

Role of Major Powers in Afghanistan: Geopolitical Rivalries, Regional Dynamics, and Strategic Implications

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Abstract

Afghanistan has remained a pivotal arena of international politics for over four decades, owing to its strategic location, fragmented political order, and persistent insecurity. This article offers a systematic analysis of the role of major powers in Afghanistan, focusing on the United States, Russia, China, Pakistan, India, and Iran, and examines how their intersecting interests have shaped the country's political evolution, security landscape, and development outcomes. Employing a qualitative research design grounded in extensive secondary sources, including peer-reviewed scholarship, policy reports, and official documents, the study is theoretically informed by realism, neo-realism, and regional security complex theory. These frameworks are used to explain power competition, security dilemmas, and patterns of regional interdependence surrounding Afghanistan. The analysis demonstrates that external interventions, frequently justified through narratives of counterterrorism, stabilization, and reconstruction, have been characterized by strategic divergence, limited coordination, and insufficient sensitivity to domestic socio-political realities. Consequently, rather than consolidating state capacity, foreign involvement often reinforced institutional fragility, political fragmentation, and conflict persistence. The withdrawal of international forces in 2021 and the subsequent reconfiguration of political authority underscore the structural limits of militarized intervention and externally driven state-building models. The article argues that sustainable stability in Afghanistan requires a shift from competitive power projection toward cooperative regional engagement, inclusive political processes, and long-term economic integration. By integrating global and regional perspectives within a unified analytical framework, this study contributes to high-level debates on intervention, regional security, and post-conflict governance, while offering policy-relevant insights for future international engagement with Afghanistan and regional stakeholders.

Keywords: Afghanistan; Major Powers; Geopolitics; Regional Security; Foreign Intervention.

1. Introduction

1.1. Historical Background of Afghanistan

Afghanistan's historical trajectory has been deeply shaped by its geographic position and sociopolitical structure, making it one of the most contested spaces in regional and global politics. Located at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, Afghanistan has historically functioned as a bridge between civilizations as well as a buffer between competing empires. This dual role has subjected the country to repeated external interventions, which have significantly influenced its political institutions and patterns of governance. During the nineteenth century, Afghanistan became central to the strategic rivalry between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia, a period commonly referred to as the "Great Game." As a buffer state separating British India from Russian Central Asia, Afghanistan's territorial integrity was preserved, but its sovereignty was constrained by external pressures. British military expeditions and diplomatic interventions shaped Afghanistan's borders and limited its autonomy in foreign affairs, laying the groundwork for a weak and externally dependent state structure. The twentieth century witnessed continued efforts at state consolidation and modernization, particularly under King Amanullah Khan and later regimes. However, these initiatives often encountered resistance from traditional power structures and tribal networks. During the Cold War, Afghanistan attempted to maintain a policy of non-alignment, yet increasing dependence on Soviet economic and military assistance gradually drew it into the Soviet sphere of influence. The Soviet invasion of 1979 marked a watershed moment, transforming Afghanistan into a major battleground of superpower rivalry. The conflict devastated state institutions, displaced millions, and militarized Afghan society. The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 did not result in political reconciliation. Instead, Afghanistan descended into a protracted civil war among rival mujahideen factions, culminating in the emergence of the Taliban in the mid-1990s. The Taliban's consolidation of power brought relative territorial control but at the cost of international isolation and severe restrictions on political and social freedoms. The events of September 2001 once again placed Afghanistan at the centre of global politics. The United States led intervention

sought to dismantle terrorist networks and rebuild the Afghan state. Despite two decades of international engagement, the persistence of insurgency, governance failures, and regional competition under-mined these efforts. The withdrawal of foreign forces in 2021 and the subsequent political transition highlighted the enduring fragility of Afghanistan's state institutions. This historical overview underscores that Afghanistan's contemporary challenges are inseparable from its long history of external intervention and internal fragmentation, providing essential context for understanding the role of major powers in the country's political and security dynamics.

