

**REGIONAL RETRENCHMENT AND  
SHIFTS: GEOPOLITICAL RE-  
STRUCTURISATION IN THE MENA  
REGION POST-US WITHDRAWAL FROM  
AFGHANISTAN (2021-2025)**

**A Thesis**

**Submitted to the Master's Study Program of Political Science at the Faculty of  
Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts (M.A.)**



**By:**

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**UNIVERSITAS ISLAM INTERNASIONAL INDONESIA**

**DEPOK**

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## ABSTRACT

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The geopolitical architecture of the MENA region has witnessed far-reaching structural and economic changes since 2021. The vacuum created by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has elicited scholarly discourses in recent times as to the continued viability of a unipolar power grandstanding in the region. Adopting the first move advantage and resource cumulativity, this thesis demonstrates how and why a great power's strategic retreat can produce structural realignments and changes and open fresh opportunities for rival actors. Fixated on a qualitative methodology, this thesis uses the interpretive-base analysis of numerous pieces of primary, secondary and tertiary economic data, scholarly sources to analyse and offer causal explanations for the shifts in bilateral and multilateral relationships, economic alignments, and regional security configurations. The study finds that the U.S. withdrawal has created a power vacuum that has accelerated the regional rise of other influential actors such as China, Russia, and Iran. Concurrently, traditional U.S. allies, most notably Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt, have begun recalibrating their foreign policy orientation by diversifying alliances and reducing dependency on American security guarantees and economic frameworks. By bridging realist theoretical insights with empirical regional developments, this thesis contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse on hegemonic retrenchment, post-intervention geopolitics, and the evolving nature of great power competition in a multipolar world order.

Keywords: *America, First Move Advantage, Resource Cumulativity, MENA, International Security*

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research Background

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have perennially been central to global geopolitical and geo-economic calculations, especially since the Second Industrial Revolution. The shift from coal to oil as the primary energy source increased the region's strategic importance due to its vast hydrocarbon reserves. After the fall and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, Western powers, notably Britain and France, divided much of the region into new political entities under mandates and bilateral agreements, including the Sykes–Picot Agreement (Savrun, 2017, pp. 66–68). The victory of the allied forces was a crucial moment to expand their influence in the MENA regions. The seemingly dwindling U.S. influence in the region, particularly since the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, has been accompanied by a perceptible shift in regional alignments. This arises from the fact that the abrupt departure signals more than a military re-constellation; it has contributed to a bigger perception of American retrenchment and created space for the long-salivating powers such as China and Russia to assert themselves diplomatically and economically in the region.

The realignment of the long-standing U.S. partners, as observed in the evolving policies in countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, depicts the growing challenges towards American influence in the region, especially after the retreat. Within the framework of great power competition, US withdrawal from Afghanistan has caused a strategic shift that has led to a change in the balance of influence across the Middle East and North Africa. Drawing from the foregoing, the study advances an argument that **the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan influenced the geopolitical re-alignment and structural dynamics of states in the MENA region from 2021 to 2025.**

Historical precedents further contextualise the dynamics of resource control and alien interference in the region. In the early 20th century, for example, British interests managed to obtain significant access to Persian oil that led to the establishment of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. The constellation provided expansive economic benefits to foreign powers but offered minuscule returns to the local population. Gohardani & Tizro (2019) and Gross (2019) argue that only a small amount of the oil revenue remained within Persia, with the British government eventually becoming a major shareholder (Gohardani & Tizro, 2019, p. 163; Gross, 2019, p. 1). The nationalisation policy enacted by Prime

Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in the early 1950s appeared as a response towards addressing the imbalance. Mossadegh's efforts to reclaim national control over oil resources were opposed by various foreign governments that became the primary shareholders, culminating in a U.S.- and UK-backed coup that restored monarchical rule under Pahlavi dynasty (Abrahamian, 1991, pp. 1–4).

Declassified CIA documents suggest that American policymakers viewed the preservation of access to Persian oil as paramount to U.S. economic and strategic interests during the Cold War (Milani, 2018). That Mossadegh was removed from his position paved the way for deeper U.S. role in Iran under the leadership of the Pahlavi Monarchy until the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The Islamic revolution, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, transformed into a sharp ideological and geopolitical rupture. In addition to redefining the state's identity, including the official shift from "Persia" to "Iran", the new regime nationalized key foreign industries and repositioned the country within a framework of anti-imperialist resistance (Farrell & Newman, 2012, p. 69). The significant change in oil production after the revolution had global consequences, that contributed to a significant increase in oil prices and underscoring the extent to which Iran remained an important player in the global energy system, at least within the Middle eastern geo-political configuration (Wardayati, 2021).

This historical trajectory underscores a broader pattern: the interplay between external economic interests, domestic political transformations, and global energy markets. Afghanistan's resource endowment places it within the mechanics of the geo-political power matrix that connects a South Asian neighbour of Iran to the MENA region. For political science scholars, the relevance lies in how such dynamics shape foreign policy behaviour, alliance structures, and perceptions of legitimacy in the international system.

The aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran profoundly changed the dynamics between Washington and Tehran. The founding of the Islamic Republic introduced a regime with a significantly different ideological and religious orientation, leading to imminent tension with the United States. Economic sanctions, such as limitations on Iran's access to international financial systems, were immediately imposed, mirroring the deteriorating diplomatic relations. As a consequence, Iran decided to construct its nuclear capabilities, arguing national sovereignty and security. Although the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 temporarily halted such activities, the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement and the following assassination of General Qasem

Soleimani in 2020 further escalated tensions and led to the resumption of Iran's nuclear programme (Scott, 2025).

Characteristic of every realist state, power consolidation is pursued as a means to an end without any recourse at the possibility of miscalculations. Elsewhere in the region, the U.S. interventions in the MENA followed similar patterns of seeking justifications for its influence-peddling strategies. In Iraq, military engagement was rationalised under the “War on Terror” policy (Crawford, 2003, p. 6). Despite the previous claims regarding weapons of mass destruction, these were never substantiated, and the war had long-term implications for both regional stability and U.S. credibility. In Libya, the removal of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, backed by Western powers, was similarly framed as a humanitarian intervention. However, some analysts have contended that Gaddafi’s proposal to create an oil-based currency independent of the U.S. dollar may have contributed to Western concerns about his regime (Ahmed et al., 2017; Ramadhan, 2021). These developments show a pattern in which economic and geopolitical considerations are intersected with narratives of security, humanitarianism, and democratisation. This brings in the centrality of the theory of the first move advantage.

The annals of diplomatic relations usually undertaken by hegemonic powers are replete with the fear of anticipated loss of status. America's presidential election in 2020 ultimately resulted in a significant change in the US foreign policy in the region. After winning the election, Joe Biden, in 2021, made a decisive move when America officially announced its military support and retreat from Afghanistan in August 2021. Biden highlighted the need to halt the occupation as a means to liberate the region from any potential oppression (Said, 2022). Briefly after the official announcement, the paramilitary group Taliban took over the capital city of Afghanistan and commenced their very own government free from the Western and the occupying forces’ influences (Nainggolan, 2020).

However, in terms of international and regional politics, such a deliberate movement by America has invoked a plethora of changes. These include the augmented role of China, particularly in the Middle East. China has become a much more reliable political and economic partner of Afghanistan which represents the MENA annexe. In addition, China has signed numerous economic cooperations, worth millions of Dollars, with the new Taliban’s administration. In 2023, the BRICS, which includes countries such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, managed to coax Saudi Arabia into merging and joining the organisation (Antony, 2023). Interpretively, the vacuum created

by America's retreat from Afghanistan opened up this vista of re-alignments and strategic shifts (Nichols & Landay, 2021). In an article by Hei Tsing So, he argues that since the calculated retreat of the American forces from Afghanistan, and given the country's closer affinity to the MENA, the region in its entirety has witnessed many geo-political re-orderings (Tso, 2024).

Among these regional re-orderings are the challenging establishment of the new administrative government and the pressures from the international communities. The strategic engagements of China and the other powerful entrants in the MENA and Afghanistan since America's retreat have been phenomena. This is due to the fact that the succeeding powers will be able to contribute significantly to the balanced relations between the countries of the MENA and the geo-strategic policy options that they pursue as occupying great powers. Iran's increasing role in regional affairs contributes to one of the most significant geopolitical shifts after the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Its expanding influence has been evident in its position toward regional adversaries, including Israel. In 2024, a series of events, such as the death of senior Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh and Israel's military engagement in Lebanon, increased regional tensions and raised the possibility of a direct Iranian response. These are all connected to America's withdrawal from Kabul.

In response to growing concerns about potential Iranian retaliation, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby in 2024 suggested that while it was difficult to precisely determine Iran's strategic calculations, U.S. officials considered a major attack on Israel a plausible scenario. The report further reiterated that the United States remained fully committed to defending Israel in the event of any aggression. According to the same source, Kirby stated that the U.S. had consistently communicated two main messages to Iran: first, that military escalation should be avoided, and second, that any attack would be met with an immediate Washington's response to protect its ally in the region. Despite being intended as a deterrent, such public statements have arguably done little to de-escalate the situation and may have contributed to further furthering regional hostilities ([www.afintl.com](http://www.afintl.com), 2024). This reflects a broader trend of shifting power dynamics in the Middle East after the absence of Washington's military presence in Afghanistan.

## 1.2 Research Problematisation

In dissecting the realist contentions of state relations in the international arena, official statements from any two countries reflect powerful alignments. When discussing the ongoing conflict that began on October 7th, 2023, the affirmations above could be interpreted as something that contributes to the rising tension, particularly as Israel decides to go on with its military activity in Gaza and some parts of Southern Lebanon. Despite the public statement of the US government of the continuous deterioration of the humanitarian condition in the conflict, the immense provision of military support could raise concerns that Washington is perpetuating the conflict. The retreat of the US, given what Israel's interactions in the region have turned out to be, is indicative of the fact that the withdrawal makes Tel Aviv a geo-political proxy of Washington. This also indicates that the current US foreign policy is profoundly aligned with Israeli security aspects despite the complexities of the broader MENA region.

The impacts of this strategic retreat range from political, economic to security dimensions that require a new analysis of the US's change of mechanics of relations in the MENA region. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: **“What effects does the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan have on the global powers’ geopolitical and economic competition in the Middle East and North Africa from 2021–2025?”** This research is driven by a puzzling observation: despite the ongoing regional instability and the rise of competing powers such as China and Russia, the U.S. has retreated from Afghanistan in August 2021. It remains puzzling that despite the increasing threats to its long-standing strategic interests the US government opted for withdrawing its military presence abruptly from Afghanistan in 2021. This research also attempts to critically engage with, extend and uncover the theoretical power and assumptions offered by the literatures on offensive realism. The theories of first-move advantage and resource cumulativity suggest that states tend to act pre-emptively when vital resources are in danger and while their military power is at its peak (Van Evera, 1999). Echoing the same tone, offensive realism postulates an assumption that in an anarchic international system, hegemony is the main objective of great powers by which they secure their survival. Therefore, the U.S. decision to retreat, rather than reinforce its position - poses a theoretical challenge, owing to the fact that Prussia's strategic expansion into Poland during the second world war was justified by the imperative to secure territorial and material aspects critical for survival (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 202–205). Using this theoretical logic, one might have expected the U.S. to have reinforced its physical presence to preserve its influence and

cumulative strategic assets in the region. The gap between theoretical expectation and empirical findings opens a space for further analysis, especially in understanding the evolving nature of American grand strategy under the multi-polar world.

Although Afghanistan is not geographically categorised as part of the Middle East, its strategic position to the region is vital. This study argues that Afghanistan is a pivotal hub among Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, transforming it into an indispensable aspect in comprehending broader geopolitical changes, thereby affecting the events in the regions located in the proximity of Afghanistan, particularly the Middle East. Historically, Afghanistan has become a critical arena for great power competition, especially during the Cold War, when both superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States sought to assert their influence over the country. The Soviet invasion in 1979, which coincided with the Iranian Revolution, raised ultimate concerns in Washington over a possible strategic alignment between the newly established Islamic Republic and the USSR, an outcome that could have significantly belittled U.S. influence in the Persian Gulf (Brown, 2013; Fukuyama, 1981).

Afghanistan's geostrategic position accounts for a potential corridor for access to Middle Eastern oil resources and trade routes. In addition, Afghanistan also exhibits strong cultural and linguistic ties with the broader Islamic world. The country's official languages, Dari (a variety of Persian) and Pashto, utilise modified Arabic scripts and contain significant Arabic lexical and morphological influence, reflecting broader historical interactions and influences with Islamic and Arab cultures (Mallory & Adams, 2006). This linguistic and cultural proximity strengthens Afghanistan's relevance and validity to discussions concerning Middle Eastern and North African regional politics. To sum up, this study includes Afghanistan within the analytical framework not merely for geographic reasons, but due to its enduring relevance to great power rivalry, its regional connectivity, and its socio-cultural intersections with the Arab-Islamic world. These dimensions make Afghanistan a critical case in examining the broader structural shifts in the Middle East and North Africa following the U.S. withdrawal in 2021.

The gradual decline of Washington's characteristic influence in the Middle East and North Africa has opened new opportunities for regional allies and actors, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, to adjust their strategic positions. These countries, which have historically been influenced by America's presence in the region, are now asserting greater autonomy as a response to shifting regional dynamics (Mohseni et al., 2025). In order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these shifts, this study also includes an

analysis of North Africa. The inclusion of North Africa is justified on both geopolitical and cultural grounds. Countries such as Algeria and Morocco, for instance, are currently engaged in a regional arms competition. Morocco has bolstered its defence relations with the United States, especially after its diplomatic relations normalisations in 2021 with Israel under the Abraham Accords framework (Alfarisi, 2024). In contrast to this, Algeria has augmented its defence cooperation with Russia, especially in the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2022, which has broadened Moscow's strategic outreach. Numerous North African states, including Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, are also parts of the broader Arab world and share historical, political, linguistic, religious and economic linkages with the Middle East. Therefore, developments in the Levant and Gulf sub regions often have spillover effects across the North African political sphere. The inclusion of this region in the analysis will allow for a more holistic and layered examination of how and why great power competition is shaping the Arab world in direct and indirect ways.

The inclusion of historical episodes such as the Mossadegh nationalisation crisis, the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Brew, 2019), and the U.S. interventions in Iraq and Libya, is not intended as a polemical catalogue, but rather to illustrate patterns of continuity and change in the exercise of foreign power projection (Maragheh, 2016). The cases that are presented in the introductory part offer insights into the mechanisms of influence, resistance, and realignment that inform contemporary developments, especially following the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan. In addition, the cases serve as pieces of information that give background and necessary information for readers to contextualise the current geopolitical developments in the Middle East and North Africa. The episodic chain of events creates the empirical and conceptual foundations necessary to evaluate whether the retreat reflects a broader hegemonic decline, or is merely a recalibration of American strategic priorities. Rather than treating these cases as isolated, they are integrated within a broader theoretical inquiry into how great powers manage decline, project resilience, or trigger structural realignments within contested regions.

The wide choice of empirical materials, which range from historical crises to present-day strategic realignments, is guided by a central methodological objective: to track and trace the consequences of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan as both a cause and a symptom of shifting regional power balances. This work requires a cross-temporal and spatial lens to assess not only how U.S. strategic significance is decreasing in the MENA, but also how regional actors recalibrate their strategies in response. The integration of Middle Eastern and North African cases into the Afghani debacle reflects the

interconnected characteristics of geopolitical shifts across the broader Arab-Islamic world. While the analytical focus remains on U.S. withdrawal and its consequences, the supporting empirical materials serve to illuminate how geopolitical vacuums are filled, contested, or redefined under multipolar competition.

## CHAPTER II

### THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theory of “First Move Advantage” actually sets the motion for this study. Precipitated on the threshold of an attacker taking a pre-emptive move ahead of its other power competitors, it essentially explains why America was ahead of its other power competitors during and after the Cold War. However, the theory does not foreshadow that Washington’s growing ascendancy in Kabul will abruptly nosedive. Coupled with the theory of resource cumulativeness, this study offers to conduct a deep investigation about why America abruptly chose to retreat from Afghanistan. This alternative narrative becomes inevitable owing to the fact that for over two decades, Afghanistan’s resources have been within the reach of Washington, and the sudden withdrawal of America from Afghanistan in 2021 offers an explanation of weakness to the set of theories. Factors such as stronger coalitions built by other power contenders, domestic pressures and financial constraints all add to why a powerful nation abruptly withdraws from a region of influence. The theories do not make any mentions of these.

There are several kinds of theories that make up the inquiry of International Relations. According to Wright Mills (2000) and Eriksson (2014) grand theory is a theory that answers abstract problem without any particular measurable variables (Eriksson, 2014; Mills, 2000). It is a theory that is designed to perceive and to digest social reality generally. The second in line is middle-range theory. According to Ponjaert (2021) and Bailey (1991), a middle range theory is a kind of theory that gives measurable variables in proving the claims of such a theory (Bailey, 1991; Ponjaert, 2021). Based on the explanation provided by Van Evera, it is logical to assume that first move advantage and resource cumulativeness belong to the middle range theory category, since they provide necessary and clear measurable variables that represent the first-mover steps taken by any actors to gain advantage and cumulative as well as crucial resources that become the main objective of countries. The theories that are used in this research are constructed upon realism in International Relations (Van Evera, 1999, p. 5). The formation of testable hypotheses is the hallmark of middle-range theories.

