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# States, nations, and self-determination: Afghanistan and decolonization at the United Nations

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## Abstract

Afghanistan is not traditionally seen as a ‘decolonized’ state, given that it was never formally part of any empire. Yet Afghan state leaders embraced the language of anti-colonialism and self-determination to assert influence in the international community, and especially at the UN. This paper explores the interactions between Afghan elites and the UN, particularly the way that Afghanistan fought the growing global consensus that self-determination in the era of decolonization meant the establishment of an international states system. Afghan elites instead argued that self-determination was for peoples, not states. Afghanistan’s stance on self-determination, as an exception to territorial state centrism, provides a way of thinking about decolonization’s universalisms and particularities, as well as how it ultimately complicated Afghanistan’s own place in the international community. The article uses Afghanistan’s engagement with the UN General Assembly and its various subcommittees, from its membership in 1946 to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, to reflect on the ways decolonization became a global yet fractured phenomenon that came to mean numerous practices and could be used by different historical actors to articulate multiple, potentially competing visions of political autonomy and rights. International institutions like the UN provided crucial arenas where postcolonial statehood became the norm yet was nevertheless contested and questioned. By providing an exception to the UN’s focus on territorial statehood, Afghanistan demonstrates the ongoing fluidity and complexity of decolonization’s meaning and consequences, as well as the ways in which nations continue to inform the global.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan; self-determination; decolonization; United Nations; nationalism

The history of twentieth-century Afghanistan is fundamentally global. It played host to a clash of universalist ideas – capitalism and communism, Islamism and secularism – as well as international actors, British and Russian early in the century, Soviet and American during the Cold War. Not only that but Afghan leaders positioned themselves as global players. They engaged with worldwide phenomena such as non-alignment, pan-Asianism, and pan-Islamism and actively asserted themselves as representatives of the non-Western, decolonizing world within the United Nations. Equally significant, Afghan leaders faced the same struggles that confronted the international community in the shifting political atmosphere of the twentieth century: defining statehood and nationhood at a time when the world’s geopolitical framework was changing drastically.

Afghanistan is not traditionally seen as a ‘decolonized’ state. It was never formally part of any empire, nor was it directly colonized. Nevertheless, its historical trajectory from the early nineteenth century undeniably intertwined with those of its neighbouring British and Russian

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empires.<sup>1</sup> Following the 1919 Third Anglo-Afghan War, which severed many of the remaining ties between Afghanistan and Great Britain, Afghan leaders embraced the global, taking on the mantles of anti-colonialism and decolonization to locate themselves in a world that, at that stage, still was one of empires rather than nation states.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent Afghan engagement with imperial and decolonizing processes, particularly in the arena of the United Nations, helped underpin the internationalization of Afghan outlooks and activities. The UN General Assembly and its various subcommittees proved particularly significant for placing Afghanistan, an otherwise poor, potentially politically insignificant state, on par with other members of the international community.

Studying twentieth-century Afghanistan reveals the complicated, even contradictory links between decolonization and international institutions. The country's experience of British imperialism gave Afghanistan's leaders the impetus to position themselves at the forefront of emerging independence and nonaligned movements. But Afghanistan also was one of the few countries that was effectively 're-colonized' owing to the Soviet occupation, 1979–89. Afghanistan's history, in this regard, is simultaneously unique and universal. It was subject to the same global pressures that affected many decolonizing states. Like the Congo, Vietnam, Angola, and others, it succumbed to the Cold War's ideological and military conflicts and the threat of international intervention. And like so many newly independent states, it turned to the UN for support and legitimation. What remained unique about Afghanistan was its leaders' particularly fraught relationship with the concept of 'self-determination', which was complicated by its longer history of empire, as revealed through its relationship with the UN. The trajectory of Afghanistan's engagement with the United Nations across the twentieth century paralleled and informed broader conversations – within states, in bilateral relations, and at the UN – about the meaning and nature of political independence, as well as the parameters and location of decolonization. But whereas the UN General Assembly prioritized and solidified statehood as the key unit of international relations, Afghan leaders contested state-centric sovereignty until the 1978 socialist coup. By providing an exception to the UN's focus on statehood, Afghanistan demonstrates the ongoing fluidity and complexity of decolonization's meaning and consequences, as well as the ways in which nations continue to inform the global.

Scholars have delved at length into the many meanings and iterations of self-determination, whether in terms of Wilsonian or Leninist visions, the ways that anti-colonial leaders adopted the term to articulate demands for political, economic, cultural, and social autonomy, or how imperialists and settler-colonialists manipulated the concept to promote certain groups' right to self-determine over others.<sup>3</sup> In relation to decolonization, historians have reflected on why self-determination ultimately led to a global system of nation states, as well as reasons sub-state

<sup>1</sup>Scholars increasingly have emphasized Afghanistan's and Afghans' numerous economic, political, social, cultural, and ideological links with communities around them and states across the world. See Robert D. Crews, *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015); Nile Green, 'The Trans-Border Traffic of Afghan Modernism: Afghanistan and the Indian "Urdusphere"', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, no. 3 (2011): 479–508; Nile Green, 'Locating Afghan History', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 1 (2013): 132–34; Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>For much of the twentieth century (1929–78), Afghanistan's ruling elite constituted members of the Musahiban family. Because their rule within Afghanistan was fragile, and frequently limited to urban centres, asserting their legitimacy in the international states system became a crucial way for the ruling dynasty to maintain power (see Barnett Rubin, 'Lineages of the State in Afghanistan', *Asian Survey* 28, no. 11 (1988): 1188–209).

<sup>3</sup>Borislav Chernev, 'The Brest-Litovsk Moment: Self-Determination Discourse in Eastern Europe before Wilsonianism', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 22, no. 3 (2011): 369–87; Erez Manela, 'Asia in the Global 1919: Reimagining Territory, Identity, and Solidarity', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 78, no. 2 (2019): 409–16; Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Bradley R. Simpson, 'Self-Determination, Human Rights, and the End of Empire in the 1970s', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 4, no. 2 (2013): 239–60. See also Joseph Massad's article,

groups largely failed to gain traction for visions of self-determination that potentially undermined this international system.<sup>4</sup> In all of this, the United Nations has been an important arena and facilitator for debates and discussions of self-determination, independence, and international relations.<sup>5</sup>

This article uses Afghanistan's engagement with self-determination at the UN, from its membership in 1946 to the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, to reflect not only on the term's shifting meaning but also the UN's fraught relationship with decolonization. Decolonization required certain visions of self-determination to triumph over others. The UN General Assembly and Security Council played a key role in this, as a norm-setting arena in which debates and resolutions limited representation for groups that advocated visions of self-determination that did not fit the confines of established states. But member states could try to subvert this model, and indeed, Afghanistan did. Afghan leaders attempted to reframe self-determination as a matter of ethno-nationalist autonomy that destabilized colonial-era frontiers. Even as the state became paramount in international relations, Afghan efforts to define self-determination in terms of people, not places, would have long-term implications, complicating Afghanistan's own nation statehood and its place in the international order. Ironically, Afghan Marxists' attempts in the 1980s to claim legitimacy within the international states system by pointing to the UN's recognition of state primacy failed to gain traction in the General Assembly, as international and domestic critics claimed that refugees and resistance fighters beyond Afghanistan's borders represented the real Afghan nation. Moreover, the emergence of other international organizations, including the Organization of Islamic Conference and Non-Aligned Movement, provided alternative arenas for Afghan non-state actors to assert their legitimacy and gain recognition. This article thus speaks to calls to produce a global history that 'neither neglects "the small spaces"' – in this case, 'peripheral' spaces – 'nor evades the specificity and strangeness of historical experience'.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it embraces the strangeness of Afghanistan's history to reflect on global decolonization trends and their detractors.

Afghanistan's twentieth-century experiences, both domestically and at the UN, highlighted the fracturing of decolonization. This was particularly so because Afghanistan was one of the last major battlegrounds of the global Cold War. Both the United States and Soviet Union exhibited clear imperialist tendencies in their attempts to exert control over states across the world.<sup>7</sup> In the early 1980s, a clear clash between competing visions of imperialism and decolonization took place

<sup>4</sup>'Against Self-Determination' (*Humanity* 9, no. 2 (2018): 161–91) and the subsequent symposium responding to the article ('Symposium: "Against Self-Determination"', *Humanity*, <http://humanityjournal.org/symposium-against-self-determination/>).

<sup>5</sup>This article expands on and complicates work on the ambiguous transition of empires to states. Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), ch. 4; Bradley Simpson, 'Self-determination and Decolonization', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, ed. by Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780198713197-e-25>; Bradley Simpson, 'The Biafran Secession and the Limits of Self-Determination', *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no. 2–3 (2014): 337–54; Lydia Walker, 'Decolonization in the 1960s: On Legitimate and Illegitimate Nationalist Claims-Making', *Past & Present* 242, no. 1 (2019): 227–64.

<sup>6</sup>Sunil Amrith and Glenda Sluga, 'New Histories of the United Nations', *Journal of World History* 19, no. 3 (2008): 251–74; Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Alanna O'Malley, *The Diplomacy of Decolonisation: America, Britain and the United Nations during the Congo Crisis 1960–64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); Vrushali Patil, *Negotiating Decolonization in the United Nations: Politics of Space, Identity, and International Community* (London: Routledge, 2008); Amy L. Sayward, *The United Nations in International History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup>Richard Drayton and David Motadel, 'Discussion: The Futures of Global History', *Journal of Global History* 13 (2018): 13.