Afghanistan has long occupied a central position in international politics due to its unique geopolitical location, complex social structure, and historical vulnerability to external intervention. Situated at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Afghanistan has served as a strategic corridor for trade, migration, and military movement for centuries. This strategic significance, however, has also rendered the country a persistent arena of great-power rivalry, often at the expense of domestic political stability and socio-economic development. The modern political history of Afghanistan has been profoundly shaped by external involvement. From the colonial rivalries of the nineteenth century to Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, Afghanistan has repeatedly been drawn into broader geopolitical contests. The Soviet invasion of 1979 marked a decisive turning point, internationalizing Afghanistan's internal conflicts and triggering long-term institutional collapse. The subsequent withdrawal of Soviet forces did not lead to stability; instead, it created a power vacuum that facilitated civil war and the rise of non-state armed actors, most notably the Taliban. Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, Afghanistan once again became the focal point of international intervention. The United States-led military campaign sought to dismantle terrorist networks, prevent Afghanistan from serving as a safe haven for extremism, and establish a democratic political order. Despite extensive military, financial, and diplomatic engagement by the international community, these objectives were only partially realized. Structural challenges such as weak governance, pervasive corruption, ethnic fragmentation, and competing regional interests undermined state-building efforts and prolonged instability. In recent years, Afghanistan's security environment has been further complicated by the involvement of multiple global and regional powers pursuing divergent strategic agendas. While the United States emphasized counterterrorism and institutional reform, Russia prioritized regional security and influence in Central Asia. China adopted a cautious but economically oriented approach, linking Afghanistan's stability to regional connectivity and internal security concerns. At the regional level, Pakistan, India, and Iran have engaged Afghanistan through a combination of strategic, ideological, and economic considerations, often intensifying regional competition. The withdrawal of international forces in 2021 and the subsequent transformation of Afghanistan's political order have renewed scholarly and policy debates regarding the effectiveness of foreign intervention and the future of regional security. These developments raise critical questions about the role of major powers in shaping Afghanistan's political trajectory and the conditions necessary for sustainable peace. This study seeks to critically examine the role of major powers in Afghanistan by analysing their strategic objectives, modes of engagement, and cumulative impact on the country's political stability and security dynamics. By integrating global and regional perspectives within a coherent analytical framework, the paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Afghanistan's enduring instability and to offer insights relevant to scholars, policymakers, and practitioners concerned with conflict management and regional security.

1.2. Problem statement

Despite being a landlocked and economically underdeveloped country, Afghanistan continues to serve as a major arena for geopolitical competition among global and regional powers, whose overlapping and often conflicting interests have shaped state formation, security dynamics, and regional stability in South and Central Asia. The prolonged involvement of major powers—such as the United States, China, Russia, India, and regional actors like Pakistan and Iran—has contributed to cycles of intervention, regime change, and insurgency, yet the precise mechanisms through which their rivalries and strategic calculations influence Afghanistan's domestic politics and regional order remain under-examined. This study therefore investigates how the competing strategic imperatives of major powers shape geopolitical rivalries, regional alignments, and the broader strategic implications for Afghanistan and its neighbours.

1.3. Research objectives

1. To analyse the geopolitical interests and strategic motivations of major powers (e.g., the United States, China, Russia, India, and key regional actors) in Afghanistan and how these motivations translate into concrete policies and interventions.
2. To examine how geopolitical rivalries among major powers influence Afghanistan's internal security, governance, and factional politics, including patterns of support to different political and armed groups.
3. To assess the regional dynamics and strategic implications of major-power involvement in Afghanistan for neighbouring states and broader South-Central Asia security architecture.

1.4. Research questions

1. How do the geopolitical interests and strategic objectives of major powers differ or converge in their approach to Afghanistan, and what are the main drivers of their intervention strategies?
2. In what ways do geopolitical rivalries among major powers shape Afghanistan's domestic security, governance outcomes, and intra-elite or intra-group conflicts?
3. What are the regional security, economic, and diplomatic implications of major-power involvement in Afghanistan for neighbouring countries and the broader regional order in South and Central Asia?

