on the other hand, the transnational aspect of Al-Qaeda and its Affiliates. This meant the President started to forcefully argue the case for a reduction in troops and eventual withdrawal from the country.<sup>121</sup> The perceived threat was now considered more widespread and disparate. Hence, the increasing use of drones and Special Forces in Pakistan, the Horn of Africa, the Middle East (especially against ISIS in Iraq and Syria) and even the Sahel region. This illustrated a genuinely more decentralised, nimbler, counterterrorist aspect. Afghanistan would remain an important country. But a redirection of US national

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<sup>120</sup> Author's interview with Dr Seth Jones of the RAND Corporation.

<sup>121</sup> While there are clear historical connections, the Salafist Jihadist militant group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda are not the same actor and as of early 2014 have cut off ties (Sly, February 3, 2014; Cockburn, 2015). However, for the sake of clarity, Washington refers to both these actors as a major threat to the United States and its allies (Obama, July 6, 2015). Therefore, in this context, the author uses the term 'Al Qaeda and its Affiliates' meaning any actor that comes under this transnational terrorist umbrella for US national security policy (Obama, September 10, 2014).

security priorities was taking place and this was deemed necessary due to the changed threat perception. As Obama stated:

*'And the need for a new strategy reflects the fact that today's principal threat no longer comes from a centralised Al Qaida leadership. Instead, it comes from decentralised Al Qaida affiliates and extremists, many with agendas focused in countries where they operate. And this lessens the possibility of large-scale 9/11-style attacks against the homeland, but it heightens the danger of U.S. personnel overseas being attacked, as we saw in Benghazi. It heightens the danger to less defensible targets, as we saw in a shopping mall in Nairobi.*

*So we have to develop a strategy that matches this diffuse threat, one that expands our reach without sending forces that stretch our military too thin or stir up local resentments. We need partners to fight terrorists alongside us. And empowering partners is a large part of what we have done and what we are currently doing in Afghanistan.'* (Obama, May 28, 2014)

#### *Washington's Evolving Relationships with Significant Actors*

In terms of the War in Afghanistan, the perceived threat of transnational terrorism was an important motivational tool and determinant for a robust US response. Washington argued that key Afghan actors needed to abide by the constitution and put an end to their connection with international militant actors. In this way, the idea of the Quetta Shura Taliban or even Haqqani Network fully renouncing its relationship with Al-Qaeda provided Washington with the space for a different

type of interaction (Clinton, 2014, pp. 163-164). Indeed, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made the point:

*'In 2001, after 9/11, I would remind us all; the Taliban chose to defy the international community and protect al-Qaida. That was the wrong choice, and they have paid a heavy price. Today, the escalating pressure of our military campaign is sharpening a similar decision for the Taliban: Break ties with al-Qaida, renounce violence, and abide by the Afghan constitution, and you can rejoin Afghan society; refuse and you will continue to face the consequences of being tied to al-Qaida as an enemy of the international community.*

*They cannot wait us out. They cannot defeat us. And they cannot escape this choice.'*  
(Clinton, February 18, 2011)

The interaction and possible change in relationship between the United States and the Taliban necessitated a clear change of thinking from both sides. A constant articulation of the 'evil' other has pervaded the narrative and counter-narrative. Washington's support for the Karzai and Ghani administrations was in large part premised on fighting the Taliban and preventing Al-Qaeda and its affiliates from obtaining sanctuary. The United States' gradual game plan of bringing on board leading members of the Afghanistan socio-political landscape therefore necessitated a change of perception on all sides and was liable to challenges and contradictions.

An evolving relationship between NATO partners and the expansion of its remit in the post-Cold War context made the relevance of Afghanistan a major test case (Morelli and Belkin, December 3, 2009). The Cold War aspect of having a security institution of shared norms and values was also one that had a collective 'other'

(Waeber, 1998, p. 81; Campbell, Op. cit.). With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the expansion of NATO eastwards, a swathe of realist scholars held that the organisation had lost its relevance (Mearsheimer, 1990, pp. 5-56; Walt, 1998/1999, pp. 3-11). Moreover, Washington has regarded the asymmetric military relationship between the United States and its allies as problematic due to the US doing most of the 'heavy lifting', with the vast majority of the rest of the alliance 'free riding' (Ibid.; Shanker and Erlanger, June 11, 2011; Gates, June 10, 2011).

Nonetheless, the relationship has evolved to take on a shared 'other', with its remit being predominately in the Islamic world and towards Russia (Wagstyl, November 8, 2014). A global combating of transnational terrorism is now an important component of the alliance. The jointly shared perception of the United States and its NATO allies having shared values is directly linked to this. At the same time, a number of disagreements have taken place within the alliance about how best to approach a security issue. This involved a perceived 'two tier' aspect to the NATO-led ISAF Afghanistan mission. Certain countries – the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and France – did the 'hard' combat missions, whereas others specialised in the 'soft' approach, including humanitarian, development and peacekeeping aspects (Gates, Op. cit.). This had an element of veracity, although even for Germany's political and military command there was a change of emphasis. Indeed, its leading role as the ISAF Regional Command North included military engagement much to the dismay of German public opinion (Alessi, October 15, 2013). Moreover, the intention of the United States and NATO/ISAF was always to combine the civil-military aspect in order to succeed in Afghanistan.