This research is built upon the theoretical insights of Stephen Van Evera, especially as explained in *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (1999), with a particular focus on his concepts of resource cumulativeness and first-move advantage. He argues that

wars are more likely to occur when key resources ,whether economic, territorial, or strategic ,are cumulative or extremely vital in nature, meaning that disproportionate control over them enhances a state's survival and future power (Van Evera, 1999). On the other side, the theory of first-move advantage suggests that when a state anticipates a high payoff from striking first, pre-emptive actions become more probable. The use of these concepts is limited to conventional interstate conflicts, particularly during the two World Wars, which form the empirical basis of Van Evera's original analysis.

This thesis seeks to extend Van Evera's theoretical framework into the domain of asymmetrical and proxy conflicts, using the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan as a case study and its implication on the MENA region. The asymmetrical conflicts in this discussion will include the strategic use of NGOs as a soft power tool in Afghanistan, ethical warfare narrative for instance "fighting terrorism", "civilising mission" to legitimate the U.S. military occupation, debt and aid as a political leverage particularly after the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan which led to the increase in Chinese and Russian investment in the country and in the MENA region, proxy influence and diplomatic re-alignment for instance the pacification of Iran and Saudi Arabia mediated by China in 2023, and America's retreat as a strategic vacuum. The thesis puts up an argument that the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan has created a strategic vacuum in the proximity of Afghanistan, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa. This is arguable from the presence of energy routes, military alliances, and spheres of influence that have long exhibited high degrees of cumulativity. Referring to Evera's theory, particularly the notion that wars and rivalry are more likely to occur when vital resources are cumulative and perceived as vulnerable, this work argues that the retreat is not merely as a withdrawal from a conflict zone, but as a further invitation for other rivals to fill the power vacuum.

The failure to pre-emptively consolidate or secure U.S. influence in MENA allowed rival powers, such as China and Russia, to incrementally occupy that vacuum through economic and diplomatic means. In this light, America's retrenchment signals a shift in the regional balance of power, aligning with Van Evera's premise that the neglect or loss of cumulative resources invites destabilising moves by competitors. The result is a realignment of influence; wherein other actors such as China and Russia are increasingly penetrating vacated geopolitical spaces. America's withdrawal from Afghanistan actually opens up a window of opportunity for other global power contenders to take an advantage of the theory, thereby making the MENA prone to geo-political eventualities of varying degrees. As for America, the theory – inter alia – questions why it has retreated from

Afghanistan. If the question of why America retreated from Kabul is basically covered by the theory, the spiral impacts of the re-entry of Russia, China and even Iran into a hitherto forbidden area for up to two decades deserve to be addressed by the same theory.

For instance, the normalisation of diplomatic relations between several Arab states and Israel under the Abraham Accords can be viewed through this scope. These accords, while initially seen as a strategic success for U.S. diplomacy, are now unfolding in a context of diminished U.S. physical presence and influence in the MENA region. One of the examples of this strategic vacuum is the evolving role of Israel in U.S. Middle East policy. After Washington's retreat from Afghanistan, Israel has assumed an increasingly assertive position, in particular with rising tensions in the region. This event is reflective of a compensatory strategy wherein Washington reinforces its remaining strategic strongholds to offset lost ground elsewhere. Masters and Merrow (2024) report that the U.S. has allocated \$17.9 billion in military aid to Israel since October 2023 (Masters & Merrow, 2024, p. 1). The assistance to Israel is arguably the manifestation of the strategic importance of maintaining allied military supremacy in key geopolitical theatres. Viewed through Van Evera's lens, this aligns with the logic of resource cumulativity: the U.S. concentrates support in regions where the loss of control would critically undermine its long-term power projection. Thus, Israel serves as a stabilising proxy in a region where American physical presence has otherwise declined. In this context, the MENA region emerges not only as a theatre of conventional interest for U.S. foreign policy but as a cumulative resource hub whose political, economic, and military significance is amplified during periods of global crisis, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine and shifting BRICS dynamics. Afghanistan, although geographically peripheral to the core Middle Eastern region, historically functioned as a gateway for great power competition. The fall of Afghanistan to Taliban after the US retreat in 2021 led to a chain reaction, that significantly altered the strategic setting of vital regional actors including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel, and the inclusion of other powers such as China and Russia (Pasztor, 2022, pp. 4–6).

Thus, this research seeks to contribute and adapt Van Evera's theoretical contributions to the evolving nature of contemporary conflict and power projection in the multi-polar world. It is designed to elucidate that in a context where resource cumulativity remains vital but traditional warfare is replaced by hybrid and proxy engagements; the logic of first-move advantage must also be reconsidered in this context. In doing so, it attempts to provide a more nuanced understanding of the hegemonic reconfiguration currently taking place across the MENA region.

## 2.2 Literature Review

Several factors have been identified to influence how a powerful nation launches itself within any geographical space. In the same vein, a nation loses its growing and enduring status when it is faced with certain events and challenges. This is observable from the cruciality of the Middle East and North Africa for the US. These two regions possess key natural resources and huge economic opportunities for the US government to exploit. Despite so, the US faces considerable challenges and adversities in the regions.

One important area of scholarship relevant to this research centres on the intersection between geoeconomics and big state behaviour, particularly in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Diesen (2022) advances the concept of geoeconomics as a theoretical complement to geopolitics. While geopolitics emphasizes territorial control and power projection, geoeconomics emphasizes market dominance, technological innovation and dependency structures. According to Diesen, a country's increasing influence comes not only from military power, but also from its ability to control strategic technologies and economic systems (Diesen, 2022).

Diesen contends that in order to reduce dependency and maximise geopolitical influence, technological independence in high-level industries is paramount. He also advances an argument that artificial intelligence and autonomous weapons systems are vital for shifting the current balance of power without having to resort to traditional military confrontation. Advancing the arguments further, Clayton (2023) argues that powerful countries like the US exploit their technological advantages through selling their weapons and creating defence partnerships in any regions (Clayton et al., 2025). Saudi Arabia is one of the longtime buyers of US weapons during the Yemen conflict. This position exemplifies the influence exercised by the US.

While these scholars provide useful frameworks for understanding technologies of statehood, they largely ignore what happens when hegemonic actors begin to lose geoeconomic influence. This is part of the large body of the vacuum this thesis seeks to fill. Glenn, for example, focuses heavily on the US-China trade war, but does not discuss the consequences of declining economic influence in strategic regions. This study seeks to fill that gap by analysing the geopolitical implications of the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

This withdrawal signals a broader withdrawal from the Middle East and is accompanied by policy decisions - such as halting arms sales to Saudi Arabia - that disrupt previous

patterns of influence. This retrenchment, in turn, opens up space for new regional actors, especially China and Russia, to increase their presence. The empirical case of Morocco's normalization with Israel in exchange for advanced US weaponry further illustrates how geoeconomic tools produce political outcomes, but also how fragile such influence can be when dependency relationships shift (Ariyati, 2020). Thus, this review reveals a gap in the literature: while geoeconomic theories effectively explain power projection through economic and technological instruments, they often fail to explain the retrenchment phase - the retraction effect - when the hegemony begins to lose market and strategic control.

Power supremacy offers to suggest that an enduring geo-political influence is obtained through being victorious in successive warfare. This introduces the realist-school of thought in the IR literature. Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) offers one of the most influential formulations of structural realism, specifically through his theory of offensive realism (Mearsheimer, 2001; Wicaksono et al., 2022). Like Mearsheimer, Mahmood also argues that the anarchic characteristics of the international system forces great powers alike to look for expanding their hegemony regionally, since it is the most reliable means to defend their survival (Mahmood,2025). Their analysis, which is based on numerous historical case studies such as the Napoleonic Wars, the First and the Second World Wars, has provided a succinct theoretical framework dedicated to understanding the rise and the decline of powers.

However, the research engages with their theoretical framework critically, especially his core assumptions that hegemony continually expands itself. Although the theory has provided a clear explanation during the rising stage, the explanatory power is limited to explaining the declining phase of hegemony, particularly when America retreated from Afghanistan in 2021. This research is constructed upon the theoretical logic advanced by Mearsheimer and Mahmood, by offering a new insight of how the pursuit of hegemony may lead to long-term structural fatigue, eventually provoking not only external balancing but internal decay. Thus, the study does not reject Mearsheimer's logic outright but seeks to extend and update it within the context of contemporary multipolarity and geopolitical fragmentation.

Poltak (2020) contends that a number of global powers fine-tune their enduring influence in the Middle East, through Afghanistan by resorting to sponsorship of proxy war. According to Poltak, in his book, which explicates the Proxy War conducted by America, which becomes my third piece of literature, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, etc., have been loyal customers of America in terms of weapons purchases. America has a

hegemonic control due to the extensive geoeconomic influence since these Arab countries are dependent on America when it comes to providing necessary weapons. For example, Saudi Arabia required such weapons to invade Yemen in 2014 during the Houthi Rebellion (Nainggolan, 2020).

A geopolitical analysis is essential for the construction of the argument of this work. Khoury (2022) in his work demonstrated that Washington is losing its influence in the Middle East. He argues that America's occupation of Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 has become problematic for its own influence especially in the Middle East. His claim is rooted from the growing terrorist threats that were never fully resolved even until Washington's retreat from Afghanistan in 2021 (Khoury, 2022). Very similar to Khoury's contention is the argument advanced by Kaye (2022) that countries in the Middle East decide to become less reliant on the US as the sole security and stability guarantor due to the immense and perennial failure in Afghanistan and the MENA (Kaye, 2022). Moreover, they also mention another factor such as the perennial civil war in Syria which comprises of Saudi Arabia's more independent stance and China and Russia's entry in the conflict which questions Washington's influence in the Middle East. While this paper presents an argument that further supports the scientific stance of this thesis, Khoury's work is only limited to the Middle East and does not include additional countries in North Africa such as Morocco, Algeria, and even Libya. This thesis is constructed upon his work by stating that America's retreat from Afghanistan has affected its regional influence not limited to the Middle East, but also North Africa. My work argues that the withdrawal from Afghanistan has released significant ripple effects which implicate the geopolitical settings of the Middle East and North Africa.

In addition, departing from the theories of first move advantage and resource cumulativity and significant contributions of neo-realism, the thesis is going to flip the core assumption. Instead of arguing that when a state is able to demonstrate power and prowess in an international setting, using America's diminishing influence in the Middle East rooted in Afghanistan and Iraq as explicated by Khoury and Kaye, this work argues that power projection cannot always be equated with having real strength. In the case of Washington's influence in the Middle East and North Africa, America has been positioning itself as the sole protector of democracy and human rights. However, due to the retreat, new emerging powers such as Russia and China interfere with America's influence in the region. America keeps projecting its power in the regions despite the entrance of new powers to create an illusion that it remains invincible in the face of constant menaces. It is to be noted that

America's influence due to its withdrawal from Afghanistan is not completely withered, but it is being challenged and under intense fire.

Another piece of geopolitical analysis regarding America's role in the Middle East is by Zazai and Jamai (2025). The authors argue that the US has long maintained a strong presence and exercised a powerful influence in the Middle East due to its resource politics, particularly the plentiful reserve of oil (Zazai & Jamili, 2025). The influence is perpetuated by showing an apparent commitment to installing and defending democracy in the Middle East through the creation of various organisations that help facilitate its interests in the Middle East. However, Washington's influence in the Middle East also contributes in perpetuating instability ranging from sectarian division and internal conflicts such as Syria and Iraq. The authors also suggest that America will still maintain its influence despite the entrance of new powers such as China and Russia.

While this paper gives valuable insights into resource politics that becomes the main analytical pillar of this thesis, it doesn't give a nuanced dissection of how the logic of resource politics is employed. Therefore, this thesis is going to apply the logic of resource politics in Afghanistan, underlying its influence on the Middle East and North Africa, while at the same time, is also going to interrogate the presence of resource politics. Afghanistan contains a lot of natural resources (The Ministry of Mining of Afghanistan and The American Geological Association, 2019). This alone could have become a potent cause of America's supposedly continued occupation rather than its retreat in 2021. This demonstrates a paradoxical empirical proof between the presence of bountiful resources in a certain location with an exercise of influential control over the region. Not to mention, the failure in Afghanistan as discussed by Khoury and Kaye has changed the Middle Eastern and North African countries' views on America, that are indicated by the gradual shift towards the new emerging super power. Despite the centrality of Afghanistan, this thesis deals with the puzzling idea that serves to interrogate the occurrence of the retreat per se.

A fallout of any ethical grounding in building a geostrategic grandstanding is a usual catalyst for an abrupt retreat. The ethical warfare literature is essential to this work. Said et al. (2022) in their article "American Presence and Withdrawal from Afghanistan: An Ethical Warfare Analysis," argue that the presence of the US military intervention was initially grounded in ethical reasons; to completely eliminate terrorism and to promote global peace after the 9/11 attacks (Said, 2022). In the same vein, the centrality of this ethical argument was common among American political discourse (Connah, 2021). It was

also reflected in the media and government actors that reinforce the "Civilising narrative" of savagery against justice (Said et al., 2022, p. 7).

The authors continue their arguments stating that the main objective of such an occupation evolved over time. When it became apparent that terrorism could not be completely eradicated through military means, Washington emphasised on shifting towards strategic influence consolidation in Central Asia and the Middle East. The authors show that this particular change marked a shift from ethical warfare to geostrategic opportunism. This puts moral considerations second after Washington's primary geostrategic interests.

However, their analysis fails to deal fully with the implications of this shift. This study builds on their foundation but goes further by arguing that the call for ethical warfare is not just a transformation - it is a strategic facade from the start. Cases such as the invasion of Iraq under the pretext of weapons of mass destruction, and continued military support to Israel despite widespread human rights violations, show that US justifications often serve as discursive tools for hegemonic expansion, rather than ethical actions (Connah, 2021; Said, 2022). Furthermore, the post-withdrawal effects of US forces in Afghanistan - ranging from political instability to economic collapse - underscore the unsustainability of the ethical war narrative. As with other historical empires, the projection of moral superiority eventually gives way to political buccaneering.

While Said et al. (2022) effectively trace the shift from ethical justification to geostrategic opportunism, this research explicitly builds on and critiques their analysis by embedding the U.S. retreat within a broader structural transformation of global power. Rather than viewing ethical warfare as a failed ideal, this study positions it as a discursive strategy that masks material hegemonic interests from the beginning. This research seeks to extend the literature by amalgamating ethical narratives with the geopolitical consequences of retreat, particularly the gradual erosion of America's strategic credibility and the rise of rival powers in the Middle East and North Africa. This represents an import of geo-political structural transformation that beclouded America's ethical grandstanding en-route its in-road into the MENA through the Afghani axis.

The events that erupted after Washington's withdrawal from Afghanistan ranging from political instability to economic collapse demonstrate that the ethical warfare analysis is insufficient. Such a retreat is distant from making a peaceful transition. Instead, it has led to a power vacuum that is being exploited by actors such as China, Russia, and Iran. At least, this points to changing political trajectories on the part of the US in regard to the Middle-east in general and Afghanistan in particular. Therefore, Said et al.'s ethical contention

lacks historical and structural reasoning and this study is aiming to address the gap by locating America within a broader pattern of its dwindling geo-strategic influence in the MENA regions and Afghanistan.

Mahmood Monshipouri (2024) in “Lessons for Israel's Gaza War in America's Strategic Blunders” constructs critical comparisons between the US' military interventions in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan as well as Israel's ongoing operations in Gaza. He contends that strategies solely rooted in military force to resolve fundamental political and social conflicts tend to lead to long-term instability and failure, based on the experiences from the Vietnamese War (Monshipouri, 2024). Reflecting on the failure in Vietnam, military might alone does not offer a sufficient explanation as to why geo-political and geo-economic changes occur. He also points out that in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US initially tried to neutralise the immediate threats: Al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's regime. However, it failed to solve the structural, humanitarian and democratic problems that contributed to the conflicts.

According to Monshipouri, Hamas differs from Al-Qaeda in several significant ways, most notably in its attachment to the Palestinian nationalist cause. This difference, he argues, makes removing Hamas not only more complex, but is also potentially counterproductive if broader political conditions are not addressed. An exclusive reliance on force could further entrench resistance and potentially give rise to more radical actors in the future (Abdiel, 2020). Any long-term resolution must involve not only security measures but also diplomatic and humanitarian efforts aimed at addressing the underlying causes of the conflict.

Meiser et al. (2021) offer the same insight as Monshipouri when they contend that military engagement proves ineffective sometimes in winning a conflict situation. The analysis offered here provides a crucial conceptual foothold for advancing the argument of this study. Drawing the logic from the foregoing argument, America's military intervention for two decades has led to multiple structural and political crises in the MENA, and by extension in Afghanistan (Meiser et al., 2021). By highlighting how the United States failed to build long-term stability in the Middle-east through its intervention in Afghanistan, despite two decades of occupation, their work underscores only an apparent tactical success without strategic transformation. This study seeks to expand the argument by shifting the focus from the particular intervention per se to its geopolitical aftermath, demonstrating how and why the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan in 2021 created definite space for regional strategic re-calibration and the expansion of rival power in the MENA region.

In this way, the critique of short-termism offered by the duo of Monshipuri and Meiser et al. directly informs the present research's investigation into post-withdrawal geopolitical dynamics and the structural fragilities of U.S. influence. Building from this logic, this research seeks to fill the gap by showing what happens to America after its retreat from Afghanistan in 2021. America concentrated heavily on military occupation from 2001 and 2021, thereby creating systemic dependence on America.

