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Pawns at Play: Refugees and the Game of Foreign Policy

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Introduction

For forty years, Pakistan has consistently been among the world's largest refugee receiving nations. By accepting millions of Afghans in the 1980s, Pakistan adopted a relatively open-door refugee policy. However, since the 1990s, Islamabad has tightened its visa restrictions, closed refugee camps, and aggressively pursued repatriation. What explains such a drastic shift in Pakistan's refugee policy? Most researchers focus on internal socio-economic factors when explaining this shift, but this project seeks to consider the impact of foreign policy.

Observation

Beginning with India's recognition of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) the order of events on our timeline reflects a noticeable linkage between India's pursuit of encirclement (orange) and Pakistan's pursuit of strategic depth (green.) It illustrates how the Pakistan-India rivalry not only lies at the heart of the shift in Pakistan's refugee policy but also at the heart of the policy itself. The fear of a rising India has consistently been an unavoidable dimension for Pakistan to consider. As a result, the Thucydidean trap playing out in Afghanistan by proxy has reduced the refugees to pawns in a game of geopolitical chess. By controlling the cross-border flow of refugees, Islamabad has created for itself a pressure valve to influence the outcome of Afghan power struggles and shape Afghanistan's attitude toward India.

Key Term

REPATRIATION: the process of returning—voluntarily or forcibly—a person to their country of origin or citizenship.

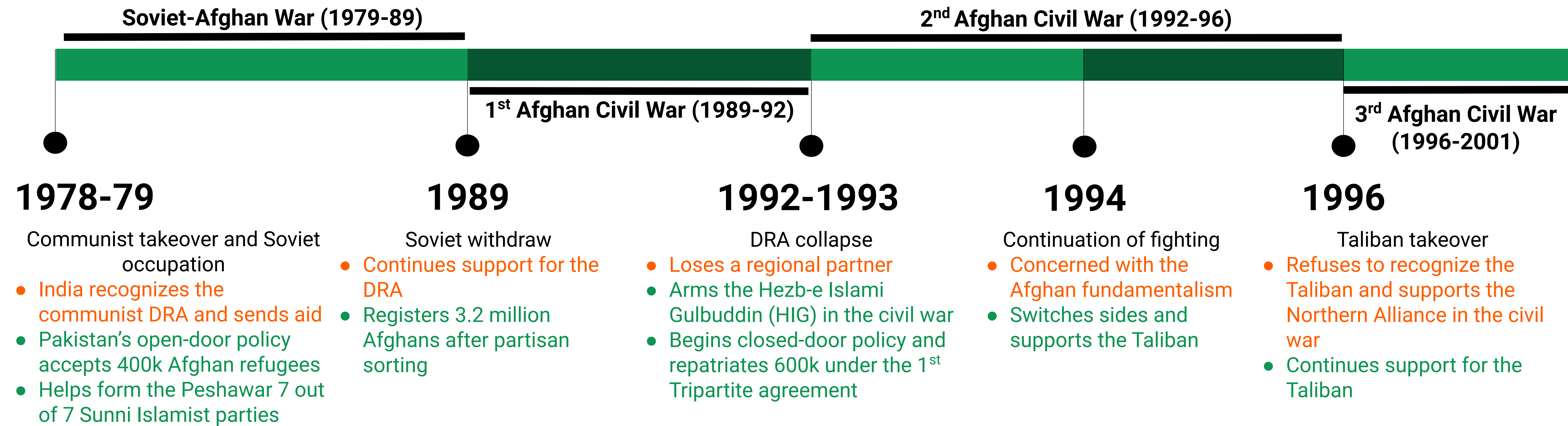
Map



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Timeline of Events



1978-79

- Communist takeover and Soviet occupation
- India recognizes the communist DRA and sends aid
- Pakistan's open-door policy accepts 400k Afghan refugees
- Helps form the Peshawar 7 out of 7 Sunni Islamist parties