The United States' intervention and building up of a coalition illustrated its *primus inter pares* throughout the conflict. It was also the chief actor in deciding when and how US/ISAF troops would leave Afghanistan. A formal recognition of a withdrawal timetable that took on board the concerns of all its allies, the Afghan central government and US public opinion was outlined in a joint statement made with President Hamid Karzai on May 2, 2012. The signed document 'Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan' was a legally binding executive agreement whereby the US would leave the country in a 'responsible way'. This was with the remit of negotiating a further Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) for a limited amount of military bases with residual US trainers and Special Forces remaining in the country post-2014 (Obama and Karzai, May 2, 2012)

There were important aspects to the Enduring Strategic Partnership including a promise of upholding democratic principles, regional security, social and economic development. This would all provide a clear proviso in attempting to improve the medium term prospects for Afghanistan. However, Obama's insistence on bringing back all conventional combat troops at the end of 2014 and transferring full responsibility to the Afghan central government and ANSF demonstrated an awareness of a war, which was becoming increasingly unpopular. This was partially due to the major amount of resources that had been spent in Afghanistan as well as other significant international and domestic challenges.

The Chicago NATO summit of May 2012 fed all of these relevant factors into its decisions. An 'exit strategy' agreement was formally put in place (NATO, May 20, 2012). At the top of the agenda, there was a continuing acknowledgement

concerning the importance of counterterrorism. The Obama administration highlighted the on-going role of the Afghan insurgency, Pakistan's role apropos Afghanistan, and especially transnational militancy as all causes for concern (Cooper and Rosenberg, May 21, 2012).

An aspect of battle fatigue and the precarious global economy was factored into the calculations of the political leaders at the summit. However, the relevance of considering Afghanistan's long-term security as important indicated a partial belief that without this commitment, the country would slip back into chaos. As Obama argued the US/NATO would – through its common interests and values – work together and help Afghanistan in its mission to become a more stable and prosperous country, which would not be a haven for transnational militancy:

*'Over the next two days we'll meet – first as allies and then with President Karzai and our international partners – to chart the next phase of the transition in Afghanistan. Just as we've sacrificed together for our common security, we will stand together, united, in our determination to complete this mission. And finally, I look forward to our meeting NATO's neighbours and our partners around the world who have been so critical to NATO operations, as in Afghanistan and Libya. It will be another reminder that NATO is truly a hub of a network of global security partners. There is nothing else like it on earth.'* (Obama, May 20, 2012)

In this regard, the relevance of an alliance with like-minded partners demonstrates the aspect of a security community. This requires a high level of interaction and trust. It functions on the basis of collective identities, values and meanings that actors have about one another. It also encompasses the shared expectation that this close relationship is mutually beneficial and endurable in the

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long-term (Adler and Barnett, 1998). Moreover, actors identify and work closely with those they deem a friend (Wendt, 1992, pp. 398-400; Flockhart, 2006, pp. 94-97).

The United States and NATO designated Afghanistan as a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) on July 7, 2012. This indicated the Obama administration's emphasis on having closer security and defence ties with Afghanistan in order to provide a longer-term aspect to the relationship (U.S. Department of State, July 7, 2012). With this security feature in place, the logic of being able to provide aid for reconstruction was also relevant to 'completing the job' in Afghanistan. It was an equally complex undertaking. The international community provided help and this was set out in a substantive way at the Tokyo Conference in July 2012 with sixteen billion dollars offered for the next four fiscal years (U.S. Department of State, July 8, 2012; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, July 8, 2012). This came with the proviso of a crackdown on endemic corruption amongst key actors in the country.

Being able to frame the war as one of necessity had changed for the Obama administration due to an uneven process of events. The United States' intention of facilitating an improvement in the social, economic and political realms was moderated to one of a far more modest aim. Washington continued to work for an improvement on the ground in Afghanistan, but this was now tempered with a far more restrained, 'good enough' approach (Sanger, 2012, pp. 49-51; Ryan and Fitzgerald, 2014, pp. 73-91).

The Obama administration was further aware of the danger of becoming overly involved in the medium term. Washington had a major balancing act. It would

continue to provide support for the Afghan security apparatus, whilst reducing its own troop levels. This was important in keeping on board the US public and providing a proper accounting of public expenditure. Moreover, the turbulence in the Middle East of what became colloquially known as the 'Arab Spring' and the Obama administration's very lopsided approach to democracy promotion there, demonstrated the United States' prevarication of how and when it would support certain basic rights that it advocated (Cooper and Worth, September 24, 2012; Halliday, 2005; Dodge, 2012, pp. 197-218).

Washington would spread 'freedom' in a pragmatic guise and this encompassed the promotion of democratic institutions and capitalism as a way of advancing a relationship between the United States and Afghanistan. Obama's original decision to 'surge' in Afghanistan was to support development, security and governance, with the interlinked goal of achieving US perceived interests. The continuing aspect of strengthening the central government and security forces was a logic based on the muscular Wilsonian approach, which even in the case of local, complex realities there could be an advancement of 'democratic processes'. This could benefit Washington by having a pro-US leadership in place (Smith, 2012, p. 372; Petraeus, Amos et al., April 21, 2009). In this regard, there was a lack of progress. Washington optimistically downplayed a number of factors in their analysis of the Afghanistan terrain. This included the socio-political reality of an Afghan central government not having a wide remit outside significant urban areas (Barfield, 2010; Smith, 2012, Op. cit.).

A re-evaluation of priorities ensued for the Obama administration including the decision to take on a more limited role in the country. Counterterrorism became

increasingly emphasised as the central reason for having a presence in Afghanistan with a long-term bilateral security agreement premised on this social fact (Obama and Karzai, Op. cit.). There was though a continuing remit that supporting institutions and providing aid would help with the crucial area of economic development.