<sup>8</sup>See Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially chapters 2 and 3; Prasenjit Duara, 'The Cold War and the Imperialism of Nation-States', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, ed. by Richard Immerman and Petra Goede (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 86–104.

in the UN General Assembly following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. For sceptics, the invasion represented the disruption of Afghan self-determination, while for supporters, it upheld Afghan independence. The debates revealed a pluralization of decolonization's meanings, while also re-emphasizing the significance of self-determination as a matter of state sovereignty, though with lingering ambiguities. Self-determination, as discussion of Afghanistan revealed, remained a key point of contention and debate for national units and state futures both in and beyond international organizations.

Efforts by states like Afghanistan to propose alternative meanings of self-determination at the United Nations mattered because they created a space, no matter how small, for these ideas and their practical manifestations to be discussed and debated in international arenas. This article shifts debates about self-determination from the Black Atlantic to Asia,<sup>8</sup> revealing a liminal space simultaneously facilitated and restricted by the UN, in which self-determination was framed as neither state nor individual rights but a more ambiguous 'people's' rights. Using documents from the UN General Assembly and Afghan correspondence with UN officials and state leaders, this article begins by examining Afghanistan's entry into the international states system, coinciding with decolonization sweeping eastern Europe, before turning to Afghan engagement with self-determination during the decolonizing moment accompanying the end of the Second World War and emergence of the UN. It concludes by reflecting on how earlier Afghan framings of political independence complicated international recognition for Afghanistan after the December 1979 Soviet invasion.

Studying the outliers to global trends provides an opportunity not only to reflect on the emergence of near-universal conditions – in this instance, postcolonial statehood that largely employed colonial borders – but also on the alternatives that did not become near-universal – an international system that incorporated different political imaginaries. The UN was a crucial battleground in which these debates about decolonization's universalisms took place because it offered the space and opportunities for all states, no matter how minor, to bring attention to such issues. Afghanistan as a state critiquing state centrism highlights how decolonization as state-making, while increasingly globalized, remained a source of tension in international exchanges and international institutions.

### Afghan internationalism during the 'Wilsonian moment'

Afghanistan's place in twentieth-century international politics was peculiar. In the preceding century, British imperialists, having failed to integrate Afghanistan into colonial India, recognized and promoted the idea of an Afghan state, even as they did their best to manipulate and control it. Afghanistan was 'a para-colonial state', in which foreign manipulation resulted in 'a state created but not occupied by the colonial order'. To this end, 'as the Afghans were subsumed into an international system shaped by European empires, they were expected to act in accordance with the forms of that system'.<sup>9</sup> British officials engineered Afghan state-building, including the demarcation of borders and Afghan leaders' relations with their domestic populations, to serve imperial interests.<sup>10</sup> Not only were Afghanistan's territorial boundaries proscribed by Anglo-Russian competition and border commissions, but these foreign leaders expected Afghan leaders to assert westernized concepts of sovereignty – their right and ability to govern with a strong central government – within that territorial space.

<sup>8</sup>On self-determination in the Black Atlantic, see Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*; Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup>Benjamin Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 169–70.

<sup>10</sup>Francesca Fuoli, 'Incorporating North-Western Afghanistan into the British Empire: Experiments in Indirect Rule through the Making of an Imperial Frontier, 1884–87', *Afghanistan* 1, no. 1 (2018): 4–25.

This history of simultaneous coercion and exclusion provided Afghanistan with an exceptional degree of autonomy in a world dominated by European empires, an autonomy that reached new heights paralleling the post-First World War treaty discussions. Even while accepting Afghanistan's ostensible independence, British officials had controlled its foreign policy through nineteenth-century treaties.<sup>11</sup> This changed in 1919 when King Amanullah came to power. In one of his first proclamations, he asserted that 'the Government of Afghanistan should be internally and externally independent and free, that is to say, that all rights of Government that are possessed by other independent Powers of the world should be possessed in their entirety by Afghanistan'.<sup>12</sup> Though using the terminology of independence, rather than self-determination, Amanullah's intent was clear. Afghanistan should determine its own course, both in world politics and its own political sphere. This assertion assumed real power through Amanullah's decision to send an invading force into British India and his subsequent success in the 1919 Third Anglo-Afghan War, resulting in a treaty by which Great Britain recognized Afghanistan's total independence.

Decolonization varied hugely across time and space. Proponents of decolonization had different motivations and different visions for the future. What globalized the movement was the desire for legal sovereignty as well as a desire 'for moral justice and political solidarity against imperialism'.<sup>13</sup> This reflected Afghanistan's aims. The treaties between British and Afghan leaders following the Third Anglo-Afghan War indicated British acknowledgment, however reluctant, that it no longer could influence, at least so overtly, a state where it had previously wielded extensive power. In Afghan national histories, 1919 is often presented as the seminal year of Afghan independence.<sup>14</sup>

Afghanistan's independence coincided with the earliest wave of twentieth-century decolonization, the emergence of a host of newly sovereign eastern European countries from the wreckage of Europe's land empires. It was these states that US President Woodrow Wilson narrowly referred to in his calls for self-determination as part of his Fourteen Points. This contrasted with Vladimir Lenin's concurrent universalist framing of self-determination as 'the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies, and the formation of an independent national state'.<sup>15</sup> As the limitations of the 'Wilsonian moment' and its Eurocentrism became clear to anti-colonial activists across Asia and Africa, Afghanistan stood out in its success. Afghanistan proved that non-Western countries could achieve independence. Amanullah framed Afghanistan as part of this decolonizing vanguard. He wrote to the Bolsheviks' legislative body, the All-Russia Central Executive Committee, emphasizing Russia and Afghanistan's shared devotion to independence. He described Afghanistan as 'the champion of freedom and equality' and praised the Bolsheviks for having 'proclaimed the principle of freedom and equality of the countries and peoples of the whole world'.<sup>16</sup> Lenin encouragingly responded, 'May the desire of the Afghan people to follow the Russian example be the best guarantee of the strength and independence of the Afghan state'.<sup>17</sup> Sun Yatsen, in articulating his Three Principles of the People, wrote, 'Wilson's proposals, once set forth, could not be recalled', noting that Afghanistan, among others,

<sup>11</sup>See Hopkins, *Making of Modern Afghanistan*; also Ludwig Adamec, *Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs to the Mid-twentieth Century: Relations with the USSR, Germany, and Britain* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974); Martin J. Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge, International Relations, and the Anglo-Afghan Encounter, 1808–1878* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup>C.H. Philips, H.L. Singh, and B.N. Pandey, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan 1858 to 1947: Select Documents* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 491–2.

<sup>13</sup>Prasenjit Duara, ed., *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then* (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

<sup>14</sup>Events in 2019 marking a centenary of Afghan independence make this point clear and also demonstrate its current significance. See Faiz Ahmed, 'Learning from Afghanistan's Independence', *Perspectives on History*, November 2019, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2019/learning-from-afghanistans-independence-afghans-liberated-themselves-in-1919-their-achievements-offer-us-lessons-today>.

<sup>15</sup>Cited in Massad, 'Against Self-Determination', 166.

<sup>16</sup>Ram Rahul Sheel, 'Afghanistan in International Perspective', *International Studies* 22, no. 2 (1985): 113.

<sup>17</sup>Anthony Hyman, *Afghanistan under Soviet Domination, 1964–91* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992 edn.), 42.



was ‘stirred with a great, new consciousness; they saw how completely they had been deceived by the Great Powers’ advocacy of self-determination, and began independently and separately to carry out the principle of the “self-determination of peoples”’.<sup>18</sup> Afghanistan was seen by these international observers as acting on the promises of self-determination to achieve political independence and rupture ties with the imperial powers.

Afghan leaders saw engagement with the international community and the politics of anti-colonial solidarity as key means of reinforcing Afghanistan’s own independence and securing its place in the global pecking order. Despite victory in 1919, Amanullah and his successors remained wary of ongoing power struggles between British and Bolshevik leaders. British officials stood convinced that once the Soviet Union consolidated power, it would invade South Asia, moving through Afghanistan. The Soviet newspaper, *Izvestia*, in turn, accused the British of trying to pressure Afghanistan into closer relations, citing ‘the spirit of Disraeli, which dreams of extending the frontier of India . . . to the Amu-Daria river in the heart of Central Asiatic Russia’.<sup>19</sup> After Amanullah was overthrown for overzealously pursuing social reform, and a subsequent civil war, Mohammad Nadir Shah succeeded in seizing the throne. He and his descendants continued to navigate between British and Soviet interests. The government of Zahir Shah, who replaced Nadir Shah after his 1933 assassination, timed Afghanistan’s application for entry to the League of Nations in 1934 to closely follow the Soviet Union’s. It only joined the Western-dominated League after the Soviets could provide a counterweight to the British imperialist agenda. Afghan hopes that the League would ensure collective security, however, were dashed by the Italian annexation of Abyssinia and the League’s woefully inadequate response, after which, according to British observers, Afghan leaders ‘completely lost faith in the League . . . as a means of insurance against external aggression’.<sup>20</sup>

Afghanistan’s membership in the League of Nations from September 1934 nevertheless was significant. The League, though fundamentally weakened by lukewarm great power support, imperial competition, and fragile structures, signalled wider interest in the concept of global governance and an effort to promote an international political system, as indicated by Bogdan Jacob’s and Giorgio Poti’s articles in this issue.<sup>21</sup> Afghanistan’s entry affirmed its place in the international community, and as one of the only independent Arab-Asian states, it was particularly significant as a symbol of the League’s (failed) global potential. Upon Afghanistan’s membership, the Agha Khan, representing India, told the League assembly, ‘I have long felt that the League was in danger of becoming too occidental and too representative of one creed to be truly catholic and universal . . . India . . . remains a true daughter of the East, proud of her Eastern blood, her Eastern language, her Eastern cultures. These she shares with Afghanistan’. The delegate from Iraq, which had only attained full sovereignty in 1933, similarly lauded Afghanistan’s membership as a sign of Asian solidarity: ‘The stronger and more vigorous the Asiatic element, the more successful that co-operation will be’.<sup>22</sup> The significance of Afghanistan’s League membership lay far more in its symbolism than in its actual participation, though Afghan delegates worked to expand the League’s non-Western membership, advocating an extraordinary assembly session

<sup>18</sup>Cited in Duara, *Decolonization*, 24.