Post-colonial literature proves to be useful when analysing the contemporary situation in the MENA. This is observable in the Western undemocratic interventions in the Middle East and North Africa. This shows that the West exercises huge influence in the region. Norman Paech's analytical essay titled "The Absence of Peace in the Middle East: On the Origin and the Development of the Palestinian Conflict" (2017) is important in this work. A core argument advanced by Paech is that the Zionist project, as conceived by its early leaders, was fundamentally exclusionary and opposed to cultural integration within the European and Oriental spheres. The same contention is offered by Kieh (1992) where military interventions in the MENA are described to have always been prompted by the exigencies of imperial expansionism (Kieh, 1992). Drawing from the writings of Max Nordau and Theodor Herzl, Paech highlights how early Zionist ideology viewed assimilation as untenable and instead advocated for the establishment of a distinct national entity. Paech characterizes this worldview as reflecting a form of cultural insularity, which, in turn, reinforced the aspiration for a separate state.

In furtherance of the argument, Paech situates the emergence of Israel within a colonial framework, emphasizing the instrumental role played by British and French imperial interests during the mandate period. He argues that without British strategic backing, formalized through instruments such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), the Balfour Declaration (1917), and the League of Nations mandate system (1920), the realization of a Jewish state would not have been viable (Paech, 2017, p. 3). In essence, colonialism should not merely be understood by its justifications, but rather by its structural consequences: the displacement of indigenous populations, the erosion of social cohesion, and the institutionalization of political subordination. In this sense, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is seen not only as a geopolitical issue but as one deeply rooted in the legacy of colonial restructuring (Paech, 2017), and it has lingering impacts within the MENA.

Moreover, Paech considers internal structural weaknesses within the Arab world as a compounding factor. He contends that the feudal social hierarchies and authoritarian political systems prevalent in many Arab states have rendered the region vulnerable to

external influence. These vulnerabilities, according to Paech, have been historically exacerbated by economic and military dependence on Western powers, who have maintained strategic influence through control over vital resources and diplomatic patronage. He illustrates how the post-World War I imposition of the Westphalian nation-state model, often artificial in the context of the region's tribal, ethnic, and religious complexities, led to fragmented political entities with competing interests. This fragmentation is reflected in contemporary rivalries, such as the intra-coalitional tensions between the UAE and Saudi Arabia during the conflict in Yemen, where national interests diverged despite shared strategic objectives.

Lastly, Paech and Kieh address Palestinian internal divisions as a significant obstacle to conflict resolution. The ideological divergence between Fatah and Hamas, particularly on the question of the two-state solution, has further complicated the path toward Palestinian self-determination. Fatah has largely endorsed a diplomatic approach, seeking international recognition and negotiation. In contrast, Hamas maintains a more maximalist position, viewing the existence of Israel as incompatible with Palestinian sovereignty. Paech notes that the rift between these two factions culminated in armed conflict, eventually leading to Hamas' political dominance in Gaza and the weakening of intra-Palestinian cohesion, thus further diminishing the prospects for a unified negotiating position in the event of a protracted military confrontation (Kieh, 1992; Paech, 2017)

While existing scholarship has extensively examined America's retreat from Afghanistan through the lenses of foreign policy failure, security studies, and realist theory, including arguments rooted in neorealism, liberal internationalism and state-building, there remains a significant gap in analysing this retreat as having elicited geo-political effects rooted in a continuation of colonial logic and imperial perpetuation. Mainstream analysts tend to depoliticise the historical and ideological reasoning that overlook US involvement in the region. They tend to frame the withdrawal as a strategic miscalculation rather than a symptom of a deeper, structural failure originating in imperial overreach.

The entirety of this study is not fashioned towards a total condemnation nor demonization of the US. Its main objective is to fill the gap by restating that the US retreat is not so simple as an isolated case of policy failure, but as a manifestation of geo-political miscalculations in international relations. Therefore, this research is dedicated to explaining the mechanics of the geo-political and geo-economic changes that have taken place in the MENA as well as the possible future impacts such will have in the region as

part of the efforts at filling the gap in the literature concerning America's retreat from Afghanistan.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Rationale and Research's Time Span**

This research hinges on a qualitative case study approach to delve into the impacts of the U.S. military retreat from Afghanistan in 2021 on the geopolitical structure of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) from 2021 to 2025. This particular approach is appropriate for this study because the main variables, such as influence, alignment, and strategic dependency, are not easily quantifiable but can be significantly explored through interpretive and contextual analysis. The time span of this research as described previously is from 2021 to 2025. The choosing of this time span serves to capture the ripple effects of America's retreat from Afghanistan in 2021 on the Middle East and North Africa. The choice is also strategically based on the chain of events that occurs to validate and support the main argument. The events span from America's retreat in 2021, geopolitical realignment of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya through investment and weapons sales, the fall of Bashar Al-Assad in 2024 December which serves as a significant point as to why Russia shifted to Libya and recognised the Taliban regime in July 2025, adding to the regional significance, and the inclusion of Saudi Arabia into the BRICS in 2025.

#### **3.2 Process tracing as an interpretive tool**

The primary explanatory tool utilised in this work is process tracing, aimed at identifying and explaining causal mechanisms between the U.S. retreat and shifts in regional alignment in the MENA region. This is in line with the argument of George and Bennet (2005) which revolves around the fact that process tracing is an appropriate method for discovering and tracing causal mechanics that contain complex political phenomena, particularly where multiple variables and events must be linked through a chronological and logical narrative (George & Bennett, 2005). This approach is reflected in Kimberley Coles' "*Democratic designs: International intervention and electoral practices in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*" where the same method is employed and backed up with primary evidences from official documents, etc (Coles, 2007, p. 30). Given the nature of the research question, which involves historical decisions, strategic calculations and downstream geopolitical effects, process tracing enables the identification of intermediate steps that connect U.S. retreat with observed regional shifts. The application of this method allows the study to go beyond correlation and move toward plausible causal inference.

### **3.2.1 Indicators**

This will be supported by analysis of policy papers, speeches, news reports, government statements, and relevant secondary literature from the specified time frame. The indicators of America's oscillating position in the MENA region rooted from its withdrawal from Afghanistan will also include several vital events:

1. Shifts in foreign policy positions by regional actors,
2. Entry or expansion of rival powers such as China and Russia in the Middle East and North Africa,
3. Reconfiguration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran mediated by China,
4. Shifts in Investment, particularly in the Suez Canal Zone whose biggest investor has been China since 2023.

The role of domestic economic pressures of America particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic and their lasting impacts on the US foreign politics and engagements. In order to fully capture the aforementioned indicators, this research draws on Van Evera's first-move advantage and resource cumulativeness theories, as well as geoeconomic insights from Diesen and Le Billon. These theoretical tools allow for analysis of how the withdrawal affects strategic resource security, alliance structures, and hegemonic posturing. This is as argued by Le Billon that the discussion of geopolitics requires a multi-dimensional analysis (Le Billon, 2004). The presence of North African states, particularly Morocco and Algeria, serves to capture and understand the broader structural shifts beyond the traditional Middle East core after America's retreat from Afghanistan in 2021. The study also considers domestic U.S. constraints (e.g., economic burden from COVID-19 and the Russo-Ukrainian war) as a contributing factor in explaining retrenchment. In sum, this research uses a qualitative strategy to trace the changing geopolitical architecture of the MENA region in light of America's retreat and assesses how new alignments emerge in a context of multipolar competition.

### **3.3 Alternative Competing Explanations**

This research despite drawing primarily on process tracing as well as structural and geoeconomic frameworks, also acknowledges competing theoretical interpretations, particularly that of Mearsheimer. The neorealist explanation of American retrenchment from Afghanistan can be understood as a rational adjustment to global overstretch, dedicated to avoiding further entanglements and reallocating resources to strategic theatres

such as East Asia (Mearsheimer, 2001). While neorealism offers a parsimonious account rooted in power balancing and strategic restraint, it is insufficient for explaining the downstream geopolitical disruptions that followed the retreat, especially the intensification of regional realignments and the entry of rival powers into the MENA region. This study, constructed upon Resource Cumulativity and First Move Advantage, argues that hegemonic withdrawals do not automatically translate into rational disengagement, but have reshaped the international order by altering perceptions of credibility, vulnerability, and opportunity among both allies and adversaries. Therefore, while neorealism serves as a useful baseline, this research demonstrates that its explanatory power is limited when confronted with the multi-dimensional, regionally embedded consequences of America's retreat.

In addition, offensive realism argues that states tend to maximise power to ensure their survival in the anarchic international system. If a state is able to exercise power and influence, it will probably survive (Alfarisi, 2024). While this thesis fully acknowledges the perennially constructed logic, it seeks to flip the coin by stating that constant power projection by a state does not always equate to being powerful. What this thesis means by power projection is the ability to demonstrate and express power; be it soft power in the form of cultural and linguistic influence or hard power in the form of the possession of military forces or any other sophisticated technologies used to enhance a state's conquest. Despite demonstrating such capabilities, a state might be attempting to conceal its weakness. An intriguing example is provided by America in the Middle East and North Africa. This thesis fully acknowledges America's prowess in the Middle East and North Africa with its gigantic military bases around the regions and its oil-extracting companies. Even as of mid-2025, America still has around 40.000 to 50.000 troops in the MENA regions alone (Ferragamo et al., 2025).

In addition, America brands itself as the harbinger of democratic peace in the regions by installing and operating various NGOs under its name and interest. Despite the constant demonstration of power, America is trying to conceal its gradually grotesque weakness; America is drowning in its own debt particularly due to the heavy spending on Afghanistan. America spent at least 300 million US Dollars per week to continue its occupation for the past 20 years, America was hit by the immense wave of the Covid pandemic which strained its financial capabilities, America spent millions and billions of Dollars on Ukraine. This leads to the fact that the current GDP to Debt ratio in 2024 alone is 124%, meaning that America's debt is 24% bigger than its annual income

(fiscaldata.treasury.gov, 2025). This leads to the constant printing of its currency which ultimately leads to its declining value globally. Countries in the MENA regions sense this change and gradually shift their policies on China and Russia as the new emerging powers. Instead of maintaining the unipolar MENA regions, we are seeing its conversion into the multi-polar MENA regions. Again, I would like to emphasise that America still retains its powerful presence in the Middle East and North Africa despite having retreated from Afghanistan, however that presence is being contested and challenged by the current trends.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

This work depends on the use of library-based research and the systematic compendium of primary, secondary and tertiary data sources. The data will be drawn from a broad range of publicly accessible and credible materials, including peer-reviewed academic journals, books, policy briefs, government publications, foreign policy documents, news articles, and institutional reports from both international and regional sources. The employment of secondary data is particularly suitable and paramount for this qualitative study, as it allows the researcher to critically engage with existing interpretations and assess the historical and geopolitical trajectories relevant to the post-2021 period in the Middle East as well as North Africa. The sources will be used not only to track policy changes and regional realignments but also to give context to key developments such as arms sales, diplomatic recognition, and strategic partnerships after Washington's abrupt retreat from Afghanistan. Tertiary sources, which include reputable encyclopaedic entries and research summaries, will serve a supplementary function, helping to triangulate information and support the validity of analytical inferences. These collected data will form the empirical foundation for the process-tracing method employed in this study, supporting both chronological mapping and thematic analysis of geopolitical and strategic shifts in the region.

### **3.5 Limitations**

This research despite drawing on multiple choices and kinds of sources as stated previously, does have limitations. Without any careful choice of sources, this research could experience selection bias in formulating the arguments. To address such issues, this research is going to utilise triangulation by also employing alternative explanations in the research. In fact, this thesis does not argue that America's influence in the Middle East and North Africa is totally depleted after its retreat from Afghanistan. The thesis acknowledges the prowess of the US in the regions while at the same time questions the power of the US; is it true that America remains an unrivalled power in the Middle East? Is it true that

Afghanistan causes other powers to capitalise the retreat from the country which leads to the changes in views of the Middle Eastern and North African countries? These limitations can be summarized as follows:

- a- More choices of literature are circumscribed owing to the fear of selection bias
- b- Limited utilization of triangulation to calibrate external validity
- c- Difficulty in ascertaining America's weakness in the MENA
- d- Difficulty in connecting the surge of other rival powers in the region to America's retreat from Afghanistan.

### **3.6 Research Question**

1. What effects does the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan have on the global powers' geopolitical and economic competition in the Middle East and North Africa from 2021–2025?

### **3.7 Research Objective**

1. To examine and observe the geopolitical and strategic influence of the United States' military retreat from Afghanistan in 2021 on its impacts in the Middle East and North Africa from 2021 to 2025.

This particular research objective aims to depict how and why Washington's military absence has reshaped the regional balance of power, ranging from shifts in alliance structures, power vacuums, to the emergence of new competitors.

2. To present an analysis of the evolving roles of emerging powers, particularly China, Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, within the MENA region after the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan in 2021, with dedicated attention to their responses and alignments

This particular objective places regional changes in a multi-polar discourse, trying to describe and identify patterns of influence redistribution and the emergence of alternative power constellation after the US retreat from Afghanistan.

3. To critically assess, and engage the explanatory power, relevance, and limitations of neo-realist theories, especially First-Move-Advantage and Resource Cumulativity in looking at the structural changes of Washington's influence projection in the regions.

This objective aims to engage existing theoretical frameworks and evaluate their applicability to contemporary international developments discourse, identifying possible gaps and proposing nuanced insights within a realist paradigm.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 The MENA Post-America's Retreat from Afghanistan: Geo-political Contestations and Resource Politics



Figure 4. 1 Afghanistan and its Surrounding Regions

##### 4.1.1 Strategic Implications of Power Vacuums: Post-America-Retreat Geopolitical Alignment

The last Washington's withdrawal troops from Afghanistan took place on August 30th 2021. This officially ended its twenty-year military involvement in the country in an attempt to eliminate terrorism, commenced in 2001 (Burns & Baldor, 2021). The emergence of the second Taliban regime, unlike its first rule after the defeat of the Soviet Union at the end of Cold War, has presented both challenges and opportunities for Afghanistan and countries located in its proximity. For some regional actors, the re-emergence of the Taliban has led to concerns about the potential re-appearance of extremist movements. This may include Salafist groups. The development is especially difficult for Iran, due to its ideological, religious and sectarian divergence from such factions. In spite of that, Iran's response to the re-emergence of the Taliban rule may also originate from the cultural and linguistic similarities to Afghanistan, since both nations largely communicate in dialects of Persian.

Simultaneously, the post-withdrawal power vacuum has created strategic openings for both China and Russia. Afghanistan could offer a complex blend of strategic advantages

and potential risks to China. Yadav (2022) argues that China views Afghanistan as a substantial partner in expanding its Belt and Road Initiative Programme (Yadav, 2022). In addition, Afghanistan abundant lithium reserves may have likely influenced and bolstered China's interests in maintaining its activity and involvement within the country. However, there remains a concern in Beijing regarding the probability that the Taliban's rise could lead to unrest among Uighur populations in Xinjiang. This, pragmatic relations with the Taliban are paramount to contain the potential instability.

Russia, too, has sought to capitalise on the evolving geopolitical landscape. With its economy weakened by Western sanctions and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Moscow has turned to Afghanistan as a potential source of critical resources, including uranium. Strengthening its foothold in Afghanistan allows Russia to diversify its resource strategy while simultaneously diminishing U.S. influence in the region (www.afintl.com, 2025). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia, long considered one of Washington's most strategic partners, has undertaken steps that suggest a shift in economic alignment. Following the U.S. withdrawal, and amidst mounting inflationary pressures attributed in part to the financial burden of the Afghan war, Saudi Arabia has reportedly moved towards de-dollarisation in its oil trade (Vivek, 2024). This can be interpreted as a reaction to America's diminished economic leverage. This section examines the multifaceted consequences the United States has faced in the aftermath of its military exit from Afghanistan. The repercussions span both political and economic domains and have arguably undermined the United States' geopolitical standing not only in Afghanistan but also more broadly across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

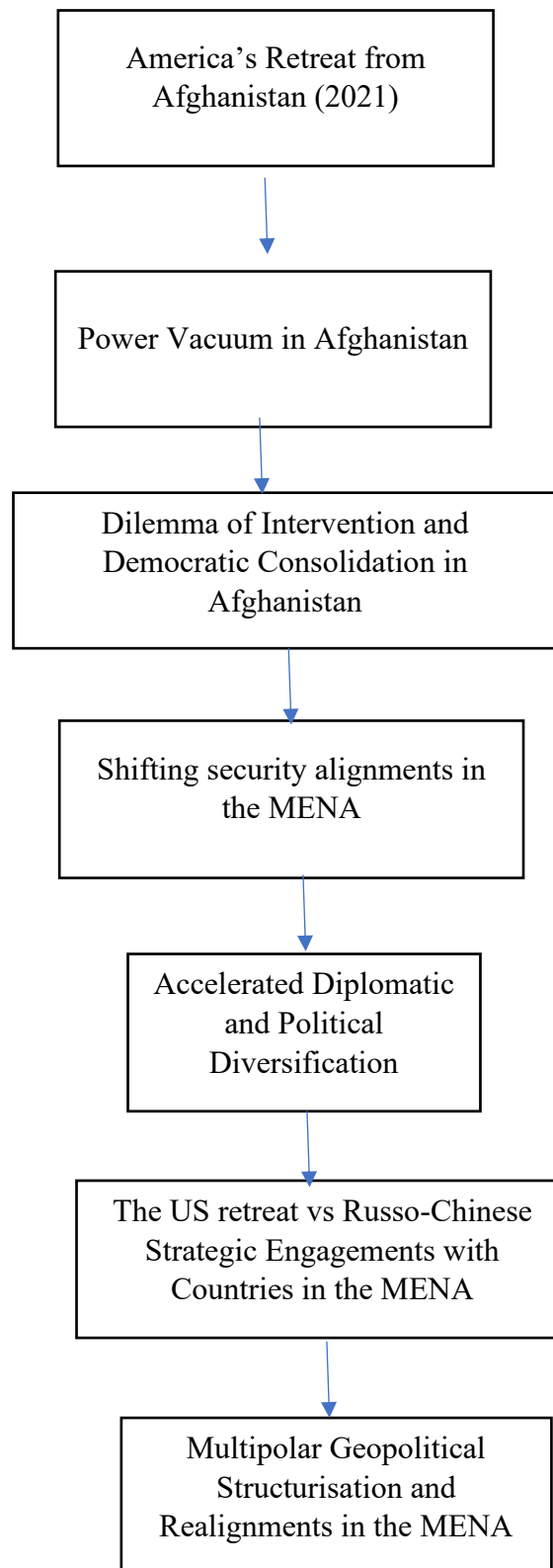


Figure 4. 2 Causal Mechanism of the US Retreat from Afghanistan and Its Impacts on the MENA Geopolitical Structurisation

It is important to acknowledge that this thesis does not suggest that America has lost its significant portion of influence particularly in the Middle East and North Africa after its retreat from Afghanistan. While this thesis acknowledges that Washington remains one of the most influential actors in the MENA region by just looking at its military presence and investment, which become the basis of its influence, this thesis seeks to question the invincibility of America in the region. Is it true that America remains invincible without any countries being able to compete with its influence? Is it true that America is the sole influential actor without any interference? This thesis delves deeper into the post-Afghanistan withdrawal setting from 2021 to 2025.