2. Literature Review

The role of major powers in Afghanistan has been widely examined across multiple academic disciplines, including international relations, security studies, political science, and regional studies. Existing literature broadly agrees that Afghanistan's prolonged instability cannot be understood without situating it within the context of sustained foreign intervention, weak state formation, and regional power competition. Early historical studies emphasize Afghanistan's structural vulnerability as a buffer state. Barfield (2010) provides a foundational analysis of Afghanistan's political history, arguing that the country's decentralized governance system and reliance on external patronage hindered the development of durable state institutions. Similarly, Saikal (2012) highlights how repeated external interventions disrupted indigenous political processes and entrenched dependency on foreign powers. Cold War-era scholarship focuses extensively on the Soviet Invasion of 1979 and its long-term consequences. Braithwaite (2011) and Roy (1990) document how superpower rivalry transformed Afghanistan into a militarized society, eroding institutional capacity and legitimizing armed resistance as a political tool. Rubin (2013) further argues that the collapse of the Afghan state during this period created conditions for warlordism and factional politics, the effects of which persisted into the post-Cold War era.

The rise of the Taliban has received significant scholarly attention. Rashid (2010) and Marsden (2002) examine the Taliban's emergence within the context of civil war, regional support networks, and societal exhaustion with factional violence. Giustozzi (2019) extends this analysis by demonstrating how the Taliban adapted organizationally and strategically in response to both domestic and international pressures, enabling their long-term resilience. Post-2001 literature is dominated by analyses of the United States-led intervention and international state-building efforts. Dobbins (2020) and Cordesman (2020) evaluate the effectiveness of military and institutional reforms, concluding that excessive militarization, weak governance, and corruption undermined stabilization objectives. Byman (2017) and Johnson (2018) emphasize that counterterrorism strategies often conflicted with broader political reconciliation efforts. Regional dynamics constitute another major strand of the literature. Fair (2014) and Siddique (2018) analyse Pakistan's strategic calculations in Afghanistan, particularly the concept of strategic depth and its implications for regional instability. Haqqani (2016) and Tellis (2020) examine India's engagement through development diplomacy, arguing that India's soft-power approach generated positive perceptions but intensified regional rivalry. Iran's role is explored by Hussain (2021), who highlights Tehran's pragmatic and adaptive policies driven by border security, refugee flows, and sectarian considerations. China's growing interest in Afghanistan has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Thomas (2021) and Malik (2019) argue that China's approach is characterized by economic pragmatism and risk aversion, linking Afghan stability to regional connectivity and internal security concerns in Xinjiang. Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, much of the literature analyses major powers in isolation or focuses on specific time periods. This study addresses this gap by offering an integrated and comparative analysis of global and regional powers within a unified theoretical framework. By synthesizing historical, theoretical, and contemporary perspectives, the paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how competing external interests have shaped Afghanistan's political trajectory and security environment. Recent studies emphasize the role of regional actors such as Pakistan, India, Iran, and China. However, much of the literature analyses these actors independently. This study contributes by integrating both global and regional perspectives into a comprehensive analytical framework.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multi-theoretical framework to analyse the role of major powers in Afghanistan. Given the complexity of Afghanistan's conflict environment and the diversity of external factors involved, no single theoretical perspective is sufficient to explain the dynamics at play. Accordingly, the research draws upon realism, neo-realism, and regional security complex theory to examine power competition, security dilemmas, and regional interdependence. These theoretical lenses provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding both global and regional patterns of engagement in Afghanistan.