<sup>19</sup>Cited in Joseph Castagne, ‘Soviet Imperialism in Afghanistan’, *Foreign Affairs* 13, no. 4 (1935): 702.

<sup>20</sup>Sir R. Maconachie to Sir John Simon, 14 October 1934, in *Further Correspondence Respecting Afghanistan, Part XVII*, FO 402/16, no. 28, UK National Archives (UKNA); Lieutenant-Colonel Fraser-Tytler to Viscount Halifax, 16 November 1938, in *Further Correspondence Respecting Afghanistan, Part XXI*, FO 402/19, no. 18, UKNA.

<sup>21</sup>Susan Pedersen, ‘Back to the League of Nations’, *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (2007): 1091–117; *ibid.*, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>22</sup>Extract from Verbatim Record of the Fifteenth Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the League of Nations, Twelfth Parliamentary Meeting, 27 September 1934, in *Further Correspondence Respecting Afghanistan, Part XVII*, FO 402/16, no. 27, UKNA. See also Susan Pedersen, ‘Getting Out of Iraq – in 1932: The League of Nations and the Road to Normative Statehood’, *American Historical Review* 115, no. 4 (2010): 975–1000.

to admit Egypt in 1937, and acceded to international laws such as the Slavery Convention.<sup>23</sup> For a time, Afghanistan became emblematic of the potentials of pan-Asianism and pan-Islamism, not only through League membership but also through its engagement in Turkish-Indo-Afghan legal networks and the Asian solidarity conferences organized by the Japan-based Pan-Asiatic Association.<sup>24</sup>

### Afghanistan, the United Nations, and self-determination

Afghan leaders would continue to value international organizations as a means of asserting their political legitimacy and role in a global political order. Afghanistan was one of the first Asian countries admitted to the United Nations, joining on 19 November 1946 (it was excluded from the 1945 San Francisco founding conference, which decided the shape of the organization, for remaining neutral during the Second World War).<sup>25</sup> Its leaders used this international arena to promote Afghanistan's leadership in the non-Western world. Afghan delegates advocated *bi-tarafī*, 'without sides', in foreign policy, emphasizing Afghanistan's long history of anti-colonialism and balancing act between British and Russian/Soviet manipulation. Participating in the 1955 Bandung Conference and helping found the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, Afghan leaders noted that 'Afghanistan's policy of neutrality far antedates the events which have given rise to the term "non-alignment"'.<sup>26</sup> Afghanistan, as a member of the Arab-Asian bloc described by Cindy Ewing, took an active role in the UN General Assembly, championing the causes of decolonizing countries and taking particular interest in the definition and application of 'self-determination'.

Self-determination was key in the United Nations' formation, drawing on the complicated precedent set by the League of Nations, as highlighted by other papers in this special issue, alongside the 1941 Atlantic Charter, which pledged to 'respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live' and 'see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them'.<sup>27</sup> While Winston Churchill, like Wilson before him, did not mean for this self-determination to apply to European colonial holdings, once enshrined in the UN's charter, the idea took on a life of its own, helped by states like Afghanistan which gave the term its anti-colonial tenor.<sup>28</sup>

Self-determination and decolonization do not always comfortably coincide. The right to self-determination does not equal the right to independence.<sup>29</sup> Decolonization consequently did not

<sup>23</sup>Manley O. Hudson, 'Afghanistan, Ecuador and the Soviet Union in the League of Nations', *The American Journal of International Law* 29, no. 1 (1935): 109–116; *ibid.*, 'Admission of Egypt to Membership in the League of Nations', *The American Journal of International Law* 31, no. 4 (1937): 681–3; Renee Colette Redman, 'The League of Nations and the Right to be Free from Enslavement: The First Human Right to Be Recognized as Customary International Law', *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 70, no. 2 (1994): 759–802.

<sup>24</sup>Faiz Ahmed, *Afghanistan Rising: Islamic Law and Statecraft between the Ottoman and British Empires* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2017); Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 155. Afghanistan even was scheduled to host the Association's third meeting, though it never occurred.

<sup>25</sup>Carlos P. Romulo, with Beth Day Romulo, *Forty Years: A Third World Soldier at the UN* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), 53.

<sup>26</sup>Cited in V.P. Vaidik, 'Afghan Non-Alignment: Changing Faces', *International Studies*, 20 1–2 (1981): 239. See also Elisabeth Leake, 'Afghan Internationalism and the Question of Afghanistan's Political Legitimacy', *Afghanistan* 1, no. 1 (2018): 68–94.

<sup>27</sup>'Atlantic Charter', 14 August 1941, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/atlantic.asp>.

<sup>28</sup>On the links between the Atlantic Charter and the UN, see Douglas Brinkley and David R. Facey-Crowther (eds.), *The Atlantic Charter* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994). On the Atlantic Charter's relationship with self-determination, anti-colonialism, and human rights, see Bonny Ibhawoh, 'Testing the Atlantic Charter: Linking Anticolonialism, Self-determination and Universal Human Rights', *The International Journal of Human Rights* 18, no. 7–8 (2014): 842–60.

<sup>29</sup>Kaiyan Homi Kaikobad, 'Self Determination, Territorial Disputes and International Law: An Analysis of UN and State Practice', *Geopolitics and International Boundaries* 1, no. 1 (1996): 18.

necessarily entail self-determination, nor did self-determination necessarily result in decolonization. Self-determination could provide a rationale for decolonization and political independence, but equally, it could, and did, complicate the end of empire. Self-determination ‘was a form of claim making about the nature and scope of post-colonial rights and sovereignty, an open-ended contest rather than a fixed concept’.<sup>30</sup> UN debates on decolonization made the issue central, changing self-determination from a principle to a right.<sup>31</sup> As General Assembly membership rapidly expanded, newly independent African and Asian countries demanded this. The December 1960 UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples outlined the General Assembly’s defining aspects of decolonization and political independence, demanding ‘an end must be put to colonialism’. The resolution acknowledged, among other issues, ‘respect for the principles of equal rights and self-determination of all peoples’ and ‘the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development’.<sup>32</sup>

But what self-determination actually meant – and whom it was for – remained a point of contention. A key reason for this was that early on, different states and their leaders used the rationale of self-determination in diverse ways. It could be simultaneously, intimately individual and encompassing whole states. The 1960 declaration indicated a hardening of the term’s definition along state lines, but it did not destroy all its ambiguities. One of the countries that continued to question and amplify many of the uncertainties in the relationship between decolonization and self-determination was Afghanistan.

Looking at Afghan engagement with self-determination, much like recent scholarship on India’s 1946 General Assembly resolution on South Africa’s treatment of Indians, highlights how decolonization and anti-colonial activism were debated within the United Nations almost from its inception.<sup>33</sup> Afghan promotion of self-determination at the UN was largely self-serving but also highlighted broader tensions and contradictions faced by states emerging from empire and their international audience. The UN, in contrast to the League, veered away from the issue of minority rights, and delegates avoided questions of potential discrimination to prevent the destabilization of the international states system and insulate state sovereignty from the threat of international intervention over the treatment of minorities. ‘In effect, everyone had come around to the nationalist cause’.<sup>34</sup> But what if one member state laid claim to a minority group in another state – or if two states laid claim to the same minority? These questions arose during the early years of the UN, thanks to decolonization, and meant that the organization’s relationship with minority communities and their international supporters remained complicated. Afghanistan became involved in two such conflicts during the emergence of independent India and Pakistan, which problematized the UN’s relationship with the end of empire.

The decolonization of South Asia, and the ways this process played out in the international community, altered how state leaders thought about, and later reacted to, decolonization. It demonstrated the problems associated with creating more than one independent state out of an existing colony, while the almost immediate outbreak of conflict in Kashmir created questions about self-determination, citizenship, and the nature of international law and state sovereignty.<sup>35</sup> Afghan demands for ethnic Pashtun self-determination coincided and intertwined with the Kashmir conflict, leading to a broader crisis of postcolonial state-creation that played out publicly

<sup>30</sup>Simpson, ‘Self-Determination and Decolonization’, 2.

<sup>31</sup>Massad, ‘Against Self-Determination’, 171–2; Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, ch. 3.

<sup>32</sup>‘Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples’, UN General Assembly, 94th plenary meeting, 14 December 1960.

<sup>33</sup>See most recently, Alanna O’Malley, ‘India, Apartheid and the New World Order at the UN, 1946–1962’, *Journal of World History* 31, no. 1 (2020): 195–223.