The power vacuum created by America's absence in Afghanistan has led to another faction to take over Afghanistan, such as the Taliban forces. There are two main consequences due to such an event; other powers such as China and Russia capitalise on America's absence in Afghanistan through the expansion of investments and even diplomatic engagements. The Second consequence is that countries in the Middle East and North Africa change their perception gradually because of the democratic failure in Afghanistan, implying that America is not the solely reliable actor. Perennially, America has branded itself as the protector and the enforcer of democracy in the MENA region that many countries trust completely. This is arguable from its being the supplier of weapons to countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, etc. However, because of the gigantic failure in Afghanistan, countries in that particular region retrospectively diversify their diplomatic engagements. Thus, this leads to the fact that America's power in the Middle East has met some rising challenges in a world where multipolarity, not unipolarity, becomes the main idea.

Additionally important is the fact that there are some instances that do not follow the pattern introduced in the aforementioned figure. One of such is the presidency of Ahmed Al Sharaa in Syria after the fall of Al Assad's regime. Al Sharaa's regime exercises proximity to the spherical influence of the West. The thesis responds to the event by arguing that the presidency of Ahmed Al-Sharaa is leveraged by Washington as a form of first move advantage or an initiative to assuage the damage caused after its retreat from Afghanistan.

#### **4.1.1.1 Saudi Arabia's Strategic Realignment after America's Withdrawal from Afghanistan**

Located in the Middle East and endowed with huge oil reserves, Saudi Arabia has long served as one of Washington's strategic regional partners. The relations of the two countries have historically been based on mutual dependency: Saudi Arabia has depended on American military equipment and security guarantees, while on the other side, the US has benefited from access to Saudi immense reserves of oil and natural gas, vital for sustaining and supporting its domestic industrial economy. This part dissects Saudi Arabia's shifts to Beijing from Washington. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of first move advantage and resource cumulativeness, Saudi Arabia took an initiative to conduct geopolitical shifts to China following U.S. retreat from Afghanistan seen as a burden that affects the stability of the financial power of America due to the heavy costs during the twenty-year occupation, leading to America's huge debt and lower GDP.

While this thesis acknowledges the Arab Vision 2030 which was launched in 2016 (Nurunnabi, 2017), it is also equally crucial to interrogate the effects of Washington's retreat from Afghanistan on Saudi Arabia's diversification programme. This argument is constructed on an empirical observation that Saudi Arabia has heavily relied on the US' supports perennially. This section finds that while it may be true that America's withdrawal from Afghanistan has not caused Saudi Arabia's diversification programme, this section finds that Washington's absence in Afghanistan has affected the way Saudi Arabia views America as its sole guarantor of peace and stability and has caused the acceleration of the economic diversification programme per se domestically (Chen & Han, 2019). This demonstrates the accelerated decline but perseverant US's influence in the country. The US's retreat from Afghanistan serves as geopolitical catalyst that affects its long-term interests in the region while exposing the limits of its influences in the Middle East and North Africa.

The United States of America and Saudi Arabia solidified their diplomatic relations through an agreement that Saudi oil would be exclusively traded in U.S Dollars commencing from 1974 for a 50-year period, which finally concluded in 2024. This accord significantly contributed to the extremely strengthened global value of the US Dollar and cemented the US' economic dominance globally for the past 50 years (Das, 2024; Momani, 2008; Vivek, 2024).

In 2021, however, the newly elected Biden administration officially announced that it would suspend weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners in the midst

of the war in Yemen against the Houthi movement (Eichensehr, 2021; Kalin et al., 2022). This policy became a turning point in bilateral relations, raising concerns in Riyadh regarding the reliability of American support in times of war and conflict. Saudi Arabia has viewed the US as a dependable supplier of military resources, a regional security guarantor, and as a stable energy market. These become the key to the Kingdom's economic stability. On the other side, Washington has often seen Saudi Arabia as a strategic ally and proxy in the region, especially in its efforts to contain regional threats that could jeopardise American geopolitical interests.

In response to these developments, Saudi Arabia began catalysing a policy of strategic diversification, primarily under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The diversification programme aims to reduce the Kingdom's overreliance on oil revenues by transforming its economy and increasing its attractiveness to foreign investment and tourism. These reforms range from loosening the previously strict cultural norms, such as relaxing bans on musical concerts and reassessing alcohol restrictions. This is to bolster the development of tourism infrastructure domestically. The conclusion of the 50-year oil agreement which was established in 1974, in 2024 has also provided Saudi Arabia with the opportunity to reconsider its currency of trade. This could open a possibility of moving away from exclusive use of the US Dollar (Omar & Cranny, 2023). Krane (2024) writes that one motivation behind this shift is the concern pertaining to the increasing tendency of America to use the Dollar as a tool of coercion ,especially through extraterritorial sanctions, which have had ripple effects on countries not directly involved in disputes with Washington (Krane, 2024).

Krane highlights that such practices were particularly pronounced under the Trump administration, citing the example of attempts to obstruct the Nord Stream 2 pipeline between Russia and Germany, and other restrictions targeting European trade with Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba. If realised, Saudi Arabia's de-dollarisation trajectory could significantly weaken the global demand for the U.S. Dollar, thereby debilitating a key pillar of American economic strength.

This shift cannot be separated from the wider fiscal pressures that the US is encountering. The U.S. is estimated to have approximately spent USD 2 trillion in Afghanistan. The colossal expenditure has contributed to a huge increase and pressure in national debt. By March 2025, Washington's national debt has reached approximately USD 36.56 trillion (fiscaldata.treasury.gov, 2025). The gigantic scale of the national debt has produced inflationary pressure on the U.S. economy and has led to extensive currency

printing, which could profoundly impact the long-term and future stability of the Dollar globally.

Washington's financial backlashes arguably cement and solidify Riyadh's decision to catalyse economic diversification and realign its strategic partnerships, especially towards China. One critical indicator in this case is the ratio between GDP and national debt which is obtained by dividing a nation's total public debt by its annual GDP and multiplying by 100%. Ratios that are above 100% indicate that a country's debt is bigger than its annual income. Between 2021 and 2024, the United States recorded debt-to-GDP ratios of 118.89%, 110.39%, 122%, and 124%, respectively (worldpopulationreview.com, 2022; www.ceicdata.com, 2024; www.macrotrends.net, 2025). Contrary to America, China's ratios during the same three-year period remained lower, respectively 66.8%, 77%, 83.4%, and 74.2% (worldpopulationreview.com, 2022; www.imf.org, 2025). Solely using this particular indication is reasonable to argue that China, compared to the US, presents itself as a more economically sustainable partner, particularly for countries like Saudi Arabia that seek future stability in global financial engagements.

Although some scholars argue that advanced economies such as the United States, Japan, and Singapore can accommodate higher debt burdens (Blanchard, 2024; Reinhart & Rogoff, 2015), it is equally necessary to interrogate the limits of such sustainability. For how long can these economies maintain and defend their current economic stature against constant strategic and fiscal challenges? In this context, the rise of BRICS and its de-dollarisation efforts represent a significant impediment to U.S. influence. The cumulative effect of sustained military expenditures, not limited to Afghanistan but also extending to involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, has placed further strain on American economic resources, thereby diminishing its relative strategic appeal. Finally, the viability of advanced economies like the U.S, depends on their capacity to maintain financial supremacy. However, economic power alone is neither constant nor immune to systemic shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic could serve as a recent reminder of the imminent vulnerability, which exposes profound fragilities in global markets. The increase in U.S. debt suggests a condition of dwindling influence, in which efforts dedicated to sustaining global dominance, paradoxically contribute to its own erosion.

Despite the U.S. Dollar continuous dominance of global trade, there is a growing perception among several countries that include Saudi Arabia that the U.S. Dollar may not be reliable and viable for a long-term store of value. The particular perception is closely correlated with the view that Washington's influence is gradually dwindling on the global

stage. While military expenditure in Afghanistan per se does not account for this decline, it could serve as a prominent example of how the U.S. Dollar that once became a symbol of unchallenged geopolitical power, has now become increasingly unstable. Ongoing military aid to Ukraine between 2022 and 2024 (temporarily suspended under the Trump administration in 2025), coupled with extensive financial support for Israel's military capabilities following the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023, has accelerated concerns regarding the sustainability of U.S. fiscal policy.

The argument that Saudi Arabia's de-dollarisation efforts are connected to America's military overreach, particularly in Afghanistan, is therefore both plausible and grounded in observable financial patterns. The proliferation of strategic rivals confronting the United States from multiple fronts has also fragmented Washington's global focus. This multiplicity of simultaneous strategic challenges has increased financial strain, compelling the U.S. government to engage in large-scale debt financing. Consequently, the rapid issuance of Dollars to service this debt has weakened confidence in the currency's long-term strength.

One of the more salient indicators of Saudi Arabia's gradual repositioning away from the United States lies in China's growing economic footprint in the Kingdom. As one of the parts of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has actively attempted to expand its global trade infrastructure, especially across the MENA region (Yadav, 2022). In 2021, the bilateral trade between China and Saudi Arabia increased significantly from USD 51.5 billion to USD 87.5 billion. That not only indicates the increasing relevance of China as a trade partner but also Riyadh's move towards reducing its economic reliance on the United States (Kayani & Saleem, 2024; Zhou, 2024).

In addition, China has become the leading source of the Greenfield foreign direct investment in Saudi Arabia. China alone contributes USD 21.6 billion from 2021 to October 2024. It is estimated that one-third of its total investment focuses on clean technologies, such as solar energy, wind power, and battery production. In comparison, the United States, though still the second-largest investor, contributed only USD 12.5 billion over the same period (Zhou, 2024). These figures suggest a broader strategic trend in which Saudi Arabia aligns itself more closely with a rising economic power that is less entangled in the region's traditional security architecture.

Another critical moment in Riyadh-Washington relations took place in 2022 when OPEC+, under Saudi leadership, decided to reduce oil production by 2 million barrels per day (Baker, 2022; Hokayem, 2022; Northam, 2022). The decision made during a period of

continually heightened global economic tension rooted from the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, led to criticism from the US. However, the problem was temporarily resolved through a diplomatic intervention by Joe Biden, travelling to Saudi Arabia and securing an arms deal that was worth USD 500 million (Northam, 2024). Ironically, this deal took place after the previously halted arms sales in 2021 due to the civilian casualties in the Yemeni conflict (Reuters, 2022; Stevanović, 2023; Woods, 2022). By 2024, the issue of arms sales had reached its apex. In November of that year, just prior to the end of his presidency, President Biden reinstated full weapons exports to Saudi Arabia ,reversing the earlier 2021 suspension (Ogolo, 2024). These particular changes were not motivated primarily by humanitarian considerations, but rather by an urgent need to maintain strained alliances and to mitigate the geopolitical fallout originating from the 2021 Afghanistan withdrawal. As previously mentioned, the post-withdrawal vacuum has been rapidly filled by actors such as China, Russia, and Iran, all of whom are seeking to expand their influence in the Middle East and North Africa.

Another proof that qualifies Saudi Arabia's gradual shift after America's withdrawal from Afghanistan is the entrance of Saudi Arabia into the BRICS, which is the contender of the organisations created under America's global influence after the end of the Second World War. The move taken by Saudi Arabia is arguably a first-mover advantage, since the country does not wait for its guarantor's approval to join the organisation. This is to secure its resources amidst the increasing uncertainty of the US rooted in and accelerated by its heavy spending and retreat from Afghanistan in 2021, leading to the aforementioned factors and considerations. According to the official website of the BRICS membership, it is noted that:

*“The BRICS is currently composed of eleven countries: its five original members – Brasil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa -, and six new members admitted in 2024-25 - Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The group was originally composed of Brasil, Russia, India, and China in 2006; South Africa adhered in 2011; the new expansion, effective as of 2024, derived from the Johannesburg Declaration, from August 2023.”* (BRICS BRAZIL, 2025)

It is worth clarifying further that this part does not indicate that America's influence on Saudi Arabia is totally diminished. The influence is under constant challenges by countries such as China that is striving to compete the US's influence. It is also important to note that America is still one of the biggest suppliers of Saudi Arabia's weaponries, but

that particular influence is no longer invincible. With the entrance of Saudi Arabia to BRICS and China's growing influence through investment, which is contrary to the western style influence, America is facing considerable obstacle when it comes to reassessing its influence on Saudi Arabia (Kaye, 2022). It is also to be taken into careful consideration that in addition to Saudi Arabia, several Middle Eastern countries such as Iran, Egypt and even, the UAE despite having normalised its diplomatic relations with Israel in 2020 (Alfarisi, 2021), indicate a widespread trend of the US's questionable unipolarity in the Middle East and even North Africa. These particular countries also try to diversify their economy after the retreat from Afghanistan conducted by the US. This has become a moment to critically evaluate the unipolar concept of the US's influence in the Middle East and North Africa with the increasing trends of such.

However, despite the official statement on the BRICS official website, there are some conflicting reports pertaining to the official status of Saudi Arabia's membership. Some analysts argue that Saudi Arabia has yet to officially decide its membership status in the BRICS (Gopaldas & Singh, 2025; Menon, 2025). However, despite the official status of the country in the BRICS, it is worth mentioning that Saudi Arabia has actively participated in several key meetings of the organisation. The participations in Rio De Janeiro and Johannesburg meetings prove that the country is demonstrating increasing sympathy towards the organisation.

It is also arguable and fair to say that Saudi Arabia's motive can be considered as a hedging to cover its diplomatic diversification particularly after America's backlash in Afghanistan which becomes a catalyst for the KSA to not hinge on a sole guarantor. The hedging is useful for the country to appear amiable towards the West, while prioritising its own national interests through various empirical evidences that the thesis presents. Another example of this hedging is when Saudi Arabia shot down Iranian missiles heading towards Israel in 2025 after the two countries engaged in a regional conflict. At the beginning of the conflict, Saudi Arabia condemned Israel's attacks on Iran (Singh, 2025). However, when Iran sent multiple missiles to attack Israel, Saudi Arabia shot them down despite claiming that the action was to protect its territorial integrity. This section proves that America's influence remains strong in Saudi Arabia despite its retreat from Afghanistan. However, that particular strength is being contested by other emerging powers, such as China and even members of the BRICS. This demonstrates the conversion from the unipolar interaction to multipolar engagement conducted by Saudi Arabia. Hence, this raises the question as to whether America's influence in the region is really invincible.

The sudden rupture of Kabul in August 2021 after the Taliban forces occupied the city and following the withdrawal of American forces, powerfully contradicted earlier U.S. commitments to the improvement of conditions in Afghanistan. The event functions as a symbol of the failure of America's nation-building agenda, and the subsequent erosion of its hegemonic authority in the region. The fiscal and reputational cost and burden of the two-decade occupation have significantly debilitated U.S. influence in the country and its proximity, leading to countries such as Saudi Arabia adopting more diversified and self-reliant foreign policy strategies. In summary, Saudi Arabia's growing interest in de-dollarisation cannot be examined in isolation from broader patterns of American military spending and rising national debt. The financial burdens and challenges procured through engagements in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and other global theatres have significantly led to the decline in influence and strength of the U.S. Dollar. As a response to this, Saudi Arabia has taken to a journey to diversify its economic partnerships, most notably with China, which now represents a major investor in the Kingdom. This gradual strategic shift is not merely a diplomatic recalibration; it signals a broader recognition of America's weakening influence grip, particularly in light of the structural consequences stemming from its withdrawal from Afghanistan.

#### **4.1.1.2 Geopolitical Realignment: China's Ascendancy Following the U.S. Exit from Afghanistan**

The power vacuum after America's and NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan following a twenty-year period of occupation has played a critical role in forming the emerging geopolitical dynamics in Afghanistan and its surrounding areas. One of the states seeking to expand their influence in this shifting landscape is the People's Republic of China. Historically, Afghanistan and China shared parts of the Mongol Empire under the Khans, a point that illustrates the historical intersections between both territories. This section examines how China interprets Afghanistan's current condition as an opportunity to extend its geopolitical reach, particularly in light of the absence of Western powers. This section argues that the power vacuum created after Washington's retreat from Afghanistan has prompted China's first-move-advantage by not waiting for what the West will do, since the resources in Afghanistan and its proximity are cumulative for China's national interests.

