

# Afghanistan's Place in the World

Since before the time of Alexander the Great, Afghanistan has been a key part of world history.

Newspaper editors used to call a story about a remote place that readers knew or cared little about an “Afghanism.” Recent events, however, have brought troops and aid workers from dozens of countries to this remote land which suffered greatly in the previous quarter century. This is not the first time the country is at the center of world attention.

The Persian leader Darius seized the country in the fifth century BC, and the greatest conqueror of ancient times, Alexander the Great, conquered Afghanistan on his way to the Indus River around 329 BC.

Buddhists took over in the first century AD, carving giant Buddhas in Bamiyan, and Islam reached the country in the seventh century. By the 10th century, Afghanistan had become the center of Islamic power. It was conquered by the Mongol Genghis Khan in 1219, who destroyed its irrigation systems. Around this period, Marco Polo crossed Afghanistan, which was part of the Silk Road linking China with Europe. Tamerlane ruled in the 1400s but faced continual revolts by the Afghans.

The Chagatai Turk ruler Babur took power in the early 1500s and was the first of the Moghul rulers, seizing control over what is now Pakistan and northern India, allowing great freedom for Hindus to practice their faith alongside Islam.

In the 1800s, the Afghans fought and defeated troops of the British Empire, which controlled India. To create a buffer between British India and Russian Central Asia—engaged in a dangerous power rivalry known as The Great Game—the Durand Line was drawn in 1893 as Afghanistan's Eastern border, including a long panhandle called the Wakhan corridor, reaching all the way to China and separating the Russian and

British empires. Unfortunately, it left half the Pashtus or Pathans in Afghanistan and half in British India, later to be carved off as Pakistan in 1947.

After the third defeat of the British by the Afghans in 1921, the country became independent, and King Zahir Shah ruled from 1933 to 1973, when he was overthrown by his cousin Daoud Khan, who in turn was killed in 1978 leading to a Soviet invasion.

The final battle of the Cold War was fought by U.S.-backed Afghan mujahidin fighters against Soviet troops, who went home in 1989. Then, after a chaotic period of factional fighting, Taliban Islamic extremists took power in 1996—turning the Afghan countryside into a nest for Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda terrorists until November 2001, when the United States and Afghan allies ousted the Taliban. But great damage had been done.

Of its 20 million people in 1980, five million fled into refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran to escape fighting. Another million people died in the war. Ancient waterworks, villages, herds, and roads were all destroyed or heavily damaged.

The voluntary return of 3.7 million refugees since 2001 shows the strong attachment Afghans have for their land and culture. They are grateful for the refuge given them by their neighbors but quick to say they don't want Pakistan and Iran to try to influence their political, economic, and security decisions.

In fact, there is already evidence of rivalry among Afghanistan's neighbors, especially as it seeks good relations with both India and Pakistan. What analysts fear is that Afghanistan may once more become a place for regional rivals to seek advantages, instead of helping it to recover from the wars, stand on its feet, and improve the education, health and economy as its people so clearly wish. The international community, and in particular the United States and NATO—which provided troops to defend the Afghans against militants, Taliban holdouts, and terrorists based along the Pakistan tribal areas and other remote regions—have pledged to remain engaged there as long as needed to help the Afghans remain free.

**“The road ahead for Afghanistan is still long and difficult. Yet, the Afghan people can know that their country will never be abandoned to terrorists and killers. The world and the United States stands with them as partners in their quest for peace and prosperity and stability and democracy.”**

President George W. Bush, June 15, 2004



A man walks in front of the 500-year old Blue Mosque in Mazar-i Sharif, said to hold the tomb of Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. The garden next to him, was rehabilitated with international assistance.



Two girls in Afghanistan.





Ben Barber/USMID

Boys at Bakhter high school in Mazar-i Sharif where tents are classrooms for overflow enrollment.



© Alejandro Chicher/WFP

A girl with her text book looks back over her shoulder at a visitor to her classroom.



Ben Barber/USMID

Men and boys await medical treatment at Tormai, a village near the city of Ghazni, after a U.S. military

medical team set up a clinic for a day, treating 800 people for free.