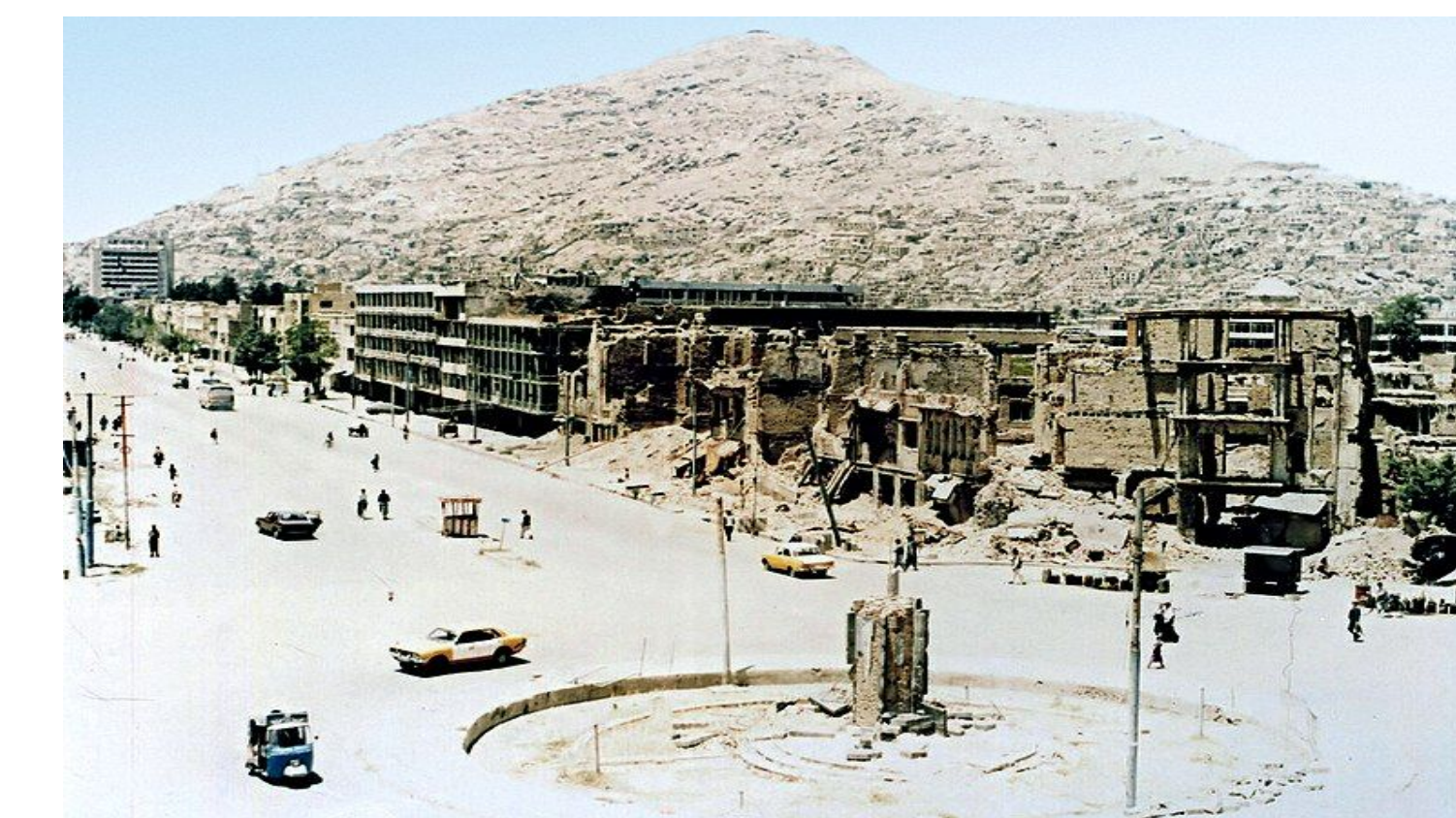


1989

- Soviet withdraw
- Continues support for the DRA
- Registers 3.2 million Afghans after partisan sorting

1992-1993

- DRA collapse
- Loses a regional partner
- Arms the Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) in the civil war
- Begins closed-door policy and repatriates 600k under the 1st Tripartite agreement



1994

- Continuation of fighting
- Concerned with the Afghan fundamentalism
- Switches sides and supports the Taliban

1996

- Taliban takeover
- Refuses to recognize the Taliban and supports the Northern Alliance in the civil war
- Continues support for the Taliban



U.S. Led Invasion of Afghanistan (2001-Present)



2000

Despite civil wars, 2/3 of the 6.2 million Afghans who fled in the 1980s return in the 1990s

2001

- Taliban replaced by the U.S.-backed Karzai govt
- India assists NATO forces against the Taliban
- Pakistan receives a 4th wave of refugees, 5 million have fled to Pakistan since 1979

2002-03

- 2nd Tripartite Agreement
- Blames Islamists with ties to Pakistan for terror attacks
- 2 million refugees are repatriated

2003-04

- Karzai wins election
- Renews investment in Afghanistan
- Repatriation rates and camp closures remain high in the build-up to Afghan elections

2006-15

- Taliban insurgency
- Becomes the largest regional donor to Afghanistan
- Violence leads to a steady fall in repatriation rates from 133k in 2006 to 15k in 2015

2016-Present

- Significant Surge in Repatriation
- Signs Chabahar port agreement with Iran and Afghanistan
- Repatriates over 381k refugees to Afghanistan