China's engagement in the country was limited during the American occupation, mainly because of the ongoing instability and numerous security risks. However, Xinjiang Oil Company, which operated in northern parts of Afghanistan was how China maintained its presence in Afghanistan. The existence of this company was mainly aimed at generating

employment opportunities for the local population. However, it may also be argued that the company's continued operation, despite the unstable domestic climate, was incentivised by Afghanistan's substantial oil reserves, initially identified by Soviet geologists in the early 1950s.

With the withdrawal of U.S. troops, several NATO members also retired their military personnel and concluded their diplomatic missions in August 2021. The alacritous disengagement facilitated the Taliban's rapid takeover of Kabul. In response to this, numerous Western governments, including those of the United States, France, Germany, and other NATO countries, imposed extensive economic sanctions on the Taliban-led government.

The actions significantly deteriorated Afghanistan's already dire socio-economic circumstances. China was among the first to recognise and signal a degree of recognition towards the new regime under the Taliban rule despite the isolationist stance adopted by the West. As argued by Roettig (2023) and Wafai (2022), China expressed its diplomatic principles through the expression of the "Three Respects" and the "Three Nevers". Chinese high-ranking representatives expressed that Beijing respected Kabul's sovereignty and territorial integrity, claiming that it would not interfere in domestic affairs or pursue hegemonic ambitions (Roettig, 2023; Wafai, 2022). The principles officially conveyed reflected and projected China as a neutral actor, refraining itself from Western models of intervention. Roettig (2023), nevertheless, observed that despite China's maintenance of its diplomatic presence in Kabul and the initiation of high-level discussions with Taliban representatives pertaining to future investments, Afghanistan is still considered as peripheral to the primary routes of China's Belt and Road Initiative (Roettig, 2023). He argues that Pakistan, in contrast to Afghanistan, remains the principal node in China's infrastructure strategy in the region.

This section, however, contends that Afghanistan may hold greater strategic significance for China than officially acknowledged. Evidence points to considerable reserves of rare and strategic materials in Afghanistan, including lithium, copper, gold, and oil (Tolo News 2025a). The particular resources, especially lithium, which is essential for producing battery, are economically vital for China's ambitions to maintain and expand its electric vehicle industry. Shah (2024) describes that in April 2023, a major deal was reached between Afghanistan's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum and Gochin, a Chinese company, worth around \$10 billion, to invest in mineral extraction in Afghanistan (Shah, 2024).

This includes a lithium processing plant. Later in August, the Taliban government confirmed seven mining contracts amounting to \$6.5 billion, approximately half the country's GDP, with various partners, including Chinese firms. These contracts span the extraction of gold, copper, iron, lead, and zinc across four Afghan provinces. Nabid (2023) also reported that in January 2023, a Chinese company successfully signed a \$350 million agreement for exploring oil reserves in northern parts of Afghanistan (Nabid, 2023).

By April 2023, the Taliban declared the completion of negotiations concerning Chinese involvement in lithium extraction. The substantial number of investments suggest that China perceives Afghanistan not solely as a peripheral route located inside its BRI framework, but as an irreplaceable and critical source of strategic materials required to sustain and expand its industrial growth (Khan et al., 2023; Pitron, 2022). Given the scale of these investments, it appears increasingly untenable to argue, as some do, that Afghanistan is merely a secondary concern in China's regional policy. Instead, the data demonstrated in this work suggest that Afghanistan possesses a position of growing importance, economically, strategically, and politically, in China's foreign policy grand calculus. Moreover, the diplomatic language used by Chinese officials, as cited by Roettig and echoed in Nabid's (2023) work, can arguably be seen as a soft-power strategy. Nabid also notes that, China's engagement is primarily based on economic and diplomatic factors which is contrary to the previous external actors such as the Americans, Soviets, and British, who utilised direct military intervention (Nabid, 2023). A significant difference is that China seems to be relying on soft power mechanism such as financial investments and humanitarian aid, while Western powers historically stressed on military operations. The historical reliance on military intervention as conducted by the West perennially often led to political and social instability in countries they occupy.

This strategy is illustrated by China's humanitarian assistance during recent earthquakes in Afghanistan, especially while many Western countries have limited or halted direct engagement with the country (Zhang, 2022). One can argue that China's long-term objectives involve taking advantage of influence through economic presence and public diplomacy, a form of soft imperialism that contrasts starkly with the militarised approach historically adopted by the West.

One of the other key developments which supports the contention that Washington's retreat has become an open door for China's growing influence in the Middle East is the significant shift and rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The meeting between both countries was facilitated by China. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979

under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, both countries severed diplomatic ties (Makramipour, 2023). Riyadh and Tehran's enmity has been exacerbated by the sectarian differences, particularly between Shi'a Islam in Iran and Sunni Islam in Saudi Arabia. In addition, their adversarial stance also originated from broader geopolitical alignments. Historically, Saudi Arabia was constantly aligned with Washington's interests, leading to the adoption of antagonistic stance toward the Islamic Republic. The political differences accelerated sustained tensions between the two countries.

This hostility has been evidenced by Saudi-led military actions in Yemen against the Houthis in 2021, a group ideologically aligned with Iran, as well as by the rhetoric of religious authorities within Saudi Arabia. Since the American withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the regional geopolitical environment has undergone significant transformation. In mid-2023, China became a host of a diplomatic dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Beijing. The objective of this meeting was to restore diplomatic relations of the two particular countries and to promote wider regional stability. Qin Gang, China's foreign minister, put an emphasis on the fact that the discussions were commenced to assist with creating peace-building efforts between the two countries and to contribute to regional security (farsnews.ir, 2023). Chinese officials also responded to Western scepticism regarding Beijing's ulterior motives in facilitating this reconciliation. According to an interview with some China's officials and China's foreign minister broadcasted by Fars News (2023), the minister criticised Western powers, especially the United States, for what he characterised as hegemonic thinking and information manipulation. He suggested that Western critiques of China's success in mediating Iran and Saudi Arabia demonstrate a wide-spread fear of China's rising influence in the region.

They argued that, while many countries welcomed the Beijing Accord, the West's suspicion highlights deeper geopolitical anxieties regarding energy access and influence in the Middle East. Furthermore, Chinese statements framed foreign, particularly Western intervention as a major destabilising force in the region, contributing to ongoing insecurity and humanitarian harm.

From a geopolitical perspective, it can be argued that such statements illustrate the broader decline of U.S. influence and the expansion of China's strategic presence in the Middle East. Historically, the concept of *Pax Americana* reflected a global order underpinned by American military dominance and intervention, which, in turn, sustained its economic hegemony. In contrast, China's emerging influence, what may be termed a *Pax Sinica*, appears to be centred on economic engagement, trade, and infrastructure

investment, rather than military coercion. This softer approach has made China an attractive partner to several states in the region.

However, it is also important to critically assess the nature of China's diplomatic rhetoric. Chinese statements are often framed in non-confrontational and cooperative language, which can obscure more strategic intentions. An analysis of trade and investment data helps clarify these underlying interests. Iran, for example, is a major oil supplier to China, accounting for approximately 77% of Iran's oil exports. In 2024 alone, China spent an estimated \$29 billion on Iranian oil imports, while non-oil trade between the two countries reached \$26.7 billion (Mohseni et al., 2025; Shokri, 2023).

China has also made significant investments in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. However, the nature of China's involvement in Iran differs markedly. In the Iranian context, Chinese companies have generally refrained from operating directly, likely due to the severe inflation and economic instability caused by prolonged Western sanctions (www.irna.ir, 2023). This indicates that one of China's strategic motivations may be to contribute to the stabilisation of Iran's economy, making it more conducive for Chinese commercial interests and business operations in the future.

Given these developments, it is reasonable to interpret China's efforts to mediate between Iran and Saudi Arabia as a broader attempt to establish both as long-term economic and strategic partners. The historical hostility between the two states presents a major obstacle to regional trade and investment, particularly for an actor like China, which prioritises economic stability and infrastructure development. Therefore, the normalisation of relations between Tehran and Riyadh can be seen as a precondition for China's broader regional engagement and the realisation of *Pax Sinica*.

In addition to economic and political considerations, security concerns also play a role in China's regional approach. One significant factor is the situation in Xinjiang, where the Chinese government has been accused of systematic repression of the Muslim Uighur population. Reports indicate the closure of mosques and restrictions on religious practices such as prayer and fasting. While these actions are often framed by the Chinese state as part of broader national integration policies, it can be argued that they are also motivated by Xinjiang's considerable oil reserves and its strategic importance.

Estimates suggest that the Xinjiang region supplies over 30% of China's domestic oil needs, underscoring its strategic importance within the country's broader energy framework (Amnesty International, 2020). This geopolitical significance provides crucial

context for understanding China's evolving relationship with the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan. While Chinese officials such as Foreign Minister Wang Yi have publicly framed these diplomatic ties as non-interventionist and mutually respectful, it may be argued that China's engagement with the Taliban is underpinned by a set of pragmatic and security-driven interests (Roettig, 2023).

One such interest relates to China's internal security concerns, particularly regarding Xinjiang. By establishing stable relations with the Taliban, China may be aiming to reduce the likelihood of extremist groups operating from Afghan territory and potentially inspiring unrest in Xinjiang. The Chinese government has long expressed concern over the presence of militant Uighur separatists in the region and has implemented controversial measures to suppress what it terms radicalism. The existence of a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan that cooperates with Beijing could therefore function as a buffer zone, limiting the mobility and influence of groups perceived as security threats. In this respect, diplomatic engagement with the Taliban could be seen as part of a broader strategy to consolidate internal stability and continue the integration policies pursued in Xinjiang.

However, despite capitalising on the changing geopolitical situations after America's retreat from Afghanistan, China still has a long way to go in matching America's influence in the Middle East and North Africa. While recent trends have shown that China is paying serious attention to the Middle East and North Africa through its immense investments, it still lacks what America has; military power in the regions. In mid-2025, America has more than 40,000 troops stationed in the MENA (Ferragamo et al., 2025). On the other side, that China refrains from using the military forces in the regions could also become its strength in addition to its weakness compared to the US. China is easily able to pacify countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran after perennial antagonism despite their sectarian differences. China is able to invest in multiple countries in the Middle East and North Africa and is even able to immediately fill the vacuum left by the US in Afghanistan after its sudden withdrawal. In order to truly defeat the US, the feat will take time.

On the other side, China has not officially recognised Afghanistan under the Taliban rule despite its investments and other engagements China has been conducting since Washington's retreat from Afghanistan in 2021. This raises a question whether China is filling the vacuum of power left by the US in 2021. Why has China not recognised the Taliban rule officially as Russia did in July 2025? Russia even became the first country globally to recognise the regime after America's retreat in 2021. This thesis responds to the problem by arguing that as stated previously that one of China's layers of engagements

with Afghanistan is security interest. The immense investments from China in Afghanistan are a clear indication that China is trying to create Afghanistan's dependence on the country to eliminate any potential threats of the Taliban regime supporting the Uighur.

China is attempting to lower the possibility of future problems. Hence, once China is able to secure Afghanistan's dependence, China might be willing to recognise the Taliban rule officially. Another interpretation that could strengthen the argument of this thesis is that China is avoiding international backlashes. Unlike Russia that is engaged in conflicts against Ukraine since 2022, Russia has received a plethora of economic and political sanctions from the West. As a result, Russia requires a rapid alternative to alleviate the cacophonous effects of the conflicts. One of such solutions is Afghanistan. The formal recognition which Russia conducted in July 2025, might give Russia exclusive access to Afghanistan's natural resources. On the other side, China is not facing any conflicts as big as Russia has been confronting since 2022. It is also to be noted that China is trying to preserve its image as the bringer of peace in contrast to the West. Formal recognition over the Taliban regime in Afghanistan is not in China's priority list for now.

To summarise, China's interest in Afghanistan appears to be multifaceted. At the most immediate level, Beijing seeks to safeguard its domestic frontiers, particularly Xinjiang, by reducing external sources of destabilisation. A secure Xinjiang not only strengthens China's internal cohesion but also facilitates the uninterrupted extraction of the region's substantial oil reserves. The mitigation of future risks could arguably be resolved through the form of preventive diplomacy with the Taliban. The second dimension of China's interest is economic. While Roettig (2023) has argued that Afghanistan constitutes a peripheral route within China's broader Belt and Road Initiative, the scale of Chinese investment and the strategic value of Afghanistan's mineral wealth suggest otherwise. As discussed earlier, China is committed to significant infrastructure and mining projects in Afghanistan, especially in lithium and oil. The dynamics in Afghanistan unravelled that Beijing perceives Afghanistan not merely as a side corridor but as a critical resource base and logistical node. Thirdly, there is a discernible political interest. The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in 2021 has created a vacuum in the regional power structure, one that China appears increasingly willing to fill. China's less confrontational and more development-oriented foreign policy, in contrast to the militarised interventions characteristic of Western powers, has positioned it as a more acceptable partner to certain regimes in the region. The diplomatic repositioning has been visible in Beijing facilitating the Saudi-Iran détente in 2023. This particular development arguably strengthens China's

influence across the Middle East. Also, Afghanistan's geographic position which is located at the intersection of various regions such as Central Asia, The Middle East, and South Asia offers a strategic hub and gateway to China for expanding its influence across multiple regions.

As a result, China's growing presence in Afghanistan may be viewed not only as a bilateral engagement but as a part of a broader geopolitical strategy. While the Chinese government continues to articulate that its involvement in Afghanistan is a form of peaceful cooperation, the magnitude of investment, the diplomatic steps, and the combined security and economic interests point to what could be called as a form of soft imperialism. Citing Nye in his work of soft power (Nye, 2004), soft imperialism implies that a country is manipulating another country through soft powers such as investment, infrastructure development, economic agreements, etc. China's strategy heavily relies on these to establish long-term influence.

#### **4.1.1.3 Iran's Strategic Resistance after the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan**

The part of this work is dedicated to the analysis of Tehran's expanding influence after the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan. It advances an argument, based on theories of the first-move advantage and resource cumulativity, that Iran's increasingly assertive stance is a prudently crafted response to the emerging strategic power vacuum left by America.

Iran exploits the vacuum of power left behind by America in Afghanistan, which serves as a gateway to Afghanistan and the Middle East. Based on this perspective, Iran's immense engagement, through both soft and hard power mechanisms, is not merely reactive but anticipatory, aiming to secure geopolitical and economic footholds before rival powers can act decisively. Afghanistan's cultural and linguistic affinities with Iran, alongside shared grievances against the United States, make it a strategic extension of Iran's influence. Furthermore, Iran's expanded support to the Houthi rebels and its rapprochement with Saudi Arabia following the 2023 Beijing Accord illustrate a broader pattern of resource-seeking behaviour and hedging against future containment, especially at a time when American influence in the Middle East appears to be in visible decline.

Iran is one of Afghanistan's closest neighbours, geographically, historically as well as culturally. The claim is backed by the considerable linguistic and cultural similarities between the two countries. Persian, also known as Farsi in Iran and Dari in Afghanistan, becomes the dominant literary and administrative language in both contexts. Despite nominal distinctions, the two varieties are mutually intelligible and functionally analogous,

in a manner similar to British and American English. Furthermore, ethnic groups with Persian heritage, including the Hazara and Shughni, are prominent in Afghanistan, reinforcing these cultural ties (Mallory & Adams, 2006). The Persian literary tradition is profoundly attached in both societies and remains an influential cultural aspect across the Middle East and South Asia.

In addition to linguistic and cultural similarities, there are also significant religious overlaps that form Iran-Afghanistan relations. Despite the Taliban adhering to Deobandi Sunni Islam, Afghanistan is still religiously diverse. Ethnic groups such as the Hazara adhere to Twelver Shi'ism, which is Iran's state religion. Other tribes, such as the Shughni, are the followers of the Ismaili branch of Shi'a Islam. Despite the existing theological distinctions between these two sects, the shared Shi'a foundation provides potential avenues for Iranian soft-power engagement (Emadi, 1997).

In addition to these affinities, Iran and Afghanistan appear to share a strategic opposition to the United States. Iran has long experienced extensive sanctions imposed by the U.S. and its allies, with lasting repercussions on its economy. Conversely, the Taliban resisted two decades of American military presence in Afghanistan. It is therefore plausible to suggest that the U.S. withdrawal created a strategic vacuum for Iran to deepen its engagement and activity in Afghanistan. The prolonged U.S. presence may have functioned, at least partially as a containment mechanism dedicated to limiting Iranian influence according to Tehran's perspective. The absence of U.S. military infrastructure in the country reduces the pressure of the US' strategic containment. This leads to closer ties with Kabul. In this context, Iran's motivations may originate not from hegemonic ambition but in the quest of pragmatic national interests. As Nader et al (2014) explain that Iran's objectives in Afghanistan may include securing its eastern border to protect shared water resources and to counter narcotics trafficking, and to manage the Afghan refugees' issues (Nader et al., 2014).

While the authors contend that Tehran does not seek to dominate Afghanistan, it is important to recognise that hegemony need not be confined to military occupation. It can also be pursued through cultural dissemination, economic investments, and ideological influence, strategies increasingly characteristic of Iranian regional engagement. Afghanistan's huge natural resource reserves contribute to further complexity to these dynamics. Iran seems to view Afghanistan as a potential site of economic opportunity alongside China. A report in 2024 suggests that Iran has become Afghanistan's largest economic partner when compared with other neighbouring states. Iranian investments are

heavily concentrated on sectors such as electricity generation, coal production, and agriculture, which amount to approximately USD 1 billion despite ongoing sanctions from the West against Iran (Bakhtar, 2024). The current developments highlight the strategic weight Afghanistan holds in Iran's regional calculus.