<sup>34</sup>Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace*, 143.

<sup>35</sup>On partitioning, see Arie Dubnov and Laura Robson, eds., *Partitions: A Transnational History of Twentieth-Century Territorial Separatism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).



in the General Assembly and Security Council. The question of Kashmir's accession to either India or Pakistan and the accompanying interstate war has become, alongside the Palestine conflict, one of the most long-running instances of UN failure. Kashmiris arguably comprised a minority group, in terms of ethnicity and, in relation to India, religion. The UN's attempts to negotiate and organize a plebiscite to decide Kashmir's future failed, and Kashmiri self-determination was disregarded in favour of a line of control that effectively bifurcated Kashmir between India and Pakistan and led to some semblance of order in the international system, though neither local nor regional agreement.<sup>36</sup>

Afghan representatives at the UN tried to insert themselves into the Kashmir dispute by attempting to represent ethnic Pashtuns from Pakistan accused of waging war in Kashmir. This linked directly to a second conflict that emerged from South Asia's decolonization. Afghan leaders from 1946 focused on the future of Pashtuns living in colonial India. Pashtuns comprise a large, politically powerful ethnic group in Afghanistan but a minority in what became Pakistan. The 1893 Durand Line, which separated colonial India from Afghanistan, had separated them between two political entities. Afghan leaders argued that this border had been imposed by the British and divided a population that was, in fact, one. Afghan leaders used South Asian decolonization and partition to demand Pashtun 'free[dom] to choose their future status'.<sup>37</sup> They advocated the establishment of an autonomous 'Pashtunistan' encompassing people and space carved from northwest Pakistan (whether Pashtunistan would be an independent state or a subsidiary of Afghanistan was never entirely clear).

Until 1978, Afghan foreign policy rested in the hands of a small coterie of elites, most of whom were ethnic Pashtuns and ambitious reformers. Mahmud Tarzi, a leading Afghan modernizer and father-in-law to the king, crafted much of Afghanistan's foreign affairs in the 1920s, while simultaneously calling for Afghans to develop a clearer sense of homeland that embraced Pashto as Afghanistan's national language.<sup>38</sup> Nadir Khan's first foreign minister, Faiz Mohammad Zikriya, was a prominent Pashtun nationalist. Under the Musahiban dynasty, members of the royal family and their Pashtun-nationalist allies were key foreign policy players, while much of the diplomatic service was staffed by Pashtuns from elite-allied ethnic and social groups. The king's cousin, Mohammad Naim, served as deputy foreign minister from the mid-1930s and became foreign minister when his brother, Mohammad Daoud, became prime minister in 1953. The brothers pursued a policy of 'Pashtunization' in Afghanistan's domestic and foreign affairs (ironically yet intentionally disregarding Afghanistan's own ethno-linguistic diversity). Afghanistan's UN representatives reflected this. Abdul Rahman Pazhwak, Afghanistan's permanent representative from 1958 to 1979, was an ethnic Pashtun who had previously served as the director of *Pashtu Tolana* (Pashto Academy), responsible for disseminating Pashto language literature and shaping Afghan national culture.<sup>39</sup> Demands for Pashtun self-determination at the UN

<sup>36</sup>On the Kashmir and the UN, see C. Dasgupta, *War and Diplomacy in Kashmir, 1947–48* (New Delhi: Sage, 2002). In notable contrast to Kashmir, the UN refused to entertain another South Asian succession question, that of Hyderabad. See Kavita Saraswathi Datla, 'Sovereignty and the End of Empire: The Transition to Independence in Colonial Hyderabad', *Ab Imperio* 2018, no. 3 (2018): 63–88.

<sup>37</sup>Mehrunnisa Ali, ed., *Pak-Afghan Discord: A Historical Perspective (Documents 1855–1979)* (Karachi, 1990), 111.

<sup>38</sup>Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 63–72; Senzil Nawid, 'Language Policy in Afghanistan: Linguistic Diversity and National Unity,' in *Language Policy and Language Conflict in Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*, ed. Harold F. Schiffman and Brian Spooner (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 34.

<sup>39</sup>Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*, 112–3, 'Pazhwak, Abdul Rahman', in Ludwig W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012). Information on Afghanistan's foreign policy elites is piecemeal, and sources offer conflicting information and names. This also was a contemporaneous challenge for foreign observers (Harvey H. Smith et al., *Area Handbook for Afghanistan*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Washington: Foreign Area Studies of the American University, 1973 edn.), 220, 231). On domestic Pashtun nationalism, see Thomas Wide, 'Demarcating Pashto: Cross-border Pashto Literature and the Afghan State, 1880–1930', in *Afghanistan in Ink: Literature between Diaspora and Nation*, ed. Nile Green and Nushin Arbabzadah (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 91–112; James Caron, 'Ambiguities of Orality and Literacy, Territory and Border Crossings: Public Activism and Pashto Literature in Afghanistan, 1930–2010', in

thus reflected the goals of a small but powerful Afghan elite who centred Pashtun nationalism in domestic and international Afghan state legitimation.

Pashtunistan almost immediately became the key focus of Afghan activity at the UN. The Afghan government initially attempted to block Pakistan's UN membership in 1947, citing the lack of choice provided to its Pashtun population. Afghanistan's representative, Abdul Hamid Aziz, claimed, 'we cannot recognise the North-West Frontier Province as part of Pakistan so long as the people of the Frontier shall not have been given the opportunity, free from any kind of influence, to determine for themselves whether they wish to be independent or become part of Pakistan.'<sup>40</sup> During the Security Council's discussions of Kashmir in 1948, Aziz demanded 'Afghanistan actively participate in any and all discussions, negotiations, decisions and agreements which may, in any manner whatsoever, affect [the] independent tribesmen'.<sup>41</sup> Afghan representatives continued to pose the same arguments for Pashtun self-determination in bilateral relations with Pakistan (and the US) and in the UN General Assembly. They also drew on the discussions of Kashmir. After the UN promised a plebiscite so Kashmiris could choose whether to join India or Pakistan, Afghan leaders suggested an additional referendum in northwest Pakistan.<sup>42</sup>

The details of the Pashtunistan debate are peripheral to this article.<sup>43</sup> Rather, its significance lies in Afghan framing of self-determination as an ethnonationalist struggle. Afghan representatives advocated self-determination for an ethnic minority, a stance that clashed with neighbouring Pakistan's articulation of itself as a self-determined state for Muslims, as well as Western European expectations on the minority question. Afghan leaders tried to internationalize and embed their perspective. As early as 1950, working alongside Saudi Arabia, Afghan representatives sponsored a resolution directing the UN's Human Rights Commission to 'study ways and means which would ensure the right of peoples and nations to self-determination' and a year later advocated, alongside other countries that had been subject to political and economic imperialism, the belief that 'all peoples have the right to self-determination'.<sup>44</sup>

Afghan rhetoric on the issue of Pashtun nationalism mirrored broader ambiguities in the 1950s regarding the self-determination of nations and peoples. 1950 also witnessed a Soviet-backed amendment to the draft international covenant on human rights acknowledging 'national self-determination's exclusion. However, Cold War schisms narrowed the parameters of the debate. Afghan representatives were the only non-eastern bloc members (alongside Mexico) to vote for the Soviet proposal.<sup>45</sup> Afghan representatives also stubbornly voted for Eritrean independence and self-determination, alongside Soviet allies and states such as Chile, Cuba, Indonesia, Syria, and even their Pakistani nemeses; these efforts were overridden by the (Western-backed) majority. In debates, Ukraine and Byelorussia argued that the right to national self-determination was 'inalienable'. Ukraine's representative compared Eritrea with Libya, which was becoming independent, arguing that both constituted nations, emphasizing common culture, language,

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*Afghanistan in Ink*, 113–40; Faridullah Bezhani, 'Nationalism, not Islam: The "Awaken Youth" Party and Pashtun Nationalism', in *Afghanistan's Islam: From Conversion to the Taliban*, ed. Nile Green (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 163–85.

<sup>40</sup>'Afghanistan's vote against Pakistan', *Times of India*, 3 October 1947.

<sup>41</sup>'Letter from the Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council dated 22 January 1948', S/658, UN digital archive (UNDA).

<sup>42</sup>This demand persisted throughout the 1950s and 1960s. See, for example, US Mission to the UN, 'Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations', 29 October 1952, Declassified Documents Reference System; Indian Embassy, Kabul, 'Report for July 1954', 4 August 1954, 6/R&I/54, National Archives of India; British Embassy, Kabul, to Foreign Office, telegram, 11 April 1961, FO 371/157415, UKNA.

<sup>43</sup>For more on the Pashtunistan debate, see Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion*, ch. 4; Elisabeth Leake, *The Defiant Border: The Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands in the Era of Decolonization, 1936–65* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>44</sup>Cited in Simpson, 'Self-determination and Decolonization', 5.

<sup>45</sup>Report of the Third Committee', 'Draft first international covenant on human rights and measures of implementation', 29 November 1950, UNDA; UNGA, 'Draft first international covenant on human rights and measures of implementation: report of the Third Committee', A/1559 and Corr. 1, 4 December 1950, UNDA.

and outlook.<sup>46</sup> As such, Afghan demands for Pashtun self-determination were not necessarily outlying and had parallels in other debates.