The NATO alliance and its collectively shared understanding of its relevant long-term mutual dependence was tested in the Afghanistan conflict. Robert Gates's aforementioned major criticism of the 'two-tiered' aspect to the alliance was a clear example of Washington's attitude towards its NATO partners. The United States was heavily critical of its overwhelmingly important role in maintaining the institution (Gates, Op. cit.; Mearsheimer, 1994/1995, pp. 5-49). In another way, other scholars and policymakers criticised the alliance as one of a US-led organisation that wanted to achieve 'world domination' by encircling significant Eurasian countries (Cox, March 12, 2010; Anderson, 2015).

Various US administrations in the post-Cold War context have insisted on a role for NATO, which includes a clear logistical and military contribution. In particular, though, the alliance provides a 'legitimising' aspect to an international operation, which makes the whole procedure more straightforward as Washington can count on other countries for a whole range of support (Barnett, 2011, p. 155).

### *Logic of Appropriateness*

In this context, the idea of 'logic of appropriateness' is relevant. Understanding what is appropriate behaviour, of what an actor 'ought' to do, is premised on the

identity of the actor concerned and the social context of defining its interests (March and Olson, 2006, pp. 689-708; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 912; Finnemore, 1996, p. 28-31). For example, the United States has consistently argued the conflict in Afghanistan was one of a response to the terrible events of 9/11, and whereby it wanted to prevent the country from becoming a hub or sanctuary of transnational terrorism (Bush, October 20, 2001; Obama, January 5, 2010).

Thus, the logic of appropriateness was evoked as countries lined up to support the United States in its struggle against the phenomenon of terrorism (United Nations Security Council Resolution 1368, September 12, 2001; United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386, December 20, 2001). The United States and the NATO-led ISAF mission in Afghanistan won further backing for its operation in the rebuilding of the country. It was this aspect that provided the United States with further economic, diplomatic, military and political tools to pursue its aims.

The Obama administration continued to articulate its support for human rights and democracy promotion, with also a focus on economic liberalism. Within the National Security Council, there were differences of opinion regarding the purpose of the mission and how the US could achieve its goals in Afghanistan. Gradually the idea that prevailed was the Biden-led approach, which stressed the relevance of counterterrorism-plus (CT-plus) and having more limited engagement. A change in direction meant a gradual alteration on the ground. In Washington, policymakers decided to continue support for the future stability and development of Afghanistan (Department of Defense, July, 2013; Katzman, October 23, 2013). However, the aforementioned 'good enough' aspect had taken

preference in the administration's considerations (Suhrke, 2012, Op. cit.; Cordesman, May 1, 2012; Majafizada, July 12, 2012).

The Obama Presidency became increasingly focused on the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) for the post-2014 context as a global counterterrorism approach remained in place. In this way, the training of Afghan National Security Forces and the targeting of Al-Qaeda and other militant actors – through drones and Special Forces' operations – has remained the continuing *raison d'être* in Afghanistan (Obama, January 11, 2013).

At the same time, Karzai's administration continued to put up resistance as a sign of its intention to be independent. It wanted assurances that any night-time raid involving US Special Forces would be carried out under the auspices of the Afghan Security Forces. Most importantly, it stressed that the sovereignty of Afghanistan should be at all times respected (Afghanistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November, 2013, Article 2, Paragraph 4). Karzai convened a Loya Jirga 'Grand Assembly' of prominent Afghan representatives that subsequently – much to the chagrin of the President – overwhelmingly voted in favour of the BSA agreement (BBC News, November 24, 2013; Kerry, November 24, 2013).

### *The Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA)*

The Bilateral Security Agreement was eventually signed on September 30, 2014. This agreement also had a direct bearing on how NATO member states would continue their future involvement in Afghanistan post-2014, as well as how much military and civilian aid would be allocated. Prior to this, at the 2012 Chicago

Summit Meeting, NATO's Status of Force Agreement with Afghanistan dictated that support, training and advice for the ANSF would take place (NATO, December 21, 2013). Still, it was the BSA that cemented future US/Afghan relations in the post-2014 context.

A continuing minimal US presence in the country in the post-2014 environment also helped prevent the various Afghan power brokers from hedging their bets against Washington and its attempt to impact on the future role of the Taliban. Moreover, it provided the political glue that underwrote continuing aid in the country. As Stephen Biddle stated: *'and you can argue quite effectively that the BSA is necessary to provide troops, soldiers. It doesn't mean we can't provide aid if there's no BSA, the problem is not legal. It's political... And you can argue quite effectively that the American military presence is not terribly important for the outcome. The US aid to keep the Afghan forces in the field is [though] decisive for the outcome. Therefore, the military presence is important because it enables the aid to be politically practical through the US Congress.'*<sup>122</sup>

The BSA provided Afghanistan with the possibility of continuing international and domestic investment. Conversely, if there were a negative perception of Afghanistan's prospects this would most likely have meant a large amount of capital flight (Felbab-Brown, November 17, 2013; Cordesman et al., 2013, pp. 18-23; Majafizada, July 12, 2012). With this bilateral security agreement, there was an incentive for the Afghan leadership to work closely with the United States and

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<sup>122</sup> Author's interview with Professor Stephen Biddle on April 8, 2014. Biddle is adjunct senior fellow for defense policy at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University.



the rest of the international community, as it wanted to secure its security and long-term welfare. As Steve Coll elucidated:

*'That they're willing [the Obama administration/Congress] to spend two to four billion dollars a year on the ANSF salaries for a few years at least to encourage the rest of the international community to invest proportionately. And there's an assumption that there's been enough international capital flowing through those investments to incent Afghan factions not to crack up because then they would lose the opportunity to rake off this money and buy condos in Dubai. So even if it's not pure nationalism there's a lot of incentives that these kinds of countries hold together, I mean look at Nigeria.'*<sup>123</sup>

A clear emerging alternative to the Bilateral Security Agreement for the United States was the 'zero option' (Mazzetti and Rosenberg, July 8, 2013; Chandran, July, 2013). This meant a complete withdrawal from the country. The Obama administration's intention of proceeding down this path was largely a bargaining tool. At the same time, the war in Afghanistan had incrementally lost support amongst American public opinion and a swathe of legislators, especially as other pressing domestic and international concerns came to the fore (Gallup, March, 2013). Coll argued the Afghan political elite was aware of the importance of continuing US and international support:

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<sup>123</sup> Author's interview with Professor Steve Coll on April 4, 2014. Coll is the Pulitzer Prize Winning author of *Ghost Wars*, was President of the New America Foundation, Managing Editor of the Washington Post, and is currently a staff writer at the New Yorker and Dean of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

*'But if there's street violence during this disputed election, if the army cracks up, if there's a coup attempt, if the peaceful hand off of power to a successful President fails, the pace at which the Obama administration would express regret and walk away I think would be very fast. It wouldn't take much. And I think most Afghans understand that acutely, faction leaders, not necessarily people on the streets, but I mean power brokers, faction leaders and generals and cabinet ministers. The one who doesn't seem to have the right calibration necessarily is Karzai and he's the one who could bring everyone down with him!'<sup>124</sup>*

Even with the factor of declining domestic support, the Obama administration insisted on the relevance of a limited presence in Afghanistan for perceived counterterrorist measures. Washington continued to offer its assurances to domestic and international actors of its commitment to that country and how it was beneficial for all parties concerned (Dobbins, December 10, 2013). In turn, the Ghani administration signed the BSA agreement immediately after the new Afghan President's inauguration (Obama, September 30, 2014; Walsh, September 30, 2014).

Prior to President Ashraf Ghani's tenure, James Dobbins – the United States' Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan – argued that with the (partial) exception of Iran, the major regional actors were supportive of the BSA agreement. As Dobbins reasoned, most of these actors were in general against the US having a military presence in Afghanistan, but saw the Bilateral Security Agreement as crucial to preventing the country from sliding back into civil war.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

Indeed, the BSA provided a 'lynchpin' to all other international agreements (Dobbins, Op. cit. pp. 3-4).

The United States' policy towards Afghanistan and the support Washington argues it has given to that country's political, social and economic institutions connects with the idea of a 'benign' US. Provincial and Presidential elections; Afghanistan's first ever peaceful democratic transfer of power at the end of September 2014; an improvement in levels of education; freedom of speech; political participation; media access; economic opportunity; employment, and an improvement in civil society are illustrative of the role the United States reasons it has played since 9/11 in Afghanistan (Bergen, 2013; Dobbins, Op. cit. pp. 3-8). As James Dobbins stated: *'Thanks in large part to the generosity of the American people, the courage of its men and women in uniform and the bipartisan support of Congress, Afghanistan is a fundamentally different than it was 12 years ago.'* (Ibid. p. 8) This thinking accords with the idea of the 'altruistic' United States reaching out to others and concomitantly achieving its national security interests in the process. In this way, the United States 'ought' to continue upholding its deep commitment to a global leadership role (Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth, 2012/2013, pp. 7-51).

The elite level rhetoric of an altruistic United States provides part of the intellectual underpinnings for a direct and global policy. If Washington does not lead then this would allow another major actor such as Russia or China to negatively influence developments in Afghanistan and elsewhere. This hypothetical, worst-case scenario for American strategic planners rests on the zero-sum assumption that only through US leadership can the world benefit.

According to this logic, the United States' support for democracy, free markets, and human rights makes it a liberal superpower that should continue to construct the rules of the global order.

This ties in with global security. In the post-Second World War context, the United States has believed in its right as 'leader of the free world' to pursue a policy that increases its prestige. This has often resulted in Washington justifying a conflict with the argument that it must take on the forces of barbarism and danger to enable the future prosperity of mankind. Therefore, this 'us' and 'them' political discourse has enabled major overseas interventions (Doty, 1993, pp. 297-320). As President Richard Nixon, a leading exponent of realpolitik, famously contended in defending his Vietnam policy and for an imminent incursion into Cambodia: *'If, when the chips are down, the world's most powerful nation, the United States of America, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world.'* (Nixon, April 30, 1970)

### *Washington's Evolving Global Perception of Threat and Afghanistan*

Initially the Obama administration oriented its national security goals in the direction of the Afghanistan/Pakistan hinterland. This meant an approach that would directly take on the perceived global terrorist threat. In the Obama Presidency's second term, the withdrawal of US troops at the end of 2014 did not mean an end to the militarised campaign against Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. It actually resulted in a shift to a more disaggregated approach, which meant an

increasing amount of US Special Forces' operations and drones against a whole swathe of terrorists (or suspected terrorists). This replaced the role of conventional forces (Obama, January 11, 2013). Concurrently, it demonstrated that the United States did not want to have a large footprint in any country as it would inflame local resentment, whilst further draining America's economic and political power (Obama, May 21, 2012; Brennan, Op. cit.).