In addition, Iran's engagement could also involve ideological components, especially through religious and cultural soft power projection. There are growing pieces of evidence that suggest Iran's regional approach in the Middle East, for example, includes leveraging its religious identity to expand its influence. Tehran's perennial support for the Houthi movement in Yemen (Bhasuki et al., 2019) and the Assad regime in Syria (Alfarisi, 2021), both constituted parts on shared religious affiliations. This sufficiently illustrates the strategy Iran has been employing. In Afghanistan itself, Iran has reportedly invested in media, cultural programming, and literature whose objective is to promote the values aligned with the Islamic Republic. These efforts span from the distribution of Persian-language educational materials to the financial support of local television stations. Despite the immense efforts by the Islamic Republic, this particular approach has faced resistance, particularly from Sunni Pashtun communities. Nader et al. (2014) document concerns from Pashtun interviewees, pertaining to the extensive presence of Persian vocabularies in Pashto-language broadcasts. One of the frequently cited examples is the replacement of the Pashto term *pohantoon* (university) with the Persian equivalent *daneshgah*.

Although *pohantoon* originates from Pashto, it has been institutionalized in Dari as part of a broader effort to forge a unified Afghan identity. It should be noted that this term does not exist in Iranian Persian (Farsi). This reaction reflects ethnic and linguistic sensitivities, highlighting the perception among some Pashtuns that Iran's soft power influence in Afghanistan exerts pressure on local cultural expression, particularly through the media and public discourse.

In sum, Iran's engagement in Afghanistan appears to be multi-dimensional, encompassing linguistic, cultural, religious, and economic components. While Nader et al (2014). frame Iran's engagement in Afghanistan as non-hegemonic, its actions suggest otherwise, demonstrating a nuanced form of influence in line with contemporary understandings and uses of soft power and regional strategic competition. Tensions surrounding linguistic identity in Afghanistan have been reflected not only in national discourse but also in interpersonal interactions (Nader et al., 2014).

In the geopolitical setting, Iran has exploited and taken advantage of the vacuum left by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan strategically. As previously explained, Iran's

projection of influence is often conducted through religious affiliations. One of the manifestations of such a strategy is Iran's constant backing of the Houthi movement in Yemen (Bhasuki et al., 2019; Juneau, 2024). The Arab Coalition formed in 2015 under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, was a response to Houthi territorial advances. The U.S. backed the coalition through arms sales and other logistical assistance (Bordas, 2024). The coalition then launched a sustained military campaign. However, significant changes occurred during Biden's presidency in which he halted arms transfers to Saudi Arabia and its allies, urging concerns over human rights in the conflict in Yemen.

Iran's relatively stronger geopolitical position in the Middle East following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is supported by two key developments. First, Tehran does not have to face constant strategic pressure from a potential encirclement from the east, as U.S. military installations in Afghanistan have been dismantled. The absence of the U.S. forces allows Iran to strengthen its engagements with Afghanistan, which could potentially serve as a buffer against future threats.

Second, Iran has taken advantage of the opportunity to strengthen its influence throughout the Middle East, using shared religious identity to build strategic alliances. Although Iran has consistently denied its involvement in arming the Houthi rebels, reports suggest otherwise. For example, Poltak documented that in 2020, Iran supplied drones to the Houthis, which were then used to attack Saudi territory (Nainggolan, 2020). Similar drone attacks were also directed at Aramco oil facilities in 2019 and 2020, highlighting the potential for disruption from Iranian support to non-state actors.

Further evidence of Iran's involvement is found in official Yemeni statements. According to the Ministry of Culture, Iran provided between USD 10–25 million annually to the Houthis from 2010 to 2018 as part of its broader support framework (Vatanka, 2020). In addition, Robinson (2025) describes that the Iranian government has been delivering arms to the Houthis date back to 2009. The perennial delivery includes small arms and other necessary military equipment (Robinson, 2025). The Houthis then launched their insurgency in 2011. After three years of insurgency, they managed to take over Sana'a, Yemen's capital in September 2014 (Nichols & Landay, 2021). Iran's persistent refusal to directly acknowledge the supports could reflect a strategy calculation: the denial of such will allow Iran to maintain its rhetorical posture as a stabilising regional actor resisting Western imperialism, thus protecting itself from international condemnation.

Since the American withdrawal, Iran's assistance to the Houthis has reportedly increased. The U.S government issued a sanctioned against Sa'id Al Jamal, who was

described as a Tehran-based financial supporter of the Houthis in 2021. The sanctions unravelled Iranian support to the group that may have reached between USD 100-300 million in cumulative assistance (Nada, 2024). Furthermore, in 2023, British sources suggested that Iran had provided the Houthis with sophisticated weaponry, which may include ballistic missiles and combat drones, which significantly expanded the rebels' operational capabilities (Bordas, 2024).

The United States and its allies then issued formal statements which linked Iranian support to disruptions in maritime trade, especially in the Red Sea. It was reported that commercial shipping vessels were targeted by the Houthis. This raised international concerns significantly regarding regional stability and freedom of navigation. Donald Trump's second term of presidency introduced new dynamics to the ongoing regional tensions which involve Iran and its affiliates. Trump also reportedly sent a letter to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In the correspondence, Trump proposed a renewed negotiation framework that would revisit the terms of Iran's nuclear programme. In addition to nuclear issues, the proposal reportedly called for restrictions on Iran's alleged support to what the U.S. defines as "terrorist groups" in the region, including the Houthi movement (Davenport, 2025; Maloney, 2025).

However, the Iranian leadership did not respond in the manner anticipated by the Trump administration. Following the absence of a favourable reply, President Trump issued warnings indicating that the United States would target Iran-affiliated actors in Yemen. Consequently, in March 2025, U.S. military operations were launched across various sites in Yemen. These included a reported 800 airstrikes on targets ranging from drone launch facilities to military infrastructure. One of the most intense strikes occurred in April 2025, when the Rais Aish oil facility in Yemen was bombed, resulting in at least 80 fatalities and injuring over 170 individuals (Gritten, 2025).

These particular recent developments may be arguably be seen as an effort to shield its strategic influence in the Middle East and North Africa after its military retreat from Afghanistan, which leads to its waning influence. The approach taken by Trump during his second term of presidency, amalgamating diplomatic engagement with military pressure, can be seen as a multi-faceted strategy whose objective is to circumscribe Iran's regional ascendancy. Despite Iran's ultimate agreement to participate in negotiations, these were conducted indirectly and took place in Oman. The negotiations between both countries were focused on two primary and vital objectives: persuading Iran to curtail its nuclear development, and discouraging its perennial support for the Houthi movement. Not only

were these goals achieved through military intervention in Yemen, but also through the perennial economic and political sanctions.

The economic consequences of these sanctions have been severe for Iran. High inflation and restricted foreign investment have significantly limited the country's capacity for economic recovery. This is consistent with earlier observations concerning the reluctance of Chinese companies to operate in Iran due to its economic volatility. In this context, U.S. actions could be viewed as attempts to contain Iran's regional influence through a blend of coercive and diplomatic instruments, reflecting long-standing tensions between the two states dating back to the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Further regional developments unfolded in April 2025, signalling potential geopolitical realignments. Saudi Arabia's Minister of Defence conducted a high-level diplomatic visit to Iran (Bayramli, 2025). This marked a significant development in the evolving relationship between two countries historically divided by ideological and sectarian differences. Observers have noted that the visit builds upon the momentum generated by the 2023 Beijing Accord, which aimed to normalise relations between Riyadh and Tehran. Discussions reportedly focused on security cooperation and potential arms agreements. While it remains premature to draw definitive conclusions, such cooperation, given the shared grievances both states have expressed regarding American and Israeli policies may present strategic complications for Washington. This budding collaboration underscores a broader trend of regional actors seeking greater autonomy in shaping the security dynamics of the Middle East, particularly in the aftermath of perceived U.S. retrenchment.

#### **4.1.1.4 Moscow's Geopolitical Realignment in Afghanistan**

This section fits Moscow's post-2021 engagements with Afghanistan within Evera's theoretical framework, especially pertaining to the theory of resource cumulativeness and first-move advantage. The theories argue that when key resources are cumulative and concentrated, they tend to reward early and assertive moves by states to defend and secure long-term advantage. This section argues that Moscow takes advantage of Washington's absence in Afghanistan.

After the U.S. troops withdrew from Afghanistan, Russia's intensified and concentrated engagements in Afghanistan demonstrate the theoretical insights. This is indicated by the swift removal of the Taliban from its terrorist list just weeks after the fall of Assad in Syria, providing humanitarian aid, expanding trade, and investing in

infrastructure. Thus, Russia has effectively instrumentalised the power vacuum following the U.S. retreat in 2021. These particular behaviours underscore how and why the accumulation of strategic footholds and access to rare resources such as uranium and trade routes offers cumulative benefits that shape regional dominance. Russia's actions, thus, reflect a rational first-move calculation to consolidate influence before Western powers recalibrate their positions.

Washington's retreat from Afghanistan can be understood as something that has significantly contributed to a geopolitical shift that has arguably benefited Moscow. Since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in February 2022, Russia has faced myriad economic and political sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies in NATO. These sanctions produce extensive and significant ramifications, leading to the departure of various Western multinational corporations from Russia. Moreover, Western nations suspended large-scale imports of Russian oil and natural gas in an effort to curtail Moscow's war capabilities (Liu, 2023). The huge sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies result in Russia's energy market loss of over 41% of its global share. This contributed to an estimated financial shortfall of 7 billion US dollars in 2023, the largest economic deficit in two decades (Milov, 2024).

Additionally, the Russian rouble experienced considerable devaluation, largely due to diminished international demand. This trend reached a critical point in March 2022, when the exchange rate deteriorated to 142 roubles per US dollar, compared to an average of 73 roubles per US dollar in 2021, a period characterised by relative post-pandemic economic stability (Avilov, 2024; Lyócsa & Plíhal, 2022). Despite the economic and political ramifications, Russia's economic position has remained constantly resilient. This is bolstered by its continued role as a leading global energy exporter. In response to all sanctions, Russia decreed a mandate that the sanctions-imposing nations use roubles to purchase its energy exports instead of the U.S. Dollar. The particular policy of using roubles to purchase oil and natural gas from Russia successfully strengthened its currency by July 2022.

In light of these developments, it is plausible to argue that the Kremlin has grown increasingly sceptical of the West's reliability as a geopolitical partner. The idea that Western actors are constantly intent on defending their influence has likely motivated Russia to pursue and explore alternative alliances and markets. There are two significant shifts that support this interpretation. The first one is that Russia has significantly and increasingly redirected its energy exports towards China. It even offers preferential pricing

as a strategic gesture. The second one is that Afghanistan becomes a country in which Russia tries to expand its strategic influence.

Afghanistan could serve as a particularly significant case in this regard. The two countries shared a complex relationship particularly during the Cold War era. This is indicated by the Soviet Union's unsuccessful attempt to integrate the country into its communist bloc. In a more contemporary discourse, the abrupt retreat of American forces from the country in 2021 has arguably allowed Russia to reassert its influence in the region through the absence of American military forces.

The absence of a substantial Western presence has effectively removed Russia's principal competitor in Afghanistan. The particular shift is reflected in the 2025 ruling by the Russian Supreme Court. The ruling issues a regulation that the Taliban is not considered to be a terrorist organisation (www.khabaronline.ir, 2025). The removal of the Taliban from Russia's list of terrorist groups is observable from the official press release of Russia's foreign policy. It is stated that:

*“The removal of terrorist status from the Taliban movement, which formed the Afghan government following the collapse of the pro-Western regime of Ashraf Ghani in 2021, opens the way to the establishment of a full-fledged partnership with Kabul in the interests of Russian and Afghan peoples. Russia is set to build mutually advantageous ties with Afghanistan in all areas, including combatting drug trafficking and terrorism. Russia appreciates the military and law enforcement operations conducted by Afghanistan's authorities in its territory against Wilayat Khorasan, an Afghan wing of ISIS, which professes an ultra-radical ideology of a “global jihad.””* (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2025, p. 1)

In addition, Russian officials have also criticised Western withdrawal from the country, stating that they only catalysed humanitarian and economic challenges in Afghanistan. Moscow has also advocated for increased humanitarian support for the Afghan population. Russia's strategic interest in Afghanistan is further evidenced by the country's uranium reserves. A widely cited 1983 report estimated that Afghanistan may contain between 10,000 and 50,000 tonnes of uranium. A more conservative 2010 estimate by the International Atomic Energy Agency suggested the presence of approximately 4,000 tonnes (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2010). During the Soviet era, the USSR engaged in uranium extraction within Afghanistan, and similar interests appear to persist

today. The current Taliban-led administration has initiated efforts to survey and map the country's rare earth elements and uranium deposits; however, these efforts are hindered by limited technological and scientific capacity (Gafarov, 2025). Consequently, Russian scientists and companies have been invited to assist in these exploratory activities, indicating the potential for deeper bilateral cooperation.

Further evidence reinforcing the argument that Afghanistan has acquired strategic value for Russia can be found in Moscow's recent humanitarian engagement. In March 2024, the World Food Programme (WFP) acknowledged a donation of one million US dollars from Russia to support food security efforts in Afghanistan. This financial contribution facilitated the purchase of over ten metric tonnes of food. By December of the same year, Russia had delivered approximately 28 metric tonnes of food to Afghanistan, demonstrating an ongoing commitment to humanitarian aid in the country (Russian Government, 2024).

Another factor that contributes to Afghanistan's heightened strategic value for Russia is the abrupt political shift in Syria. The collapse of Al-Assad's regime in December 2024 prompted Russia to shift its focus strategically. Historically, Russia has maintained a close alliance with Syria by providing consistent military and logistical support in the entirety of the prolonged civil conflict that emerged in the midst of the Arab Spring. In addition, Syria possessed critical value for Russia as a critical geopolitical foothold in the broader Middle East and North Africa (El Abdi, 2021; Hatahet, 2021; Nainggolan, 2020, p. 60). The fall of Al-Assad's regime proved to be a geopolitical setback for Moscow.

Russia appears to have accelerated efforts to deepen ties with Afghanistan since the fall of Al-Assad's regime. In December 2024, around weeks after the collapse of the Al-Assad's regime, the Supreme Court of Russia declared the removal of the Taliban from its official list of terrorist organisations. The legal efforts conducted by Russia paves the way for expanding both countries' diplomatic engagements. The growing bilateral trade is an indicator of this particular shift. Russia's exports to Afghanistan have reached a total of 300 million US dollars despite the absence of fully restored formal diplomatic relations following the U.S. withdrawal (Hakim 2024).

In addition to trade, infrastructure collaboration has also emerged as a key area of focus. Russia announced several plans to contribute to and to bolster the development of Afghanistan's domestic transport network, in particular the Salang Highway in April 2025 (Saqi, 2025). The project is a symbol of a broader intention to enhance economic integration between Kabul and Moscow. Furthermore, Afghanistan has become the leading

importer of Russian flour in 2024. The purchases amounted to 80 million US dollars (Bandouli, 2025). The developments of the trade bilateral relations, implicitly suggest that after the loss of Syria as a regional ally, Russia increasingly views Afghanistan as a central pillar in its renewed strategic posture across Central and South Asia.

#### **4.1.1.5 North Africa: Shifting Geopolitical Contours**

This part contends that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has accelerated a wider realignment of geopolitical influence in North Africa. The presence of rival powers such as Russia and China has gradually increased since America's retreat from Afghanistan. This analysis which is based on the First Move Advantage and Resource Cumulativity will demonstrate how Russia despite losing strategic footing in Syria, rapidly redirected its influence-construction efforts toward Libya and Algeria, taking advantage of the power vacuum left by the U.S. in Afghanistan.

At the same time, China has expanded its economic presence through investments in infrastructure in Egypt, especially in the Suez Canal Zone. While Van Evera emphasises how early control over strategic areas and resource-rich zones can enhance long-term power projection, this section illustrates how such control is not only sought militarily but also through economic and logistical infrastructure. Hence, the North African context highlights a modern application of Van Evera's concepts, wherein emerging powers exploit geopolitical openings to consolidate regional influence in the wake of U.S. retrenchment.

The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan has had a notable impact on the geopolitical landscape, not only within Afghanistan itself but also across neighbouring regions, particularly the Middle East. This sentiment is reflected in the perspective of Republican Representative Pat Harrigan, who observed that the manner in which the withdrawal was conducted may increase the likelihood of future conflicts for subsequent generations of Americans. He emphasised the need to deter such outcomes and ensure that, if conflict arises, the United States is prepared to prevail (Kranich, 2025). Harrigan further remarked that Afghanistan has become increasingly vulnerable to extremist activity, suggesting that the withdrawal created an environment conducive to instability (Kranich, 2025).

He also expressed concern over the potential presence of the US' adversaries who could exploit and take advantage of the situation to strike at perceived weaknesses. His statements align with the broader geopolitical shifts after the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan.

It was also noted that China, Russia, and Iran have taken strategic interest in filling the vacuum left by the American departure.

Beyond the Middle East, this study argues that North Africa has also been affected by the structural and geopolitical changes that followed the US withdrawal in 2021. One of the turning points for Russia's strategic re-calibration was the collapse of Al-Assad's regime in Syria. The development directly and indirectly benefited the US' position in Syria and in the entirety of the Middle East. In 2021, for instance, Syria's then oil minister, Bassam Toma'a, stated that Washington approximately controlled 90% of Syria's oil reserves. Washington still holds a significant portion of its military presence in the country in order to defend the resources (Donovan, 2023), deploying an estimated 900 troops, which reportedly increased to around 2,000 by the end of 2024 following the fall of Al-Assad in December 2024, (Mehr, 2024).