Afghan delegates likewise supported General Assembly debate on Cyprus in 1954, inserting themselves into the conflict between Great Britain, which retained control over Cyprus as a non-self-governing territory, and Greece, which (much like Afghanistan and Pashtuns) demanded that Greek Cypriots be given the choice to pursue independence or join Greece.<sup>47</sup> While Afghan delegates ultimately supported a New Zealand-tabled resolution in December 1954 to pause debate on the Cyprus question, Mohammed Kabir Ludin, Afghan ambassador to the US, former permanent representative to the UN, and ally of Foreign Minister Naim, reiterated ‘the right of the Cypriot people to self-determination’.<sup>48</sup> In internal reports, British officials seethed about ‘the Pashtunistan neurosis that made the Afghans vote as they did in favour of the Cyprus item’, noting ‘the slogan of “self-determination”’ was the ‘common factor’.<sup>49</sup>

Afghanistan’s interpretation of self-determination was significant on both national and global scales. Locally, it showed how Afghanistan’s own experience of empire, its circumscribed sovereignty, shaped its approach to the international community. The demand for Pashtunistan pushed back against the colonial precedents that had created Afghanistan’s borders and sheared off ethnic Pashtuns who were, leaders argued, ‘Afghan’. Broadly, it revealed questions about the meaning and location of the nation at a time when the nation state was increasingly enshrined in international politics, particularly at the UN. Equating Pashtun ethnicity and Afghan nationalism blurred the lines between nation and state and went against the increasingly prevailing rationale that located sovereignty within a specific territorial space.<sup>50</sup> Instead, Afghan rhetoric rooted political power in people, no matter their location, and spoke to another key tension of decolonization: the legitimacy of colonial-era border agreements and the hardening of imperial frontiers into nation-state perimeters.<sup>51</sup> By promoting Pashtunistan abroad, Afghan leaders questioned colonially imposed borders and the issue of imperial precedent.

Afghan demands for revisions to its border with Pakistan and Pashtun self-determination thus fit alongside the Kashmir conflict and the Palestine question in problematizing, at an early stage, the United Nations’ potential to arbitrate border disputes and reconcile the relationship between

<sup>46</sup>Report of the Ad Hoc Political Committee, ‘Former Italian colonies (d) Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea, (e) Report of the interim committee of the general assembly on the report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea’, A/1561, 29 November 1950, UNDA; UN General Assembly, Fifth Session, 2 December 1950, 316<sup>th</sup> plenary meeting, UNDA.

<sup>47</sup>See Edward Johnson, ‘Britain and the Cyprus Problem at the United Nations, 1954–58’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 28, no. 3 (2000): 113–30; Suha Bolukbasi, ‘The Cyprus Dispute and the United Nations: Peaceful Non-Settlement between 1954 and 1996’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30, no. 3 (1998): 411–34.

<sup>48</sup>UN General Assembly, Ninth Session, First Committee, 752<sup>nd</sup> Meeting, 15 December 1954, Agenda Item 62, UNDA.

<sup>49</sup>Daniel Lascelles, ‘Afghanistan: Annual Review for 1954’, in *Further Correspondence Respecting Afghanistan, Part 9, January to December 1955*, FO 402/31, no. 1, UKNA.

<sup>50</sup>On the tensions between ‘nationhood’ versus ‘statehood’, see, for example, J. Samuel Barkin and Bruce Cronin, ‘The State in the Nation: Changing Norms and the Rules of Sovereignty in International Relations’, *International Organization* 448, no. 1 (1994): 107–30; Bérénice Guyot-Réchar, ‘Nation-building or State-making? India’s North-East Frontier and the Ambiguities of Nehruvian Developmentalism, 1950–1959’, *Contemporary South Asia* 21, no. 1 (2013): 22–37; Jeffrey Herbst, Terence McNamee, and Greg Mills, eds., *On the Fault Line: Managing Tensions and Divisions within Societies* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2012); Alfred Stepan, Juan J. Linz, and Yogendra Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations: India and Other Multinational Democracies* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

<sup>51</sup>On the relationship between decolonization, borders, and sovereignty, see Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, ‘From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History’, *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 814–41; Elisabeth Leake and Daniel Haines, ‘Lines of (In)Convenience: Sovereignty and Border-Making in Postcolonial South Asia, 1947–1965’, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 4 (2017): 963–85; Julie MacArthur, ‘Decolonizing Sovereignty: States of Exception along the Kenya-Somali Frontier’, *The American Historical Review* 124, no. 1, (2019): 108–43.

territory and self-determination in the postcolonial world.<sup>52</sup> In later years, the UN developed a range of strategies for dealing (not always successfully) with territorial disputes that accompanied decolonization. In most cases, the UN General Assembly accepted the retention of colonial-era borders, assuming the logic that each *colony* had the right to independence and citing the precedent of imperial legal agreements. UN officials frequently turned over border disputes to the International Court of Justice, which found peaceful resolutions to disagreements between Burkina Faso and Mali, Cambodia and Thailand, Chad and Libya, among others, using tenets of international law.<sup>53</sup> In other situations, UN workers administered or oversaw plebiscites to allow populations in disputed territories, such as Northern Cameroons, West Irian, and Djibouti, to decide their future. These referendums did not necessarily represent popular feeling, as shown in the case of West Irian, but they served as a mechanism for departing imperial powers to leave behind territorially intact new states.<sup>54</sup> Afghanistan's claims, in contrast, stand out because the UN did not act on them. A Pashtun plebiscite, much like the Kashmir referendum or the partition of Palestine, did not occur.

Global circumstances worked against Afghan demands. Regionally, Afghanistan's call for representation for the same Pashtuns whom India accused of undertaking Pakistan's war in Kashmir threatened to complicate the already messy negotiations around a Kashmir plebiscite.<sup>55</sup> Internationally, Afghan demands for Pashtun self-determination coincided with a huge upsurge in UN activities, as well as the spreading Cold War. As the former Czechoslovakian representative on the UN Commission for India and Pakistan, Josef Korbel, observed in 1949, the General Assembly, since 1946, had established working groups dealing with crises in Palestine, the Balkans, and Korea, while the Security Council also wrestled with the Greek Civil War, Indonesia's war of independence, the plan to partition Palestine, and the Kashmir crisis.<sup>56</sup> The scope of Afghan demands likely paled in comparison to these other crises, and both British and Pakistani officials cited Afghan irredentism as a threat to South Asian security, noting the potential for the Kashmir and Pashtun issues to intersect, throwing the region into turmoil and thereby providing the opportunity for Soviet machinations.<sup>57</sup> Thus, Afghanistan largely failed in its representations to the UN, bypassed by more pressing international concerns.

In their demands for Pashtun self-determination, Afghan leaders also were often out of sync with the other Afro-Asian states emerging from empire which focused on state-building. Instead, Afghan state rhetoric paralleled that of non-state actors like the West Irians, Namibians, or Nagas, whose demands for independence came up against the claims of postcolonial states and who, like Afghanistan, did not fit comfortably in the UN's increasingly state-centric forum.<sup>58</sup> Afghanistan's representatives sought to keep the UN accountable to questions of minority rights and independence and reinforced language that multiplied the meanings of self-determination as a term that could be applied in different ways by different actors, depending on the context. As late as 1968, Afghanistan's representative, Abdul Rahman Pazhwak, argued in the General Assembly that UN

<sup>52</sup>On Palestine, self-determination, and the United Nations, see Michael J. Cohen, *Palestine and the Great Powers, 1945–1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), especially chs. 9, 11, 13; John Quigley, 'Palestine's Declaration of Independence: Self-Determination and the Right of the Palestinians to Statehood', *Boston University International Law Journal* 7, no. 1 (1989): 1–34.

<sup>53</sup>Victor Prescott, 'Contributions of the United Nations to Solving Boundary and Territorial Dispute, 1945–1995', *Political Geography* 15, no. 3/4 (1996): 287–318.

<sup>54</sup>Emma Kluge, 'West Papua and the International History of Decolonization, 1961–69', *The International History Review* 42, no. 6 (2019): 1155–72; also Kaikobad, 'Self Determination, Territorial Disputes and International Law'.

<sup>55</sup>Pakistani leaders also cited a referendum held in British India in July 1947 giving local Pashtuns the choice between joining Pakistan or India as indicating that Pashtuns had 'chosen' Pakistan (independence or joining Afghanistan were not proffered).

<sup>56</sup>Joseph Korbel, 'The Kashmir Dispute and the United Nations', *International Organization* 3, no. 2 (1949): 278–87.

<sup>57</sup>J.W. Nicholls, British Embassy, Moscow, to M.E. Dening, Foreign Office, 17 February 1950, FO 371/84252, UKNA; UN Security Council Official Records no. 6, 464<sup>th</sup> meeting, 8 February 1950, UNDA.