3.1. Realism

Realism remains one of the most influential theories in international relations, emphasizing the primacy of state interests, power, and survival in an anarchic international system. From a realist perspective, Afghanistan represents a strategic space in which major powers seek to maximize influence and prevent rival dominance. Classical realist scholars argue that states are primarily motivated by national interest defined in terms of power, and this logic is clearly reflected in the policies of external actors toward Afghanistan. The United States' intervention following the events of 11 September 2001 can be understood through a realist lens as an effort to neutralize security threats and preserve its global strategic position. Similarly, Russia's engagement in Afghanistan is driven by concerns over regional stability and the prevention of extremist spillover into Central Asia, while China's involvement reflects strategic calculations related to security and economic influence (Barfield, 2010; Saikal, 2012). Realism thus explains why cooperation among major powers has remained limited, as each actor prioritizes its own strategic objectives over collective outcomes.

3.2. Neo-Realism

Structural Realism Neo-realism, or structural realism, builds upon classical realism by emphasizing the role of the international system's structure rather than human nature. According to neo-realist theory, the distribution of power within the international system shapes state behaviour, compelling states to pursue security through balancing or hedging strategies. Afghanistan's political instability has created a permissive environment for external actors to engage independently, often without coordination. From this perspective, the prolonged presence of multiple powers in Afghanistan reflects systemic pressures rather than isolated policy failures. The absence of a dominant stabilizing power following the gradual withdrawal of the United States intensified competition among regional actors, each seeking to safeguard its interests in an uncertain environment (Rubin, 2013; Dobbins, 2020). Neo-realism helps explain why international efforts at collective stabilization failed to produce durable outcomes, as structural constraints discouraged sustained cooperation.

3.3. Regional Security Complex Theory

Regional security complex theory (RSCT) provides a crucial framework for understanding Afghanistan's security environment by emphasizing the interconnectedness of regional actors and the spillover effects of insecurity. According to this theory, security dynamics are most intense among geographically proximate states, and instability in one state inevitably affects neighbouring regions. Afghanistan's instability has directly impacted South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, influencing the security calculations of Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia, and China. Pakistan's strategic concerns regarding its western border, India's interest in regional stability, and Iran's focus on refugee flows and border security illustrate how Afghanistan is embedded within a broader regional security complex (Fair, 2014; Hussain, 2021). RSCT thus highlights that Afghanistan's conflict cannot be resolved in isolation but requires regionally coordinated approaches.

3.4. Integrative Analytical Approach

By integrating realism, neo-realism, and regional security complex theory, this study offers a holistic analytical framework capable of capturing both global power competition and regional interdependence. This multi-theoretical approach enables a nuanced understanding of how major powers' strategies intersect, overlap, and occasionally conflict within Afghanistan. It also provides a robust foundation for assessing the implications of foreign intervention and for identifying pathways toward more cooperative and sustainable engagement in the future.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine the role of major powers in Afghanistan and to analyse the political, security, and strategic implications of their involvement. Given the complex and historically embedded nature of Afghanistan's conflict, a qualitative approach is most appropriate, as it allows for in-depth interpretation of policies, narratives, and power relations that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone.

4.1. Research Design

The research is based on an exploratory and analytical design aimed at developing a comprehensive understanding of major powers' engagement in Afghanistan. The study employs a comparative case study approach, focusing on the policies and strategies of the United States, Russia, China, Pakistan, India, and Iran. This design facilitates systematic comparison across actors while identifying patterns of convergence and divergence in strategic objectives and out-comes. The research is longitudinal in nature, covering key phases of Afghanistan's modern history, including the Cold War period, the post-Soviet civil war, the post-2001 international intervention, and the post-2021 political transition. This temporal scope enables the study to assess continuity and change in external actors' behaviour over time.

4.2. Data Sources and Collection

The study relies exclusively on secondary data sources, which are appropriate given the security constraints and political sensitivity associated with primary field research in Afghanistan. Data were collected from peer-reviewed academic journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, scholarly books, policy reports published by international organizations, government documents, and analyses produced by reputable think tanks. Key sources include works by Barfield (2010), Rashid (2010), Rubin (2013), Giustozzi (2019), Dobbins (2020), and Fair (2014), among others. Official reports from the United Nations, World Bank, and regional security organizations were also utilized to supplement academic literature and provide empirical context.