Barack Obama's speech at the National Defense University in May 2013 was an attempt to put a policy in place that would formally move an all-encompassing 'global war on terror' to something far more specific and manageable. Obama's argument referenced US history to make the case that every war came to an end. Therefore, according to this rationale, this meant American values and constitutional principles continued unabated.

Obama stated the current 'war' needed to have an option for increasing oversight measures with the possibility of Congress and legal courts scrutinising planned targeted killings (The New York Times Editorial, May 23, 2013). Moreover, President Obama's insistence that the United States had Al-Qaeda on the 'back foot' meant Washington could finally be more focused on other important areas of public policy. It was at this very point in the speech that the President argued the war in Afghanistan would be wrapped up effectively. The possibility of 'Al-Qaeda and its Affiliates' being able to have sanctuary in Afghanistan was thus deemed virtually non-existent.

The President argued his administration would though go further vis-à-vis Afghanistan and constrain as much as possible its use of force, with drone attacks being contingently wound down. The use of drones would also be reduced in other

parts of the world. In this way, Obama reasoned that compliance with the highest legal standards continued to guide his Presidency (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 23, 2013).

In the aftermath of the speech, there was a clear lack of transparency and a continuation of drone strikes killing innocent civilians. This continued to be problematic for the Obama administration, which argued it would right the wrongs of its predecessor (Ali and King, 2013; Coll, 2014). However, within the National Defense University speech there was also an unclear aspect of 'who' the United States was actually at 'war' with (Coll, 2013).

President Obama argued the United States and its partners had to defeat of 'Al-Qaeda and its Affiliates'. The President also made an important distinction between extremist groups that had localised grievances and territorial objectives, and those that had a transnational agenda. Obama was adamant about not conflating these two elements. Further on in the speech though, this is exactly what happened, with the example of Mali especially noteworthy:

*'Now, beyond Afghanistan, we must define our effort not as a boundless global war on terror, but rather, as a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists that threaten America. In many cases, this will involve partnerships with other countries. Already, thousands of Pakistani soldiers have lost their lives fighting extremists. In Yemen, we are supporting security forces that have reclaimed territory from AQAP. In Somalia, we helped a coalition of African nations push Al Shabaab out of its strongholds. In Mali, we're providing military aid to French-led intervention to push back Al Qaida in the Maghreb and help the people of Mali reclaim their future.'* (Obama, May 23, 2013)

The Obama administration continued to argue for its essential leadership role in combatting transnational terrorism. Indeed, Washington's compartmentalisation and specification of the 'enemy' was an attempt to recalibrate US national security objectives. However, the element of not being able to define how and in what way an actor was connected with intercontinental militancy – bent on attacking the United States – meant a continuing justification for an expansive role in fighting global terrorism.

Afghanistan is the principal nation-state through which the paradigm of 9/11 has oriented the United States' focus. Washington's evolving policy towards that country is contingent on an emerging understanding of what is the *perceived threat of transnational terrorism*. In the process, the Obama administration believed in the relevant notion of supporting Afghanistan as it connected with the image of an exceptional United States, which wanted to achieve the observed interest of preventing the country from becoming a strategic hub of international terrorism.

The Obama administration argued it had to prevent Kabul from becoming a sanctuary for transnational militant actors to plan and instigate attacks on the United States and its allies. As this chapter has demonstrated, there is a supposition it has done enough to properly rectify the situation. Within this premise Afghanistan is very different to how it was in the 1990s. Washington's evolving idea of perceived global threats means Afghanistan is a challenge but one that is now discursively constructed as containable.

## Conclusion

*'But she [America] does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all.'*

Secretary of State John Quincy Adams Speech on US Foreign Policy, July 4, 1821  
and Sixth President of the United States (1825-1829)

The United States' perception of its interests and identity in relation to Afghanistan resulted in a disjointed policy from 1979 to the end of 2014. As a rule-of-thumb, Washington strategically sizes up what threats and opportunities exist in the world and how it ought to proceed. This provides state officials with common sense guidelines to understand and pursue its foreign policy goals. However, all of this is premised on a historically bounded, complex process of practices, social interactions and human agreement, which helps the United States (re-) define who they are and what they want. American policymakers' discursive practices and interpretation of events in Afghanistan shaped a policy, which like other prior US overseas interventions, was often based on binary thinking (Fitzgerald and Ryan, 2014; Hunt, 1987; Cullinane and Ryan, eds., 2015). In this regard, and in contrast to John Quincy Adams's above dictum, the United States clearly did identify a sense of foreign policy purpose in its relationship with key state and non-state actors operating in the Afghan theatre. Indeed, Afghanistan's emergence as a key challenge for US national security was based on Washington's



perceived national interests and how America saw its benevolent role in that country's affairs.

Making predictions about the future political, economic, security and civil dynamics within Afghanistan as well as the wider region is fraught with complexity. In large part, this is due to the challenge of understanding collective human intentionality and how this impacts on and is affected by the international social structure (Giddens, 1984; Hay, 2002, Bhaskar, 1998, pp. 34-41). Moreover, as demonstrated, US policy has evolved in such a way that Afghanistan became central in the post-9/11 global security context, which would have been unimaginable in the 1990s. The relevance of scrutinising Washington's purpose in Afghanistan and this region over a thirty-five year period is important as it challenges our understanding of what it means to live in a multifarious, asymmetrical and interconnected world.

Understanding how globalisation impacts on the choices that state and non-state actors made are an important factor in this story. The variety of responses to an event (and subsequent events) is another as the Soviet intervention or case of the 9/11 attacks attested. Within this, the element of human agency and the possibility of constructing a policy that became institutionalised and 'taken for granted' helped illustrate the relevance of constructivism in providing a rich explanatory tool. It explicated on why policies continued or changed and how it was possible.