<sup>58</sup>Kluge, 'West Papua'; Walker, 'Decolonization in the 1960s'.

member states did not truly support decolonization if they were not ‘concerned with the legitimate rights of the people who do not have a voice of their own to put their case before this Assembly’. The UN, in Afghan perspective, remained responsible for ‘dependent peoples’, not just states.<sup>59</sup>

While Afghanistan might not have found major backing for its position on Pashtunistan, Afghan representatives nevertheless were positioned to inform UN debates. Pazhwak served as a member (1961–3) and chair (1963) of the UN Commission on Human Rights, head of the UN’s 1963 fact-finding mission to Vietnam, and president of the General Assembly in 1966. As part of a six-member Committee on Periodic Reports on Human Rights, Pazhwak scrutinized country human rights reports (alongside representatives from Austria, France, India, Panama, and Poland). In debating how states should report on the realization of self-determination and independence for non-self-governing and trust territories, one committee member argued ‘there were territories which were neither “non-Self-Governing” nor “Trust” Territories but which had not yet attained independence’ and requested that reports consider such regions as well. The committee compromised by deciding that ‘all dependent territories’ should be addressed in state reports; ‘some representatives observed that the term did not imply that such territories should remain dependent and added that the Charter was concerned with all dependent territories, that is to say any territories under alien subjugation against the will of the people’.<sup>60</sup> While the records do not make clear who pushed this position, it clearly matched earlier Afghan arguments, and its passage signalled that Pazhwak ensured the Afghan state’s perspective fed at least limitedly into UN administrative processes for reflecting on rights and self-determination.

By associating self-determination with peoples and nations – not states – Afghan pronouncements in the UN revealed it as an arena for communities whom decolonization disappointed while highlighting the ambiguities of postcoloniality. They brought attention to communities that did not receive their hoped-for or anticipated independence, emphasizing the UN’s problematic as the ‘simultaneous arbiter of the universal and defender of the particularism of the nation-state’.<sup>61</sup> Afghan resolutions worked against the developing trend in the UN that ‘made the state its constituent piece and the individual (or human), rather than a people (or community), its rights-bearing subject’.<sup>62</sup> Much like Naga and Namibian non-state actors sought intermediaries to support and publicize their cases at the UN, Afghan representatives lobbied US officials to raise the Pashtun question in the UN and continued to bring up ‘the aspirations and wishes’ and ‘legitimate and human rights’ of ‘our Pashtun brothers’ in General Assembly debates.<sup>63</sup> Because of their frustrations with the decolonization process in South Asia, Afghan leaders chose to use the UN to publicize the aspirations of an otherwise marginalized ethnic group. In the context of international relations that prioritized the nation state as the main arbiter of politics, Afghan demands for self-determination for people, not just states, could have only limited impact. Nevertheless, they were significant for emphasizing a lingering sense of discord that pervaded decolonization processes, as well as ongoing disagreement regarding nationhood and statehood in the UN.

### Rethinking self-determination during the Soviet invasion

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 returned Afghanistan to the centre of international debates on self-determination and political independence. The Afghan Marxists who

<sup>59</sup>UN General Assembly, 23<sup>rd</sup> session, 1692<sup>nd</sup> plenary meeting, 11 October 1968, UNDA.

<sup>60</sup>Report of the Committee on Periodic Reports on Human Rights’, UN Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, 18<sup>th</sup> session, 23 March 1962, UNDA.

<sup>61</sup>Amrith and Sluga, ‘New Histories of the United Nations’, 260.

<sup>62</sup>Walker, ‘Decolonization in the 1960s’, 236.

<sup>63</sup>Ambassador in Afghanistan to Secretary of State, 8 November 1951, in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, vol. 6, part 2, eds. Paul Claussen et al. (US Government Printing Office, 1977), Document 363; UN General Assembly, Thirtieth Session, 2539<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting, 24 September 1975, UNDA.



came to power in a military coup in April 1978 framed the entry of Soviet troops as safeguarding Afghan self-determination. In contrast, Afghan resistance fighters and their supporters across the world argued the intervention undermined Afghan independence. UN General Assembly debates regarding the Soviet troop presence highlighted the still-contested nature of self-determination and the ways that the global Cold War raised additional questions about the term, its meaning, and its application.

The Cold War created a fundamental paradox for empire and decolonization. Both Soviet and American leaders actively manipulated newly independent, as well as extant, states, using the promise of economic aid and the threat of covert or military intervention to mould friendly regimes, often irrespective of those regimes' internal politics. This not only introduced a 'new imperialism' that relied on unequal power relations between the US and USSR and their respective allies but also reinforced the nation state as the key configuration of political power. The conflict required the creation of alliance systems built on interstate relations, leaving little room for nonstate actors.<sup>64</sup> As part of this new imperialism, Soviet and American officials took advantage of interstate and intrastate conflicts, thus continuing to blur the lines of self-determination. Nikita Khrushchev's support for the Afghan stance on Pashtunistan from 1955 gave significant backing to Afghan emphasis on 'dependent peoples', rather than states, while serving as a rebuke to Pakistan for entering a military alliance with the United States.<sup>65</sup> Yet in 1960, the Soviet premier also proposed a resolution to the UN General Assembly that demanded the end of colonialism and the creation of new 'national states'.<sup>66</sup> This resolution, while withdrawn, informed the Afro-Asian-supported 1960 Declaration on the Granting of Independence.<sup>67</sup> It also reveals how the Soviet Union, as a great power, could simultaneously advocate for independent postcolonial states and sub-state groups like ethnic Pashtuns, contributing to definitional ambiguities relating to decolonization for Cold War aims.

On 28 April 1978, a bloody coup toppled the Afghan government and replaced it with the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). While the coup took place at a time when the emergence of newly independent nation states had slowed, Afghanistan's new leaders nevertheless positioned themselves as decolonizing vanguards, undertaking the same role as past anti-colonial leaders. Leaders of the PDPA likened the 'Saur Revolution' to an independence struggle. They returned to the rhetoric of self-determination to justify their coup. In one of his first communications with Kurt Waldheim, UN General-Secretary, Nur Mohammad Taraki, first leader of the PDPA, pledged to 'combat against . . . old and neo-colonialism' and 'confirm[ed] the right of self-determination of nations and peoples based on their free will and devoid of foreign intervention'.<sup>68</sup> In another speech circulated to international audiences, he likened the regime overturned by the PDPA to colonial tyrants, calling it a 'regime of suffocation and terror' and arguing the coup had 'ended the black talisman of [a] terroristic and fascist

<sup>64</sup>Duara, 'Cold War and the Imperialism of Nation-States', 88–9; *ibid.*, 'The Cold War as a historical period: An interpretive essay', *Journal of Global History*, 6 (2011): 457–80. Not only that, but both the United States and Soviet Unions were empires in their own right, given the numerous territories they controlled. See Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2019); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>65</sup>Nikolai A. Bulganin and Nikita S. Khrushchev, *Visit of Friendship to India, Burma and Afghanistan: Speeches and Official Documents* (Moscow, 1956), 221.

<sup>66</sup>*Khrushchev in New York: A Documentary Record of Nikita S. Khrushchev's Trip to New York, September 19th to October 13th 1960* (New York: Crosscurrents Press, 1960), 94.

<sup>67</sup>Alessandro Iandolo, 'Beyond the Shoe: Rethinking Khrushchev at the Fifteenth Session of the United Nations Assembly', *Diplomatic History* 41, no. 1 (2017): 128–54.

<sup>68</sup>Noor Mohammad Taraki to Kurt Waldheim (Unofficial Translation), June 1978, S-0904-72–10, United Nations Archives and Records Management Services (UN ARMS).

regime'. He promised, instead, the 'democratisation of social life' and a 'progressive national, cultural system'.<sup>69</sup>

The PDPA tried to frame its political legitimacy – particularly to outside observers – in terms of anti-imperialism and decolonization, employing the ideas of liberation, political freedom, and overcoming feudalism. Afghan representatives assured the UN, 'The Afghan people having accomplished in April 1978 the National Democratic Revolution, made a final choice and stepped on the path of the creation in the country of a new society based on the principles of equality and justice, a society excluding exploitation of many by man'.<sup>70</sup> Their adherence to Lenin's vision of self-determination provided a way to justify vast internal reform, as well as close ties with the Soviet Union. The PDPA drew direct correlations between the Bolshevik and Saur revolutions as the people's choice, while signing a new treaty later used to justify the Soviet invasion.<sup>71</sup> But at this point, Afghanistan was not a former colony, nor were the preceding Afghan regimes really agents of empire. Soviet-occupied Afghanistan posed an uncomfortable paradox, one debated by countries across the globe within the realm of the UN: who defined Afghan self-determination, and how? A similar discussion had taken place during the Congo crisis, where decolonization's political processes and Congolese self-determination had clashed with Soviet-American competition for the Third World.<sup>72</sup> The January 1980 sixth emergency session of the General Assembly returned to these decades-old debates about the nature of political independence.

Shah Mohammad Dost, Afghanistan's foreign minister, drew immediate parallels between events in Afghanistan and other decolonizing states. He argued, 'The new stage of the Saur revolution . . . is part of the prevailing trend in the world towards the emancipation of the oppressed peoples from imperialist domination and exploitation'. He pointed to Vietnam, Iran, Yemen, Angola, Ethiopia, Cuba, and Nicaragua as examples of other countries that had undergone similar processes of decolonization, arguing the PDPA was equally anti-colonial and invested in the self-determination of the Afghan people. He also claimed that the Soviet provision of armed support was, in fact, to shield Afghanistan from western imperialism – attempts by the United States and its allies to shape the direction of the Afghan state by supporting Afghan resistance groups.<sup>73</sup>

Afghanistan's Eastern bloc allies supported this line of argument. The Soviet permanent representative attempted to recycle rationales presented during earlier Soviet interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, explaining, 'It is quite clear that the maintenance and development of co-operation between Afghanistan and the USSR falls exclusively within the field of their bilateral relations'.<sup>74</sup> Henryk Jaroszek, representing Poland, pledged his country's 'solidarity with Afghanistan in its persistent struggle in the defence of its political independence and territorial integrity . . . and progressive social transformation'. He went on to accuse the UN of serving as 'a smoke-screen to cover the aggressive designs of the most reactionary circles of imperialism',

<sup>69</sup>Text of statement of Noor Mohammad Taraki, Chairman of the Revolutionary Council and Prime Minister, broadcasted over Radio Afghanistan on May 10th, 1978, ACKU Digital Collection, <http://www.afghandata.org:8080/xmlui/handle/azu/17796>.