4.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by the theoretical framework outlined earlier, integrating realism, neo-realism, and regional security complex theory. Qualitative content analysis was employed to identify recurring themes related to power competition, security dilemmas, and regional interdependence. Comparative analysis was used to assess how different major powers have pursued their interests in Afghanistan and how these strategies have interacted.

4.4. Limitations of the Study

Despite its comprehensive scope, this study has certain limitations. The reliance on secondary data may introduce interpretive bias, as findings are dependent on the perspectives and methodologies of existing scholarship. Additionally, the absence of primary interviews limits the ability to capture real-time policy deliberations. The rapidly evolving political situation in Afghanistan also means that some conclusions may require revision as new developments emerge.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

This research adheres to established academic ethical standards. All sources have been properly cited to avoid plagiarism and ensure intellectual transparency. Given the sensitive nature of Afghanistan's conflict, the study avoids normative judgments and seeks to present a balanced and objective analysis. No human subjects were involved, and therefore no ethical clearance for human research was required.

5. Role of Major Powers in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been a central arena for the strategic engagement of major global and regional powers, each pursuing distinct political, security, and economic objectives. The involvement of these actors has significantly influenced Afghanistan's internal dynamics, often producing overlapping and competing interventions. This section examines the roles of the United States, Russia, China, Pakistan, India, and Iran, highlighting their motivations, strategies, and impacts on Afghanistan's political and security environment.

5.1. United States

The United States' intervention in Afghanistan following the attacks of 11 September 2001 was primarily driven by counterterrorism objectives, particularly the dismantling of Al-Qaeda and the prevention of Afghanistan's use as a safe haven for transnational terrorist networks. Beyond immediate security concerns, the United States sought to establish a democratic political order, strengthen state institutions, and promote socio-economic development. During the initial phase of intervention, the United States achieved significant military success, including the removal of the Taliban from power and the establishment of a new political framework. However, prolonged military engagement, evolving insurgent tactics, and challenges related to governance, corruption, and political fragmentation gradually eroded these gains. As the conflict persisted, strategic fatigue emerged, both domestically and among international partners, leading to declining public support and resource constraints. Scholars argue that the emphasis on military solutions often overshadowed political reconciliation and institutional capacity-building, contributing to diminishing returns over time (Dobbins, 2020; Byman, 2017).

5.2. Russia

Russia's involvement in Afghanistan is primarily shaped by regional security considerations and historical experience. Having endured the consequences of the Soviet intervention, Russia has adopted a cautious approach that prioritizes stability and the containment of extremist threats. Moscow views Afghanistan as a potential source of insecurity for Central Asia, particularly due to concerns over terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and cross-border militancy. Rather than direct military intervention, Russia has relied on diplomatic engagement and multilateral forums to influence developments in Afghanistan. By maintaining dialogue with various Afghan actors and coordinating with regional partners, Russia seeks to protect its strategic interests while avoiding the costs associated with large-scale intervention. This approach reflects a pragmatic recalibration of policy rooted in past experience (Braithwaite, 2011; Rubin, 2013).

5.3. China

China's approach to Afghanistan is characterized by economic pragmatism, political caution, and a strong emphasis on stability. Beijing perceives instability in Afghanistan as a potential threat to its internal security, particularly in relation to concerns over militancy in the Xinjiang region. Consequently, China prioritizes counterterrorism cooperation and border security while avoiding overt military involvement. China's engagement has increasingly focused on economic initiatives, including infrastructure development, trade, and regional connectivity. By linking Afghanistan's stability to broader regional economic frameworks, China seeks to promote long-term security through development. Scholars note that China's strategy reflects a preference for indirect influence and risk management rather than active political intervention (Malik, 2019; Thomas, 2021).