Donald Trump also previously acknowledged that the US military presence in Syria was to guard and secure oil resources, highlighting strategic economic considerations. While the official statement behind the particular policy was to prevent extremist groups from accessing critical infrastructure and to contribute to creating regional and national stability (Schmitt, 2024; Tama, 2024). Other factors such as U.S strategic interests of securing oil reserves in Syria may also be at play. The current Syrian president, Ahmed Al Shara, has indicated a willingness to normalise relations with Israel, contingent upon the cessation of hostilities against Palestine (Rosdalina, 2025). As of early May 2025, despite numerous airstrikes carried out by the Israeli army on Syrian territories, it has not responded militarily. This could serve a significant change from the more assertive stance of the previous administration. The tone shift could indirectly bolster and advantage the US' strategic influence in the region. This paper puts up an argument that Al-Assad's fall combined with America's retreat from Afghanistan as a strategic foothold, has compelled Washington to re-calibrate its approach to securing vital energy resources. The current US military presence in Syria, while officially framed and expressed as one of the efforts to maintain peace, may also be interpreted as part of a broader effort to compensate for diminished strategic leverage in Afghanistan. These developments reinforce Representative Harrigan's view that the United States is actively seeking to reassert stability and influence in the aftermath of its military disengagement from Afghanistan.

Russia's strategic re-calibration after the current events in Syria has produced notable implications for its regional posture. Russia maintained an operational airbase historically in Latakia, Syria, specifically the Khmeimim Air Base. Significant changes

took place following the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan which eventually led to subsequent changes in the regions. Thus, Moscow has sought to diversify its strategic foothold. As previously discussed, one such move included removing the Taliban from its national list of terrorist organisations, thereby strengthening bilateral ties with Afghanistan. Simultaneously, Russia has turned its attention to North Africa, particularly Libya, as an alternative strategic anchor. Evidence of this shift can be observed in the reactivation of Maaten al-Sarra Airport in southern Libya. Although the site had been abandoned as of January 2024, intensive redevelopment activities resumed in January 2025. Le Monde reported that the airport is expected to function as a logistical hub for Russian military operations in North Africa. This presence could pose a direct challenge to the influence traditionally held by America in various African regions. This includes Sudan, Niger, and Chad.



Figure 4. 3 Airport in Maaten Al-Sarra in January 2024

Source:(Afrique, 2025)



Figure 4. 4 Airport in Maaten Al-Sarra in February 2025

Source: (Afrique, 2025)

The Russian military vacated its installations in Syria after the fall of Al-Assad in December 2024, thus relocating equipment to Al-Khadim Airport in Benghazi. Additionally, Russia has increased its presence at Al-Juffrah airport, a development demonstrated by a significant increase in Russian cargo flights in early 2025.



Figure 4. 5 Russian Antonov Cargo Planes in Al Juffrah in January 2025

Source: (Afrique, 2025)

Concurrently, Moscow has provided military support to the Libyan National Army, which remains involved in conflict with the UN- and US-backed Government of National Accord (Afrique 2025). Thus, while the fall of Assad might have created opportunities for the United States to reassert influence, particularly over energy assets, Russia appears to have responded by augmenting its engagement in Libya, further adding the complexity of the domestic conflict there.

In addition to Libya, Russia has engaged in the geopolitical tension strategically between Algeria and Morocco. The two particular states maintain disparate positions regarding Israel. Through its agreement in 2020 under the Abraham Accords, Morocco normalised relations with Israel. This particular move successfully secured American support and formal recognition over the Western Sahara (Alfarisi, 2024). In contrast, Algeria remains opposed to normalising relations with Israel and continues to support the Polisario Front. Algeria approximately sourced 73% of its arms imports from Russia from 2018 to 2022. This makes it Russia's largest regional client during the particular 4-year

period (www.statista.com, 2024). In March 2025, multiple reports said that Russia had delivered an unspecified number of Su-35 fighter jets to Algeria (Nikolov, 2025). The defence cooperation between the two countries strengthens Moscow’s influence in North Africa and presents a challenge to Washington’s strategic presence in the region ,an influence arguably attenuated by the U.S (AN, n.d.; Sour, 2024). retreat from Afghanistan in 2021 that results in regional shifts. In response, the United States has not remained passive. Following the loss of its strategic outpost in Afghanistan, Washington imposed sanctions on Algeria for procuring \$7 billion worth of arms from Russia. U.S. officials have encouraged Algeria to immediately reassess its military cooperation with Russia, particularly in the midst of the Russo-Ukrainian war (Rubio, 2023; Zoubir, 2024).

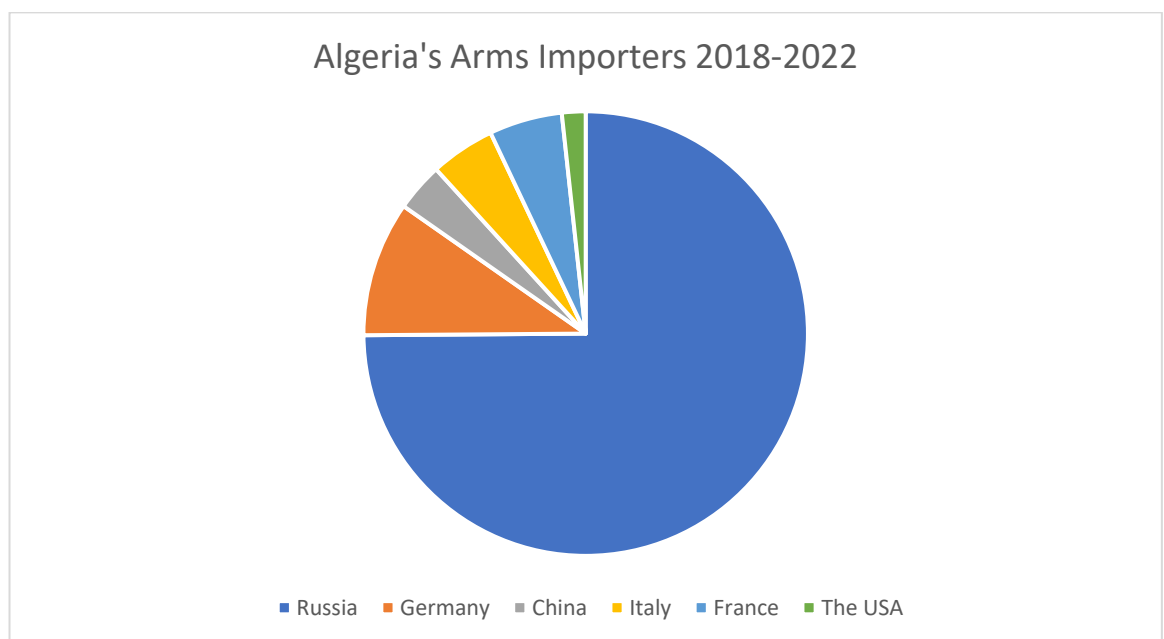


Figure 4. 6 Algeria’s Arms Importers

Source: (Zoubir, 2024)

Furthermore, China's increasing economic footprint in North Africa has become another concern for American policymakers. In 2025, Egypt has deployed military forces to the Sinai Peninsula. The events raise questions regarding compliance with the Camp David Accords of 1979. The accords prohibit the militarisation of Sinai (Egypt Independent, 2025; Oron, 2025; Telhami, 1992). The deployment occurred in a broader context after the escalation of conflict between Israel and Hamas, which intensified following the events of 7 October 2023 (Alfarisi, 2024, p. 26). During a temporary ceasefire in February 2025, reports suggested that former U.S. President Donald Trump had proposed relocating approximately two million Palestinians from Gaza and redeveloping

the area into a luxury tourism hub, termed the "Riviera of the Middle East" (Hellyer, 2025). China's economic engagement in the region, particularly through massive investments in the Suez Canal, underscores the shifting balance of influence (Yilmaz, 2023). Between 2022 and 2023, Chinese investment in the canal reached \$16.6 billion and \$14 billion respectively (Yasser, 2023). Projects such as the TEDA Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone, hosting over 140 Chinese companies with investments totalling \$1.6 billion, illustrate this growing presence. Additional initiatives include a \$2 billion iron and steel facility by Xinxing Ductile Iron Pipes and the Green Hydrogen Project in partnership with Egyptian stakeholders (www.scmp.com, 2023).

Egypt's redeployment in Sinai can be interpreted as an effort to safeguard these critical economic assets amidst escalating regional instability. This shift potentially signals a weakening of the long-standing Egypt–U.S. security relationship. More broadly, the Israel–Hamas conflict, when viewed through a geopolitical lens, may serve American strategic interests by disrupting China's expanding economic footprint in the Middle East and North Africa. In this light, U.S. financial and military support to Israel may also be interpreted as a mechanism to counterbalance Chinese regional investments. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the potential strategic significance of the proposed Ben Gurion Canal project. Originally conceptualised in the 1960s, the canal would serve as a direct competitor to the Egyptian-controlled Suez Canal. Reports suggest that the proposed relocation of Palestinians from Gaza may facilitate the realisation of this project (Pezzulli, 2024). Given China's dominant investment in the Suez, the construction of an alternative trade route could be seen as an American response to mitigate Beijing's economic leverage in one of the world's most vital maritime corridors.



Figure 4. 7 Ben Gurion, Sinai and Suez Canal Map

Source: (Pezzulli, 2024)

#### **4.1.1.6 Reassessing U.S. Strategic Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Geopolitical Realignment**

This work tries to address a central question set earlier: Despite the fact that Afghanistan's strategic importance is not limited to Central Asia, but also to the Middle East and North Africa, why did the United States choose to withdraw from the country? What explains Washington's idea to tolerate heightened vulnerability to its adversaries in the region? Based on a wide range of empirical data, this work advances an argument that the principal reason behind Washington's retreat from Afghanistan lies in its huge financial constraints, which led to the fact that America's military presence in Afghanistan became gradually and increasingly untenable despite the region's geopolitical significance.

To support this argument, my work has put forward the United States' rising debt levels. From 2021 to 2024, America's debt-to-GDP ratio has consistently exceeded 100%, peaking at approximately at 124% in 2024. This implies that the national debt is much higher than the annual economic output by around 24% (fiscaldata.treasury.gov, 2025). In addition, several interlinked factors that contributed to the huge financial strain, have been identified. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an economic contraction, which shrank the US GDP by 3.4% in 2020. This contraction is the most significant one since 1946 and the first since the 2009 global financial crisis. The long-term consequences of Washington's financial strain were accelerated by the spending of the federal government on combating pandemic domestically, which was estimated to have reached \$14 trillion (Hlava & Rose, 2023; Zelikow, 2023), and even according to Kirson et al, America has spent \$16 trillion on societal cost during the pandemic (Kirson et al., 2022).

In this context, the withdrawal from Afghanistan can be interpreted as a strategic recalibration aimed at preserving core national interests by relinquishing peripheral commitments. The occupation of Afghanistan reportedly cost the United States approximately \$300 million per week, excluding unpublicised expenditures (Simbar & Kikanlo, 2024). Simultaneously, the US continued to provide substantial financial and military assistance to longstanding allies such as Israel. As such, the decision to end its involvement in Afghanistan reflects a strategic concession, Washington opted to reduce its global military footprint to contain growing domestic economic pressures.

The economic rationale located behind Washington's retreat is further explained by the developments of US foreign policy. In the years after the military retreat, President Biden significantly increased military aid to Ukraine after the Russian invasion on Ukraine in 2022, thus adding strain to national resources. During Trump's second presidency in

2025, the US had responded to the fiscal pressures by setting protectionist trade measures, ranging from heightened tariffs that disrupted international trade flows. Meanwhile, all US aid to Ukraine was discontinued, with Trump reportedly asserting that Washington had received little in return for its assistance.

The developments lend further credence to the argument that the US retreat from Afghanistan was not a projection of a diminished perception of the country's strategic value and importance, but it is an imminent sacrifice motivated by financial exigencies. The imposition of new trade barriers under Trump's administration may also be understood as an effort to reassert American dominance within a shifting international order, an attempt to counter China's ascent and reinforce the image of US leadership at a time when its structural capabilities are increasingly constrained. In essence, Washington's retreat from Afghanistan illustrates how hegemonic endurance may sometimes require tactical retrenchment in the face of unsustainable economic commitments.

Finally, this study puts up an argument rooted from the theoretical blind spot of Evera's First Move Advantage and Resource Cumulativity that the amalgamation of military over-extension, mounted financial strain, which lead to growing global and strategic resistance reflects a broader structural tendency within the decline in influence. When a dominant power continuously projects influence across multiple regions, the cumulative economic pressures and political repercussions can finally prompt a strategic retreat. In this context, America's withdrawal from Afghanistan demonstrates a recalibration motivated not by diminished interest in the region, but rather by the unbearable costs of constantly maintaining hegemonic commitments amidst competing priorities and declining fiscal flexibility.

#### **4.2 Afghanistan in the Radar of the Post-retreat America: The Unsettled Terrain of Interest Articulation**

This part is going to argue and describe the cumulative resources in Afghanistan and its strategic importance in geopolitics particularly for great powers. Drawing on the theoretical insights of resource cumulativity, this part finds that Afghanistan possesses a lot of strategic and cumulative resources such as oil, lithium, gold, etc. The description of resources in this part is going to depict the strategic interests in the country which invite the arrival of great powers such as America under the pretext of defending human rights in 2001. This is further demonstrated when Washington withdrew from the country, which prompted First-Mover for countries like China and Russia, since Afghanistan possesses key natural resources for their particular national interests.

Afghanistan has long possessed strategic importance in international politics which is rooted in its geographical position and natural resource potential. Located at the intersection of several regions, bordering Central Asia to the north, the Middle East to the west, and South Asia to the southeast, Afghanistan serves as a crucial geo-strategic crossroads, which contributes to its political and strategic values in international politics. Its estimated reserves of crude oil, natural gas, and uranium have made it a region of sustained interest for global powers. During the Cold War, Afghanistan became a central theatre of rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union (Brown, 2013). The Soviet Union attempted to solidify its influence in the region by backing a communist government in Kabul, with the objective of aligning Afghanistan more closely with its ally, Iran. Not only was this alliance ideological, but also resource-driven, as access to natural reserves in both countries would cement Moscow's bargaining position during the Cold War.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan led to a counter-response from the United States. In an attempt to prevent the strengthening of Soviet influence in Afghanistan, Washington gave support to the formation and training of Afghan resistance fighters. Cooperating with its ally, Pakistan, the US was able to provide both logistical and financial support to the mujaheddin, many of whom later formed what became known as the Taliban. The groups were ultimately driven by religious and ideological motivations to drive away the invading Soviet forces (Gohardani & Tizro, 2019).

Following the eventual withdrawal of Soviet troops and the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Afghanistan came under the control of the Taliban. In spite of this, the terrorist attack on September 11 2001 significantly shifted U.S. policy. The Taliban forces were accused of harbouring Al-Qaeda operatives in the country. Thus, Washington launched a military intervention in an effort to enact its "War on Terror" operation globally. Despite its frame as an effort to completely eliminate terrorism, critics have contended that this particular intervention also reflected longstanding geostrategic and economic interests in the region, particularly related to energy resources (Butt, 2019; Saidin, 2022; Waško-Owsiejczuk, 2023). Iraq is a comparable case to further understand America's position in Afghanistan. The Washington-led invasion was justified and motivated by the alleged existence of weapons of mass destruction, a claim which would later be discredited (Nakdon & Ladol, 2023). The objective of the invasion was also to erect a democratic government in Iraq and to protect the Iraqis from the authoritarian regime. Some scholars

have put up arguments that such justifications often serve broader geo-economic agendas, especially given Iraq's huge oil reserves (Powaski & Powaski, 2017).

Afghanistan also attracted U.S. corporate interest. In the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal, U.S. energy companies such as Unocal explored opportunities to construct pipelines traversing the region (Imranullah & Hakimuddin, 2024). Despite the arrivals of various investors invited by the U.S. government, social restrictions under the Taliban rule, especially regarding to the role of women, reportedly impeded operations and limited commercial viability (feminist.org, 1997). As a result, tensions accelerated as the Taliban's governance was increasingly becoming incompatible with U.S economic and strategic goals. Resource politics becomes the U.S. central interests. Thomas (2007) notes that despite the US only accounting for 5% of the global population, it consumes approximately 25% of the world's oil production.

The US' domestic reserves only account for 3% of global supply. This renders foreign energy access extremely vital to economic stability and the interests of Washington's multinational corporations (Thomas, 2007, p. 1217). Thomas further connects these dynamics to powerful entities like the Carlyle Group, linking defense, energy, and policymaking circles. Furthermore, the absence of Soviet counterbalance in Central Asia heightened U.S. engagement, especially as estimates suggested the presence of over 200 billion barrels of oil in the broader region (Thomas, 2007). According to a 2019 mutual evaluation report cited by the BBC, Afghanistan alone may possess around 1.6 billion barrels of crude oil, 16 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, and 500 million barrels of liquid natural gas (Klett et al., 2006; The Ministry of Mining of Afghanistan and The American Geological Association, 2019). Yet despite these reserves, Afghanistan remains economically vulnerable, particularly following the U.S. withdrawal in 2021.