<sup>70</sup>M. Farid Zarif to Kurt Waldheim, Statement of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, 15 May 1980, S-0442-0330-7, UN ARMS.

<sup>71</sup>Amin speech marks Great October Revolution anniversary', Kabul, 1 December 1978, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, MEA-78-232.

<sup>72</sup>See O'Malley, *Diplomacy of Decolonization*; Alessandro Iandolo, 'Imbalance of Power: The Soviet Union and the Congo Crisis, 1960–1961', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16, no. 2 (2014): 32–55.

<sup>73</sup>First plenary meeting, 3:45 pm, 10 January 1980, UN General Assembly Sixth Emergency Special Session Official Records.

<sup>74</sup>On Hungary and Czechoslovakia, see Andras Nagy, 'Shattered Hopes amid Violent Repression: The Hungarian Revolution and the United Nations (Part 1)', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 4 (2017): 42–73; Gunter Bischof, 'United States Responses to the Soviet Suppression of Rebellions in the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 22, no. 1 (2011): 61–80.

praising ‘the friendship, assistance and co-operation of the Soviet Union and other States of the socialist community’.<sup>75</sup>

In contrast, many recently independent states rejected great power intervention, as did the Soviets’ Cold War opponent, the United States. Critics pointed particularly to one of the key 1960 resolutions regarding decolonization: ‘Any attempt aimed at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and the territorial integrity of a country is incompatible with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations’.<sup>76</sup> Armed intervention flew in the face of national independence. Senegal’s representative bluntly stated, ‘such intervention constitutes a direct threat to the independence and sovereignty of all small countries, and in particular those in an area which a great Power hopes to integrate into its sphere of influence’. Amoakon-Edjampan Thiemele from the Ivory Coast framed the conflict in terms of residual empire: ‘While most of us, for decades, had our very physical, cultural and social existence flouted, some of the founders of the United Nations have never known foreign subjugation, the denial of their very being or the situation of the dominated with no other right than that of submission . . . The issue before us today, in its brutality, seems to us to be shaking the foundations of our present-day civilization’. Thiemele linked the Afghan experience with that of colonialism, but in this case, Afghanistan had been re-colonized.<sup>77</sup> The General Assembly consequently passed a resolution that, among other demands, ‘Appeal[ed] to all States to respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence and nonaligned character of Afghanistan’ and called for a troop withdrawal ‘to enable [Afghanistan’s] people to determine their own form of government and choose their economic, political and social systems free from outside intervention, subversion, coercion or constraint of any kind whatsoever’.<sup>78</sup>

The UN’s emergency special session brought together a host of states with very different understandings of independence, revealing ongoing tensions in the ways that global actors wanted international governance to account for decolonizing (or colonizing) processes. This was clear from the universalist rhetoric used: the intervention in Afghanistan threatened the independence of *all* small, sovereign states or, alternatively, was a sign of Soviet support for such states. For some observers, Afghanistan was undergoing a delayed process of self-determination, as it finally lost its ruling dynasty and gained an ostensibly representative government. For others, Afghanistan was, in fact, being colonized by Soviet forces using a puppet regime. Both sides agreed on the principle of Afghan self-determination and the necessity of an Afghan state in the international system, but they disputed whether the PDPA represented the will of the Afghan people or whether an Afghan state could exist with(out) Soviet support.

The Afghan crisis reinvigorated global debates about the meanings of independence and imperialism. This fit into a renewed international focus on empire and authoritarianism, driven in part by Ronald Reagan’s descriptions of the Soviet Union as an ‘evil empire’, as well as corresponding Soviet rhetoric decrying American imperialism and the rise of latent nationalism across many eastern European states.<sup>79</sup> Discussions of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan also revealed fractures within the Non-Aligned Movement, as Yugoslavia demanded a resolution on ‘non-interference in

<sup>75</sup>First plenary meeting, 10 January 1980, UN General Assembly Sixth Emergency Special Session Official Records, UNDA; Second plenary meeting, 11 January 1980, UN General Assembly Sixth Emergency Special Session Official Records, UNDA.

<sup>76</sup>Declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples’, UN General Assembly, 94th plenary meeting, 14 December 1960, UNDA.

<sup>77</sup>First plenary meeting; Second plenary meeting; Third plenary meeting, 11 January 1980, UN General Assembly Sixth Emergency Special Session Official Records, UNDA; Fourth plenary meeting, 12 January 1980, UN General Assembly Sixth Emergency Special Session Official Records, UNDA; Fifth plenary meeting, 12 January 1980, UN General Assembly Sixth Emergency Special Session Official Records, UNDA.

<sup>78</sup>ES-6/2, ‘The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security’, UN General Assembly Sixth Emergency Resolutions, UNDA.

<sup>79</sup>James Mark, Bogdan C. Iacob, Tobias Rupperecht, Ljubic Spaskovska, 1989: *A Global History of Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), ch. 4, especially 180–6.

internal affairs'; Cuba stubbornly supported the Soviet Union; India, which hosted the Foreign Ministers conference in early 1981, equivocated; Pakistan, with the backing of the Organization of Islamic Conference, demanded an immediate troop withdrawal; Iran suggested Afghanistan's expulsion from the movement; and Afghan leaders denounced NAM interference. Although a final resolution papered over these cracks, calling for a political settlement 'on the basis of the withdrawal of foreign troops' and reaffirming the 'territorial integrity and non-aligned status of Afghanistan and strict observance of the principles of non-intervention and non-interference', discussions showed that members could not fully agree on how to achieve this – or who determined whether Afghanistan's territorial integrity and non-alignment were intact.<sup>80</sup>

Ironically, ambiguities about who determined self-determination (and how), as lobbied by earlier Afghan elites, left space for the PDPA's opponents to question Afghanistan's own political future and whether sovereignty lay with the Afghan state or its citizens. While one group of Afghans – the PDPA – advocated national self-determination based on a territorially rooted state, another group of Afghans – the resistance groups – framed self-determination in terms of an Afghan people, irrespective of their location. Armed resistance had begun within months of the April 1978 coup, as numerous groups across the country resisted the PDPA's political, social, and economic reforms. By December 1979, the country was effectively in a state of civil war, and the Soviet invasion only worsened matters. Though the PDPA controlled very little of the country, nevertheless its officials asserted that they represented the will of the people through a fully functioning regime. In a document circulated to the General Assembly, the Afghan foreign minister claimed, a year after the invasion, 'The positive changes which have been brought about after the new phase of the Saur revolution are now increasingly perceived and supported by the vast masses of the toilers of the country and this is indicative of the growing consolidation of the peoples' power'.<sup>81</sup>

But across the border in Pakistan and Iran, and in Afghan regions beyond PDPA control, a host of other groups asserted their legitimacy. Seven key parties emerged in exile in Peshawar, which became responsible for organizing much of the armed resistance against the PDPA and were described by sympathetic states as the true representatives of the Afghan nation. Resistance leaders spoke to the Organization of Islamic Conference, where they declared the PDPA 'neither reflects the will and aspiration of the nation nor does it enjoy the support of even one per cent of the population'.<sup>82</sup> They turned to international audiences and institutions as arbiters of their claims, lobbying the UNHCR on behalf of Afghan refugees, meeting with President Reagan, and writing directly to the UN's Secretary-General to advocate their representation in any negotiations regarding Afghanistan's future.

Afghan resistance groups perpetuated earlier Afghan definitional ambiguities about self-determination, arguing that they represented Afghan interests and aspirations, despite their positions in exile. This also established a rationale for international support for these groups (in American parlance, 'freedom fighters').<sup>83</sup> They claimed to have the Afghan 'peoples and nation' at heart. The PDPA could do little to silence them, not only due to the resistance's base beyond Afghanistan's borders but also given earlier generations' vocal support for a territorially ambiguous Pashtun nation, which questioned Afghanistan's own borders and blurred its foreign and domestic policies. If the Afghan government could support a sub-state autonomy movement, what stopped other states from recognizing non-government actors as representing Afghan interests?

<sup>80</sup>Cited in M.S. Rajan, 'The Non-Aligned Movement: The New Delhi Conference and After', *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1982): 63–4; 'Soviet briefing on the need to counter-balance Yugoslav endeavors concerning the Afghan question in the non-aligned countries', 1980, Cold War International History Project, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112499>; Yasmin Qureshi, 'Non-Aligned Foreign Ministers' Conference: Delhi 1981', *Pakistan Horizon* 34, no. 2 (1981): 78–101.

<sup>81</sup>M. Farid Zarif to Kurt Waldheim, 23 January 1981, S-0904-1-8, UN ARMS.

<sup>82</sup>'Statement of Afghanistan Islamic Resistance Movement', undated, S-0904-1-5, UN ARMS.

<sup>83</sup>Howell Raines, 'Reagan hinting at arms for Afghan rebels', *New York Times*, 10 March 1981, A3.