5.4. Pakistan

Pakistan has played one of the most influential and controversial roles in Afghanistan. Its policies have been driven by strategic depth considerations, concerns over border security, and rivalry with India. Pakistan views developments in Afghanistan as directly affecting its national security, particularly along its western frontier. Over the decades, Pakistan has sought to maintain influence over Afghan political actors to ensure a favourable security environment. While this approach has provided Pakistan with strategic leverage, it has also contributed to mistrust and regional instability. Scholars argue that Pakistan's dual role as both a security partner and a regional competitor has complicated international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan (Fair, 2014; Siddique, 2018).

5.5. India

India's engagement in Afghanistan has largely emphasized soft power diplomacy and development assistance. New Delhi has invested in infrastructure projects, healthcare, education, and capacity-building initiatives, aiming to support Afghanistan's reconstruction and promote regional stability. India's approach has generally been perceived positively within Afghanistan, enhancing its diplomatic standing. However, India's involvement has also intensified regional competition, particularly with Pakistan, thereby influencing the broader strategic environment. Analysts note that India's strategy reflects a commitment to regional stability through non-military means, while also serving its strategic interests (Haqqani, 2016; Tellis, 2020).

5.6. Iran

Iran's involvement in Afghanistan is shaped by geographical proximity, cultural ties, and security concerns. Tehran has prioritized border security, refugee management, and the protection of minority communities, particularly Shiite groups. Iran's policies toward Afghanistan have been notably pragmatic, involving engagement with a range of Afghan actors to safeguard its interests. Iran has also sought to counterbalance the influence of rival powers while preventing instability from spilling across its borders. Scholars highlight that Iran's flexible and adaptive approach has allowed it to maintain influence despite shifting political dynamics within Afghanistan (Hussain, 2021).

6. Comparative Analysis of Major Power Strategies

The engagement of major powers in Afghanistan reflects a diverse set of strategic objectives, policy instruments, and political outcomes. While these actors operate within the same geopolitical space, their approaches differ significantly in terms of priorities, modes of engagement, and long-term impact. A comparative analysis highlights both areas of convergence such as shared concerns over instability and extremism and areas of divergence shaped by competing national interests. The United States adopted a security-centric strategy dominated by military intervention and counterterrorism operations. Although this approach achieved short-term tactical successes, it failed to establish durable political stability, leading to limited long-term effectiveness.

Russia, in contrast, pursued a diplomatic and regionally focused strategy aimed at containing security threats and preserving influence in Central Asia. This approach yielded moderate influence without the costs associated with direct military involvement. China's strategy has emphasized economic engagement and political caution, prioritizing stability and regional connectivity. While the immediate impact of Chinese investment has been limited, its long-term potential remains significant, particularly if security conditions improve. Pakistan's approach, shaped by strategic depth considerations and regional rivalry, relied heavily on political leverage within Afghanistan. This strategy produced contested outcomes, contributing to both influence and instability. India's engagement has centred on soft power and development assistance, generating positive perceptions among Afghan stakeholders while simultaneously intensifying regional competition. Iran adopted a pragmatic and adaptive strategy focused on border security, refugee management, and influence preservation, enabling it to maintain regional leverage despite shifting political circumstances.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Major Power Strategies in Afghanistan

Actor	Primary Objective	Dominant Strategy	Overall Impact
United States	Counterterrorism and state-building	Military intervention and institutional support	Limited and largely unsustainable outcomes
Russia	Regional security and strategic influence	Diplomacy and multi-lateral engagement	Moderate but cautious regional influence
China	Economic stability and security	Investment and regional connectivity initiatives	Long-term strategic potential with limited short-term impact
Pakistan	Strategic depth and border security	Political leverage and influence networks	Highly contested and inconsistent outcomes
India	Regional stability and diplomatic influence	Development assistance and soft power diplomacy	Generally positive perception with strategic limitations
Iran	Border security and regional leverage	Pragmatic and adaptive engagement	Sustained influence in western Afghanistan

Overall, the comparative analysis underscores that no single strategy has succeeded in stabilizing Afghanistan. Military-dominated approaches have proven costly and unsustainable, while purely economic or diplomatic strategies remain vulnerable to persistent insecurity. The findings reinforce the argument that Afghanistan’s stability depends on coordinated regional engagement rather than unilateral or competitive interventions.