As shown in the study, constructivism elucidates upon the varied dimension of nation-states and their identity. It also takes a critical approach in terms of understanding that states (like other actors) are entities that are informed by

social interaction. There is an international and domestic normative structure that both shapes and is shaped by the actors within it. Therefore, as Martha Finnemore expounds, states construct what their interests are within this socialised context:

*'States are socialized to want certain things by the international society in which they and the people in them live.*

*Ultimately, power and wealth are means, not ends. States must decide what to do with them. States may not always know what they want or how to use their resources. Foreign policy debates after the Cold War makes this clear. Interests are not just "out there" waiting to be discovered; they are constructed through social interaction.'*

(Finnemore, 1996, p. 2)

The United States' discursive construction that it is the world's benign power continues to play an important role in motivating state officials and US public opinion in support of a particular policy. Various administrations have sought to persuade its audience of how this has the benefit of increasing American power and prestige. This is always coupled with the 'generosity' aspect to US actions. Along these lines, a shared language – especially amongst US state officials – has constituted a sense of purpose for what a policy is and what it should be (Weldes, 1996, pp. 276-277; Farrell and Finnemore, November/December, 2013, pp. 22-26; Hunt, 1987; Finnemore, 2003, p. 15).

This thinking often comes up against the notion that Washington only acts in the world for pure self-interest. However, as this study has shown, such a view does not give enough credence to the historically relevant idea that Washington largely believes in its benevolent role within global affairs (Bacevich, Op. cit.). This

interlinkage of ideals and power has played an important part in the American foreign policy equation (Smith, 2012, pp. 32-33; Dumbrell, 1997, p. 6). The United States ties these two elements together in order to find *purpose* and *legitimacy* for its actions. Indeed, even the avowedly realist thinker and statesman Henry Kissinger argued that both factors are necessary (Ibid.). In this fashion, Kissinger made the case that US Presidents' steadfast adherence to exceptionalism is symptomatic of how policy is not solely grafted on realpolitik due to the important elements of American ideology and political history:

*'All twelve postwar Presidents have passionately affirmed an exceptional role for America in the world. Each has treated it as axiomatic that the United States was embarked on an unselfish quest for the resolution of conflicts and the equality of all nations, in which the ultimate benchmark for success would be world peace and universal harmony.'* (Kissinger, 2014, p. 276)

The United States often operates under the rubric of 'double standards' in how it engages with the outside world. Indeed, Washington has frequently followed its perceived national interests to the clear detriment of human rights, economic progress and democracy promotion (Walt, 2005; Chomsky, 2000; Johnson, 2004; Kolko, 2006). However, this inconsistency only gives a partial and incomplete picture to what US foreign policy is about. American political leaders largely believe in their country's central role as one that spreads freedom and universal values (Westad, 2007). The United States' emphasis that it is a 'noble' country, which stands to defend the world's oppressed means any antagonistic state or non-state actor is getting in the way of progress and decency (Johnson, April 7, 1965; Reagan, May 1, 1982).

Another important point that can be taken from this study is how Washington has argued for and taken on the role of 'global protector'. This has been historically challenged within the domestic realm but not to the extent that American exceptionalism is discredited. Often within the US foreign policy establishment the debate is much more a question of means rather than ends. So whilst there have been differences between administrations, the sense of a dynamic United States that is *a force for good* in the world – which has especially emphasised democracy promotion in the post-Cold War context – is largely supported and becomes a taken for granted reality (Parmar, 2012, pp. 221-255).

This idea of exceptionalism is a stable and underlying identity narrative that American policymakers have continued to use in order to pursue national goals. Indeed, as has been argued in this thesis, from the foundation of the republic until the twenty-first century, the United States' sense that it is an exceptional nation, with an extraordinary history and a special role to play in contemporary affairs, has taken on both a national and universal mission. This argues for a country that is secure within its own borders and which has the responsibility for improving the international order. Moreover, the United States strongly believes it has the right to spread democracy, human rights, capitalism and progress, as these are important components in helping other countries, which in turn helps make America safer and more powerful (Thompson, 2015, p. 282).

It can be reasonable to conclude from this study that US policy towards Afghanistan has used the logic of exceptionalism to achieve its perceived national interests. During the 1980s, key decision makers within the executive and legislative branches fully supported national independence for the 'freedom

fighters' and strongly believed in this mission. Moreover, in the post-9/11 milieu, the US argued that supporting Afghan institutions and building up the Afghan National Security Forces would embolden the country to be more independent. In turn this meant that no transnational actor would be able to use the country as a 'safe haven' to carry out attacks on America and its allies.

Amongst state officials, the discussion has often been one of how the United States should spread its national mission rather than if it should do so (Krebs, 2015, p. 13). American exceptionalism means that the United States adheres to an objective that is both historically bound and forward thinking. It draws on ideas from American political history and concomitantly makes the case for a continuing leadership role in the world.

Given the above evidence, it can be surmised that American exceptionalism will continue to rear its head in US policy for the foreseeable future. This means that there will be a bipartisan consensus on America's right to be the preeminent power in the world. Whether a future Democratic or Republican administration, the political rhetoric of how the United States is the indispensable and benevolent global power will therefore most likely remain. This indicates that even with certain fiscal and economic constraints, especially following the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 and sequestration cuts in 2013, the United States will likely continue to keep its presence strongly felt in regions that it perceives as significant (as the recent 'pivot' to Asia demonstrates).<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> The Trump administration's foreign policy approach may challenge this point.