The PDPA tried to redefine Afghanistan in terms of a territorial space, rather than an Afghan people who could transcend the state's borders.<sup>84</sup> This spoke to the UN's embrace of the nation state in international politics, but it lacked power because of the broader debates taking place about Cold War imperialism. The PDPA's opponents argued that Afghanistan was no longer a state but rather a site of intervention and as such, the UN needed to ascertain what Afghans really wanted for themselves. In seeking UN-led discussions for a negotiated Soviet withdrawal, Pakistan's foreign minister emphasized the General Assembly's responsibility for 'upholding the right of peoples to determine their own political, economic and social systems free from outside intervention or coercion'. He demanded, echoing earlier Afghan rhetoric on Pashtuns and the Cyprus question, 'the right of the Afghan people to determine their own form of government'. Zia ul-Haq's government thus refused to recognize the PDPA, while backing the exiled Khmer Rouge in retaining Cambodia's seat at the UN, citing the presence of foreign troops as the deciding factor.<sup>85</sup> In the Afghan (and Cambodian) case, Pakistani officials claimed that groups located outside of the territorial state represented the Afghan nation – and should be allowed to determine the country's future. Pakistan's position thus echoed the earlier ambiguities argued by Afghan leaders where national self-determination did not necessarily correlate with political boundaries, reinforcing the UN as an arena for debate, not just consensus.

The conflict in Afghanistan demonstrated that self-determination still lacked a singular meaning, even in the confirmed international states system, and the question remained who truly represented both nation and state. Even the UN's leaders wavered on this question in practice. While the Secretary General acknowledged the legitimacy of the PDPA – in line with the primacy placed on states in international politics – he admitted in private talks that he also used the UNHCR to engage with the non-state Afghan resistance. As Javier Perez de Cuellar told Iran's foreign minister, 'the Secretary-General could not deal directly with the guerrillas but, through the refugees with whom consultations would be held, the UN would ascertain the views of the Mujahideen'.<sup>86</sup> Even as the UN remained the arena in which Afghan statehood was asserted and debated, its leaders used auxiliary organizations to gauge what Afghans wanted. While recognizing an Afghan state under the PDPA, UN officials acknowledged that it did not represent all, or even most, Afghans.

Unlike the earlier cases of Soviet intervention into Hungary and Czechoslovakia, which had met with indignation but no real consequences at the United Nations, the invasion of Afghanistan created an international furore. Soviet representatives, as expected, vetoed a Security Council motion demanding the immediate withdrawal of troops. However, the strength of feeling in the General Assembly, compounded by a US administration claiming the invasion was part of a wider Soviet strategy to reach the Persian Gulf, prevented the dispute from dwindling into impasse. Instead, the Secretary General appointed a special representative to negotiate an end to the conflict, working with PDPA, Pakistani, Soviet, and American representatives to create the circumstances through which Soviet troops would leave the country and a new, unified, clearly independent Afghan regime could emerge. In the end, even a decade of talks had little bearing. While the special representative, Diego Cordovez, managed to negotiate a Soviet withdrawal, the

<sup>84</sup>This could be seen both in PDPA refusal to recognize a refugee crisis and in its numerous notes to the UN protesting Pakistani transgressions of the Afghan-Pakistan border. See, for example, Note on the Meeting with the President of the Revolutionary Council of Afghanistan, 16 April 1981, S-1067-1-3, UN ARMS; Farid Zarif to Kurt Waldheim, 12 November 1981, S-904-1-4, UN ARMS; Notes on the Secretary-General's Meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, 23 November 1983, Folder 88, Box 8, Javier Perez de Cuellar Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University.

<sup>85</sup>Statement by His Excellency Mr. Agha Shahi, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, on Agenda Item 116: The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security in the Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on 17 November 1980, S-0904-1-5, UN ARMS.

<sup>86</sup>Record Note on Meeting of the Secretary-General and Mr. Palme with the Foreign Minister of Iran', 30 September 1983, Folder 63, Box 5, Perez de Cuellar Papers.



UN left Afghans, themselves, to decide their political future. Cordovez encouraged PDPA and resistance members to work together to create a peaceful Afghanistan, but he made no recommendations how two completely different visions of Afghan nation statehood could be reconciled.<sup>87</sup> In this instance, Afghanistan underwent a type of secondary decolonization, as the Soviet occupiers withdrew. But the end of Soviet control only led to further questions about Afghan self-determination and the nature of a future Afghan nation state.

## Conclusion

In reflecting on the global history of decolonization, a history that ultimately culminated in an international system of states, Afghanistan's demands for self-determination for minority groups that crossed state boundaries went against developing norms. Afghan leaders questioned the major trends of decolonization and posed political alternatives that clashed with an increasingly universal vision of decolonization where postcolonial borders largely matched their colonial predecessors. Yet this singular history has much to contribute to our understanding of the end of empire, the United Nations, and the world today. Afghan leaders' embrace of the language of self-determination, even as they asserted a definition that conflicted with prevailing conceptions, reveals the significance of this concept in international politics and the ways that it became part of the global lexicon of decolonization and political independence. In this context, the United Nations was fundamentally important, providing arenas for such terms to be debated and creating spaces where a country like Afghanistan, with ostensibly marginal influence on international politics, still had the opportunity to assert alternative definitions that complicated not only Afghanistan's place within the international community but also broader discourse around empire and decolonization. Afghanistan's arguments about self-determination, while linked to a specific (Pashtun) community, became part of a global conversation because they took place at the UN and needed to be couched in universalist terms. Early Afghan leaders effectively tried to use their membership in the UN to internationalize what was otherwise a small, regional dispute tied specifically to the decolonization of South Asia.

The long-term significance of Afghan attempts to fight the territorial statism of self-determination and international politics at the UN was to create ambiguities around Afghanistan's own nation statehood. Debates about the meaning of decolonization and self-determination left Afghanistan in the 1980s in a precarious position. While PDPA leaders could claim legitimacy by pointing to precedents established by the General Assembly – the right to territorial integrity and choice of political system, the need to create political stability and support peoples' well-being – their enemies could point to the same resolutions regarding decolonization and political independence to argue the opposite – that the PDPA was a product of Soviet expansionism, it did not represent the will of the people, it was a mere puppet regime. The rhetoric used, the debates about state sovereignty and self-determination, had lineages in earlier discussions about decolonization, but were further complicated by the Cold War. This global conflict created the question of whether Afghanistan had become a site of imperial intervention or remained an independent state in its own right. Afghanistan's independence and the very nature of its statehood came under fire due to Cold War imperialism as well as the uncertainties of Afghan self-determination.

Against this backdrop, and the fact that civil war in Afghanistan persisted beyond the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, it is perhaps unsurprising that Afghanistan in the twenty-first century became the site of a global conflict that involved actors from across the world, as well as new debates on

<sup>87</sup>Statement Made by Under-Secretary-General Diego Cordovez at the Conclusion of the Negotiations on the Situation Relating to Afghanistan', 8 April 1988, S-1024-2-3, UN ARMS. For more on the UN negotiations, see Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Afghan self-determination. Following the 9/11 attacks, the Security Council passed resolutions pledging ‘strong support for the efforts of the Afghan people to establish a new and transitional administration’ that would be ‘broad-based, multi-ethnic and fully representative of all the Afghan people’. The Secretary General emphasized, ‘Any future arrangements, then, must reflect the will, needs and interests of the Afghan people’, even while embracing the “central” role of the United Nations in assisting the Afghan people in developing a political alternative to the Taliban regime.<sup>88</sup> The UN and its member states agreed to actively ensure Afghan self-determination through intervention. Rather than merely a space for debating self-determination and foreign intervention, the UN, in its engagement with Afghanistan in the twenty-first century, assumed a leading role in establishing a certain type of Afghan self-determination, one defined, agreed upon, and often implemented by foreign actors.

One thing that has remained unsettled is who self-determination is for – the state, its people, or, alternatively, the international community. In the 1980s, the PDPA sought to capitalize on the UN’s support for state primacy, but earlier discussions in the General Assembly, propelled in part by Afghan leaders, left a continued space for political minorities and non-state actors, like the Afghan resistance parties, to assert their legitimacy and claims to political power. In the twenty-first century, questions arose due to the UN’s pledges to support Afghan self-determination and independence. Internationally led state-building in Afghanistan tried to create mechanisms to support a legitimate, representative government but also set unachievable targets and did not fully account for local reactions and non-state actors.<sup>89</sup> Afghans needed the opportunity to invest in and shape foreign-led state building for it to have any sticking power or be truly representative. The UN’s relationship with statehood, nationhood, and self-determination thus remains fraught. For Afghanistan in the twenty-first century, the tension has become the extent to which international powers have defined Afghan statehood versus the extent to which Afghans have had the opportunity to determine their own future. While the issue of self-determination and its relationship to statehood has outlasted the century of widespread decolonization, discussions today nevertheless remain rooted in the language, practices, and uncertainties that emerged in the UN as a consequence of the ends of empires in the twentieth century.

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<sup>88</sup> ‘Afghanistan, One of UN’s Greatest Challenges, at “Most Urgent Stage”, Says Secretary-General, At Day-Long Security Council Meeting’, 13 November 2001, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2001/SC7210.doc.htm>; UN Security Council Resolution 1378, 14 November 2001, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1378\(2001\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1378(2001)).

<sup>89</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, ‘Peace Building and State-building in Afghanistan: Constructing Sovereignty for Whose Security?’, *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2006): 175–85.