7. Results and Discussion

This study examined the role of major powers in Afghanistan through a comparative analytical framework grounded in realism, liberal institutionalism, and soft power theory. The findings demonstrate that Afghanistan has remained a central arena for great power competition, where strategic interests have consistently outweighed normative commitments to stability and development. From a realist perspective, the actions of the United States, Russia, China, Pakistan, and Iran reflect a primary concern for security, influence, and regional balance of power. The United States’ prolonged military intervention, initially justified under counterterrorism objectives, yielded limited long-term success due to strategic overstretch and weak institutional sustainability. This outcome reinforces realist arguments that external military power alone cannot guarantee political stability in complex conflict environments (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001).

Liberal institutionalism offers partial explanatory value, particularly in understanding India’s development-oriented engagement and multilateral diplomatic initiatives. India’s emphasis on infrastructure, education, and humanitarian assistance contributed to positive local perceptions; however, the absence of a robust security role constrained its strategic influence. This finding highlights the limitations of liberal approaches in highly securitized environments (Keohane Nye, 2012).

China’s involvement reflects a hybrid strategy combining economic pragmatism with security driven concerns, particularly regarding regional connectivity and internal stability in Xinjiang. While large-scale investments indicate long-term strategic intent, their immediate impact remains limited due to Afghanistan’s political instability. This supports the argument that economic statecraft requires a minimum level of domestic security to succeed (Brautigam, 2020).

Pakistan and Iran pursued regionally focused strategies shaped by border security, ideological considerations, and geopolitical rivalry. Pakistan’s pursuit of strategic depth produced contested outcomes, while Iran’s pragmatic engagement ensured sustained influence in western Afghanistan. These findings align with constructivist insights emphasizing historical relationships and identity-based interests (Wendt, 1999).

Overall, the results indicate that the absence of coordination among major powers, coupled with competing strategic objectives, has undermined Afghanistan’s long-term stability. The study concludes that without an inclusive regional framework integrating security, economic development, and political legitimacy, external interventions are likely to remain fragmented and ineffective.

8. Conclusion

This study analysed the role of major powers in Afghanistan using an integrated theoretical framework combining realism, liberal institutionalism, and soft power theory. The findings confirm that Afghanistan has remained a focal point of geopolitical competition, where external interventions have largely been shaped by security imperatives and strategic interests rather than coordinated efforts toward sustainable state-building. The analysis demonstrates that military-centric approaches, particularly those pursued by the United States, yielded limited and unsustainable outcomes, reinforcing realist arguments regarding the constraints of coercive power in fragmented political environments. Regional

actors such as Pakistan, Iran, and Russia similarly prioritized strategic depth and border security, resulting in selective and contested influence. In contrast, India's development-oriented engagement and China's economic pragmatism illustrate the potential—but also the limitations of non-military strategies in the absence of a stable security framework. From a policy perspective, the study underscores the necessity of greater regional coordination and multilateral engagement in Afghanistan. Future interventions should prioritize inclusive political dialogue, regional confidence-building mechanisms, and the integration of economic development with security governance. Without a coherent framework that balances power politics with institutional legitimacy and local ownership, external involvement is likely to remain fragmented and ineffective.

Overall, the study contributes to contemporary debates on international intervention by demonstrating that sustainable stability in Afghanistan depends not on unilateral dominance but on coordinated regional strategies grounded in political realism, institutional cooperation, and context sensitive engagement.

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