There are of course worst-case scenarios for Washington that could affect the United States' ability to carry out this policy, such as the dollar losing its reserve currency status, an inexorably rising China, or even a major terrorist attack. However, even with these provisos, the United States would arguably still want to play an important role in the world. Consequently the idea of disentangling American exceptionalism from US identity is very much a fallacious enterprise. It is the case that with a potentially diminished position in the world, the United States would eventually become more restrained, which is something realists have argued in favour of for some time. However, such interpretations underestimate the extent to which ideology is so ingrained in US politics and history, so much so that the belief that the United States has the right to promote its ideals is something that will persist, especially within a political system that has been remarkably stable.

Whilst this exceptionalist thinking looks most likely to continue to inform US foreign policy, the important aspect is whether policymakers can become wiser at a time when American hegemony is becoming increasingly challenged. One of the major challenges in seeing one's own nation as exceptional and having a universal mission is how to square this with *empathy* for other state and non-state actors. Indeed, as this work has shown, the concern of US policymakers with Afghanistan has overemphasised Washington's perceived interests. This has meant a distinct lack of understanding for that country's history, the people, and its social, economic and political institutions. In the 1980s, US policy appeared to work, if one uses the Mujahideen's defeat of the Soviet Union and the PDPA as a template. However, it has also had long-term and negative transnational implications that

were not dealt with. It subsequently meant that American policy towards Afghanistan in the post-9/11 context has been fraught with complications and muddled thinking, which has been decidedly expensive in the process. In light of this, the historian Michael Howard's advice on ideology and international relations would be well heeded in US scholarly and (especially) policymakers' circles:

*'The first duty both of the theorist and of the practitioner of international relations therefore, is empathy: the capacity to enter into other minds and understand ideologies which have been formed by environment, history and education in a very different mould from our own.... Whether or not we possess the key which languages provide to the understanding of other peoples and their ideologies, there is another which lies within the grasp of all of us: the study of their history. If without languages we are colour-blind, without history we are groping in total darkness. History enables us to understand ourselves as well as other cultures. It teaches us what we may or may not expect in our mutual relations. It teaches us our own limitations, and thus a certain humility. In dealing with a multicultural, multi-ideological world, that in itself is not a bad beginning.'* (Howard, 1989, p.9)

It is a historically salient fact that the United States vastly expanded its territory between the early to mid-nineteenth century (Hixson, 2016; Stephanson, 1995, pp. 28-48; Mead, 2002; McDougall, 1997). This helped create the foundations for its ascendancy to world power status (Hunt, 2007; Perkins, 1993, pp. 1-16). It is the outward looking aspect of US foreign policy that has continued to play an important role in the formation and evolution of its policy in the twentieth century, especially when it took the mantle of 'leader of the free world' in the post-Second World War context (Fousek, 2000). Moreover, during the Cold War and post-Cold

War periods, America has often jealously guarded the territorial aspect of other nation-states.

In this way, Washington has had to work within an international normative structure that places a premium on the importance of sovereignty. Therefore, America's policy of indirect intervention is the recently preferred approach to achieving its perceived objectives of global leadership in the economic, diplomatic, military and ideological realms, while arguing it supports national self-determination. At the same time, the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate that Washington does directly and in a long-term way 'flex its muscles' when it sees a perceived core interest challenged.

US foreign policy towards Afghanistan has evolved as Washington has questioned what it actually *wants* from its relationship with that country. As a result, the United States has interpreted and adapted its policy to changing circumstances. As explored, the original Soviet intervention of December 24, 1979 required the Carter administration to interpret the motivation for it. After deciding that this represented an attempt on behalf of the Soviet's to expand their influence in the direction of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, an important debate ensued over what the most effective response should be. With the arrival of the Reagan administration this evolved into a clear understanding that Moscow was behind all of the world's troubled spots (Reagan, March 8, 1983).

Therefore, Washington's discursive formation of the 'brave' Mujahideen specifically saw in Afghanistan a strategic social opportunity in helping the country eventually regain its 'independence' and in the process undermine Soviet influence. This evolved into a widely accepted policy during the 1980s due to a

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confluence of factors, including major international support for the ‘freedom fighters’, the Soviet Union’s loss of legitimacy, and US institutional backing amongst the National Security Council and the State Department. Having debated the issue themselves, members of Congress and the CIA decided to support the White House’s position, especially given the fact that the Afghan policy was seemingly working, resulting in pressure on the administration to go further (Coll, 2004). In turn, an American policy that increasingly saw the brave ‘freedom fighters’ as a strategic asset vis-à-vis the Soviet Union solidified as the 1980s unfolded.

America’s perception of what Afghanistan represented in the 1990s meant a downgraded relationship. The Clinton administration’s largely long-distance approach to counterterrorism provided the United States with the opportunity to push for its global economic objectives with increasing fervour. US policymakers largely turned a blind eye to the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan during this period. In this regard, the aspect of potentially capturing key Al-Qaeda leaders and the faltering case of the Trans-Afghanistan pipeline meant only a very limited engagement with the country.

With the catastrophic events of 9/11, however, the relationship with Afghanistan changed. The discourse of a ‘safe haven’ and the danger that sprang from this became an important guideline for Washington in how and why the United States would interact so fully with key actors in that country (Bush, January 31, 2008; Obama, August 17, 2009; Obama, October 15, 2015; U.S. Department of State, July 31, 2012; Jones, June 3, 2014). This meant the United States’ objective became to stop any state entity – especially the Quetta Shura Taliban – from taking over the

country and giving sanctuary to transnational terrorist actors including Al-Qaeda and other associated groups.

The Bush and Obama administrations wanted to take on and prevent transnational terrorism, which meant a more direct approach. In conjunction with this, the US supported the idea of helping Afghanistan build up its institutions in order to make it a stable and (eventually) independent nation-state. However, in the case of the Bush administration, it believed a light footprint was sufficient for this purpose. This enabled Washington to prioritise other international commitments, which especially encompassed the war in Iraq (Riedel, 2014, p. 140, Zakheim, Op. cit.).

Though adhering to its predecessor's conviction regarding the absolute necessity of confronting the scourge of international terrorism, the Obama administration looked to Iraq as a 'dumb war'. Instead it focused directly on the Afghanistan/Pakistan hinterland where the instigators of the 9/11 attacks resided (Obama, December 1, 2009). The surge in Afghanistan meant COIN was introduced for a limited time in order to reverse Quetta Shura Taliban gains and provide the Afghan central government and ANSF with a more established position. Emphasis was placed on good governance, security and development. However, the results were at best incomplete. Subsequently, the Obama administration took on a more direct counterterrorist approach. Changing circumstances in the international landscape and America's domestic considerations meant that Afghanistan was still on Washington's radar but to a more limited extent. During the Obama Presidency, the perceived threat of transnational terrorism evolved. Initially there was a central focus on the Durand

Line area. Incrementally, this changed to a more diffuse approach encompassing many other parts of the global strategic map (Obama, December 6, 2015).

The relevance of strategic interpretation is sacrosanct in 'why' and 'how it is possible' that the United States has perceived a certain country as significant for an indirect or direct intervention. Ideas of 'containment', 'domino theory' and the 'war on terror' are all historically relevant, discursive constructions of a perceived threat in the global context. This has helped to provide a clear rationale in prioritising the pursuit of a particular policy.

It is the construction and response to these ideas that give a dynamic and sometime unsettling aspect to the United States' global approach. 'Weapons of mass destruction' and 'terrorism' – to take two relevant criteria for the post-9/11 world – are capable of major physical destruction. However, it is the subjective element of 'who' has the weapon and is 'plotting' against the US homeland and its perceived interests worldwide that are designated with the terrorist label and fought against.

In this way, state officials respond to their perception of threat. Moreover, America's strategic interpretation, expectations and interactions help it define and redefine relationships. Social facts exist due to this human agreement and institutionalisation of practices (Kratochwil, 2008, pp. 444-461; Searle, 1995, p. 2; Wendt, 1999; Wendt, 1995, pp. 71-81; Adler, 2005, p. 10). This intersubjective aspect operates within and impacts upon an overall international social structure. There are certain norms and rules that help regulate and make possible types of practices for the United States or any other social actor.

Washington's justification of its policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan has been underpinned with the idea of *legitimacy* and continues to evolve. The purpose of supporting 'freedom fighters' provided a bipartisan and powerful strategic narrative for the United States in the 1980s context. The tragic event of 9/11 lent a very different meaning. In both cases, however, Afghanistan emerged as an important country through which the United States understood and orchestrated its foreign policy.

The United States and Afghanistan has become very intertwined in recent history. It is this surprisingly close relationship that confirms a relevant level of contingency regarding how Washington constructs and implements policy. In this respect, the United States identifies what its interests are in order to understand how it should act, which in the case of Afghanistan has meant a heavily militarised approach. All in all, as the world is premised on processes and open-ended relationships, this invites the observation that Washington has discursively constructed Afghanistan's relevance in order to achieve its perceived national interests whilst confidently asserting its benign mission in helping that country change.

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## **Expert Interviews**

Bill Emmott, April 17, 2013. Full Transcript Available (DR)\*

Professor Michael Zerr, April 24, 2013. Full Transcript Available (DR)

His Excellency Abdulla Ali Al-Radhi, June 16, 2013 (DR)

Dr Raouf Tajvidi, July 11, 2013

Christopher Pang, July 12, 2013

Professor Norman Markowitz, November 8, 2013

Professor Herbert W Simons, November 9, 2013 (DR)

Hashim Khodaidad, February 20, 2014

Dr Nicolas Bouchet, February 26, 2014

Sir Christopher Mallaby, March 24, 2014. Full Transcript Available (DR)

Dr Barbara Elias, April 3, 2014 (DR)

Professor Steve Coll, April 4, 2014. Full Transcript Available (DR)

Professor Stephen Biddle, April 8, 2014. Full Transcript Available (DR)

Benjamin Friedman, April 9, 2014. Full Transcript Available (DR)

Dr Marvin Weinbaum, April 9, 2014. Full Transcript Available (DR)

Jason Campbell, April 14, 2014. Full Transcript Available (DR)

Professor Henry Nau, April 15, 2014. Full Transcript Available (DR)

Dr Seth Jones, April 22, 2014. Full Transcript Available (DR)

Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown, April 24, 2014. Full Transcript Available (DR)

\* (DR) = Directly Referenced in the work.

N.B. This list does not include the large amount of conversations and two off-the-record interviews that the author carried out. As previously stated, a number of these semi-structured, in-depth expert interviews have been recorded and full transcripts are available. Throughout this thesis, when the author cites an interviewee for the first time it is accompanied with their biographical details in a footnote.

The author also conducted research in Kabul, Afghanistan, January 2010.