Estimation	Resources
1.6 billion of barrels	Oil
16 trillion cubic meters	Gas
500 million of barrels	Liquid Gas
60 million of tons	Copper
2200 million of tons	Iron Ore
4.1 million of tons	Rare Mining Materials
2700 kilograms	Gold

Figure 4. 8 Natural Resources in Afghanistan

Source: (Klett et al., 2011; The Ministry of Mining of Afghanistan and The American Geological Association, 2019)

Afghanistan reportedly possesses huge lithium reserves, with some sources referring to it as the "Saudi Arabia of Lithium" (Chaudhuri & Roy, 2024, p. 31; Deberdt et al., 2024; Pitron, 2022). This demonstrates the potency that Afghanistan could supply lithium demands globally to a similar extent that Saudi Arabia currently fulfils global oil needs. Lithium is increasingly recognised as a critical mineral in the context of the global transition towards environmentally sustainable industries. As the world gradually shifts from oil dependency to cleaner energy alternatives, lithium has emerged as a cornerstone resource in the production of batteries that power electric vehicles. The contemporary industrial transformation has heightened both the economic as well as geopolitical value of lithium (Hussein & Haddad, 2021). States are now competing against each other for access to abundant lithium supplies to maintain and defend their competitive power in the growing market for electric transport.

The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021 not only demonstrates a significant change in political strategy, but also symbolises a missed opportunity to secure vital economic interests and resources. During the early years of occupation following the 2001 intervention and the collapse of the Taliban regime, Washington's focus was primarily on the oil sector and other conventional mining industries. However, in the context of a global push for decarbonisation and sustainable development, the strategic oversight of Afghanistan's lithium potential now appears increasingly consequential. According to data from the Ghani administration, the total value of Afghanistan's lithium reserves is estimated to be in the trillions of US dollars. Nevertheless, ongoing security concerns in regions where the deposits are located have hindered large-scale extraction and investment. In addition to lithium, Afghanistan is also believed to harbour significant untapped uranium

reserves. Uranium is a vital input for nuclear energy production and, in some cases, military applications.

A geological survey conducted by the United States in 2010 estimated that Afghanistan approximately has 4,000 tonnes of uranium (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2010). Even according to NASA (2012) preliminary estimation, this country could possess 1.4 million tonne reservoirs of uranium. It is even suggested that the uranium reserve in the country could power Afghanistan for more than 500 years with 30 different nuclear reactors (Hasimi, 2020). Despite having this potential, current political and social instability and limited foreign involvement have hindered the development of this particular sector.

In sum, Afghanistan has two primary dimensions of strategic value and position for global powers such as the US, Russia, and China. Firstly, its geographical position offers a geostrategic nexus point between Central Asia to the north, the Middle East to the west, and South Asia to the southeast. Secondly, its richness of natural resources, particularly lithium, natural gas, oil, and uranium, positions it as a potential hub of future energy and industrial supply chains. Even estimates suggest Afghanistan may hold over three trillion US dollars' worth of lithium reserves alone (Chaudhuri & Roy, 2024, p. 27; Sharma, 2021). This suggests that the country is capable of being a leading actor in both traditional fossil fuel markets and emerging green technology sectors. Many parts of these resources are underdeveloped and not exploited. This highlights the potential advantages in the future for other countries to secure exclusive partnerships. One can argue that America's withdrawal has created a vacuum of power and opened pathways for rival states, such as China, to expand their influence and claim access to the valuable resources in support of their national and industrial goals.

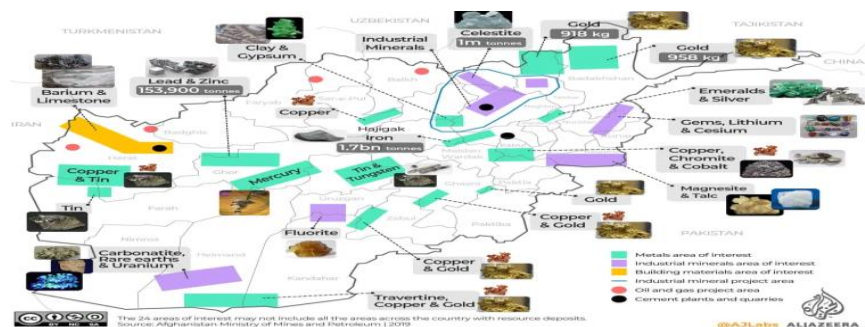


Figure 4. 9 Afghanistan’s Natural Resources

Source: (Hussein & Haddad, 2021)

#### 4.2.1 America's Retreat from Afghanistan and Its Consequences

This part demonstrates the aftermath of U.S. retreat from Afghanistan. Drawing on the theoretical insight of the first-move advantage, this part argues that Washington's retreat from Afghanistan has left strategic power vacuum which would benefit other rivals such as Russia, China and even Iran. America's 2020 presidential election marked a turning point in United States foreign policy with Joe Biden's victory. This is apparent in its engagements in the Middle East and South Asia. A significant early decision in 2021 was the halting of arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which was part of the Arab Coalition involved in the Yemeni conflict. This particular measure was justified by the need to address and solve the ongoing human rights violations concerns, especially the repeated civilian casualties associated with coalition airstrikes (Eichensehr, 2021). Simultaneously, the Biden administration linked its withdrawal from Afghanistan to a broader commitment to human rights and Afghan sovereignty. American officials stated that the primary objective was to bring an end to what had become the country's longest war. They emphasised that the intervention in Afghanistan had not been intended for nation-building and that the responsibility for governance should rest with the Afghan people themselves (Simbar & Kikanlo, 2024).

The phased withdrawal began in 2021 and culminated on 15 August of that year when Taliban forces captured Kabul (Seir, 2021). Despite the existence of a national army, Afghan forces proved unable to repel the Taliban's rapid advance. The US and other NATO member states also completed their troop withdrawals, leading to the collapse of the Western-supported regime. Ashraf Ghani, the president of Afghanistan was forced to leave the country shortly thereafter. This officially ended the US-led occupation political order since 2001 (Nainggolan, 2021).

According to Michael Kugelman, an expert at Wilson Center, the threat of terrorism could be more dangerous after U.S. retreat from the country (Kugelman, 2021). Taliban forces then were able to secure significant caches of abandoned US military equipment, including aircraft and firearms. In addition, the report *Missing in Action: UK Leadership and the Withdrawal from Afghanistan* describes the operation as a disaster in terms of planning and execution. This is rooted from the lack of coordination between Washington and UK government regarding the retreat (House of Commons: Defence Committee, 2022). This leads to financial, mental losses of the British government. Not only did this event reflect America's diminishing influence but also presented strategic openings

and vacuums for other powers such as China, Russia, and even China to increase their presence in the country and the region in the proximity of Afghanistan.

#### **4.2.1.1 Afghanistan and the Influx of Post-conflict Many-sided Rationales**

Although some put up arguments that the US-led occupation contributed extremely positively to various sectors such as education and public services (Deo, 2014; Małgorzata, 2022), this study takes a more critical stance, it contends that the rhetoric of promoting human rights, employed at the time of intervention and withdrawal, functioned as a narrative to legitimise broader strategic objectives.

The original justification in 2001 had centred on the claim that the Taliban supported Al-Qaeda, the group responsible for the September 11 attacks. Despite the removal of the Taliban regime and years of military presence, insurgent violence, including terrorist attacks, remained a persistent issue, particularly in Kabul. Both the Bush and Obama administrations had escalated troop deployments in an attempt to stabilise the situation. However, internal corruption and reliance on local militias limited the efficacy of these efforts. Alongside military operations, the US also actively supported programmes to promote liberal democratic values, especially among Afghan youth. Despite the betterment and expansion of education, especially for girls, marking significant social progress (Easar et al., 2023), such steps also served to align local governance and social institutions more closely with American ideological and strategic interests and identities.

For instance, the establishment of the Lincoln Learning Center provided a platform for disseminating educational content that promoted individual rights, pluralism, and democratic participation ([www2.fundsforngos.org](http://www2.fundsforngos.org), 2020). The US Embassy reported that Washington had closely and perennially worked with the Afghan government to improve the country's educational access. The Embassy stated that these efforts had led to an increase in school enrolment to 9.6 million students, supported institutional capacity-building, and contributed to a more stable future for the Afghans ([af.usembassy.gov](http://af.usembassy.gov), 2021; Arooje & Burrige, 2021; Lan, 2022).

Since 2008, USAID had built or rehabilitated 580 schools, trained 480,000 teachers, and distributed 170 million textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education. In addition, educational access had reportedly expanded to 3.5 million Afghan girls, many of whom were attending school for the first time ([af.usembassy.gov](http://af.usembassy.gov), 2021; Ryman, n.d.). In conclusion, although American involvement in Afghanistan included developmental efforts, these actions must be examined within the broader framework of US strategic

interests. *The juxtaposition of military operations with educational and humanitarian initiatives suggests a complex interplay between genuine development goals and broader geopolitical ambitions.*

The presence of institutions such as the Lincoln Learning Centers in Afghanistan shows a bigger projection of soft power strategy as argued by Joseph Nye. Nye (2004) states that soft power refers to a country's ability to shape the preferences and values of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004, p. 6, 2008). In this particular context, one can argue that education is an instrument for promoting the cultural and ideological norms of donor countries. The Lincoln Learning Centers, which is supported by Washington, did not only offer language and technological training but it also promoted liberal democratic ideals such as individual rights, inclusivity, and civic participation.

While it is true that these initiatives can be categorised as part of development and humanitarian assistance, they also serve to promote and strengthen America's cultural and ideological influence and preference in strategic regions. In post-conflict environments like Afghanistan, where institutional and ideological vacuums are almost ubiquitous and prevalent, the dissemination of particular values through education may contribute to a subtle form of norm-setting aligned with American geopolitical interests. Thus, education in such cases, while beneficial in certain respects, can also function as an instrument of soft power projection.

The US' presence in Afghanistan's education was not just limited to constructing formal schools and training thousands of teachers. One notable example is the production and the broadcast of the children's television programme *Baghch-e-Simsim*, which is the local adaptation of *Sesame Street*. The idea of such a televised programme was to promote values such as inclusivity and social harmony, which is aligned with broader liberal democratic ideals (Canfield, 2017, p. 1; Wiest, 2016, p. 1).

Through the Hypodermic Needle Theory of media influence, one could infer that contents in a televised show of the localised version of *Sesame Street* in Afghanistan operate through a direct and uncritical transmission of normative values, particularly in various contexts where alternative narratives are limited (Mehrad et al., 2020; Wartella & Reeves, 1985). The theory postulates that the media can exercise strong and imminent influence on passive audiences, particularly children, by embedding specific messages in their cognitive and emotional development. Combined with Nye's conceptualisation of soft power, which is the ability to influence the preferences of others through attraction rather

than coercion (Nye, 2004, 2008), programmes like this is arguably part of a long-term strategy to cultivate value alignment and sociopolitical affinity with the donor country. *This does not discount the developmental benefits of the programme, but it raises important questions regarding the role of educational media in shaping ideological orientations in post-conflict societies.*

While the programme was tailored to reflect Afghan cultural contexts, it also introduced norms and values rooted in Western educational paradigms. This indicates that education engagement has served as developmental purposes which may also contribute to shaping long-term sociopolitical orientations and circumstances. It is to be noted that this analysis does not challenge the essence of education or the right to access education of Afghan children. Rather, it raises questions about the underlying intentions and structural dependencies that may emerge from prolonged foreign educational involvement. In this sense, educational initiatives could function as instruments for advancing soft power objectives, thereby supporting future strategic interests, particularly in contexts where natural resources and geopolitical positioning are at stake.

Beside the formal and media education, America has also given support to a wide range of non-governmental organisations or NGOs in Afghanistan. While they frequently have a crucial role in promoting human rights, preparing and offering vocational trainings, and contributing to the solution to environmental challenges, there arose concerns pertaining to the extent to which they operate in favour of donor preferences. This is as argued by Mehrdad in his writing in which NGOs tend to promote democratic values and human rights that are aligned with the donor preferences (Mehrdad, 2021). They also tend to reflect the priorities of their primary funders. Since the US has historically become one of the most prominent contributors to the initiatives, this raises an important question about the neutrality of NGO operations within the country.

It is also paramount to stress the increasingly strategic integration of civil society actors into foreign policy instruments, especially after the 9/11 geopolitical context. Colin Powell (2001:1) who served as U.S. Secretary of State in the early days of America's War on Terror stated:

*“I have made it clear to my staff here and to all of our ambassadors around the world that I am serious about making sure we have the best relationship with the NGOs who are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team”* (Powell, 2001, p. 1).

The explicit framing unravels a deliberate attachment of non-governmental organisations into the strategic calculus of Washington's national interests. Powell further added that:

*"NGOs, for example, can minister to those in misery. They can work person by person within communities, building capacity for societies from the ground up. They can focus deeply on specific issues and track them for long periods of time. You have stability in the work and in the programs that you do. Particularly in this age of instant communications and rapid change, you provide a certain consistency, a certain coherence over time that allows you to handle such grassroots work."* (Powell, 2001, p. 1).

The statements uttered by Powell explicitly demonstrates that the narratives of humanitarian and developmental assistance often serve parallel strategic functions, in which NGOs are not entirely autonomous, but they can serve as extensions of broader geopolitical objectives and agendas.

The scale of Washington's humanitarian aid raises questions about its influence and strategic interests. For example, in 2023, the US contributed approximately \$4.5 billion to the UN World Food Programme (Camarena, 2024). Since withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan, US aid has reached approximately \$2.9 billion. The US has constantly remained the largest donor country to Afghanistan, contributing over \$400 million to broader international relief efforts that have raised \$1.2 billion since the Taliban's return (Amu Tv, 2023; Rahmany & Shani, 2024). This level of financial engagement not only demonstrates America's role as a leading humanitarian actor but also has implications for political influence. While aid delivery may be purely altruistic, it is reasonable and arguable to consider that aid recipients may become more open to the interests and ideological frameworks of donors, particularly those of the primary one.

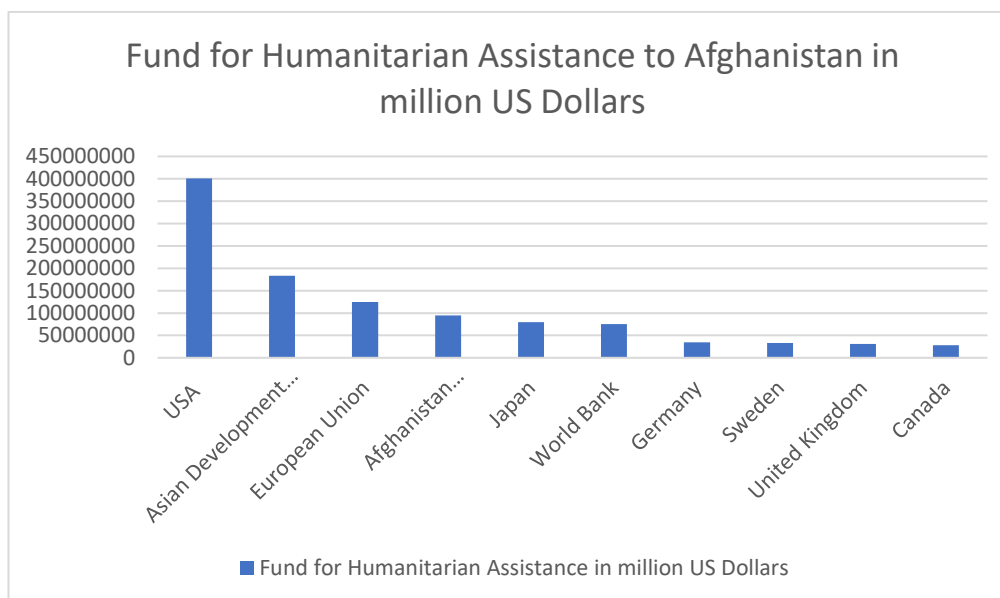


Figure 4. 10 Foreign Aid to Afghanistan

Source: (Rahmany & Shani, 2024, p. 12)

A clear structural imbalance exists in the hierarchy of international donors operating in Afghanistan. This structural reality, when combined with the donor-driven operational models of many NGOs, often leads to the alignment of these organisations with the normative frameworks and ideological preferences of their primary benefactors, particularly the United States. Mehrdad (2021) notes that NGOs working in Afghanistan frequently adjust their agendas to align with the expectations of key donors, occasionally promoting liberal values that may diverge from the socio-cultural and religious fabric of Afghan society (Mehrdad, 2021). **This underscores the broader contention that international engagement in Afghanistan has extended beyond immediate humanitarian or development objectives, serving instead to reinforce strategic regional interests.**

This particular phenomenon in Afghanistan is comparable with the findings of Kimberley Coles' (2007) ethnographic study of Democratic Designs: International Intervention and Electoral Practices in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina. She argues that the implementation of democratic systems in post-conflict countries such as Bosnia, East Timor, and Afghanistan tends to be achieved through technocratic imposition rather than natural and organic development according to localities and contextualities.

She puts up an argument that international assistance and interventions, coupled with technical mechanisms of electoral design, tend to normalise externally derived models

of governance that may not refer to or even reflect local traditions or institutions (Coles, 2007). In essence, democracy in these contexts is more artefact of externally imposed standards than it is a process of self-determination.

#### **4.2.1.2 A Retreat Trailed by a Drop in Humanitarian and Infrastructural Influence**

According to the theoretical framework used in this research, in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal, other state actors such as Russia, China, and Iran have sought to expand their influence in Afghanistan, capitalising on the strategic vacuum. Democracy can in certain contexts be used as an instrument of external influence imposition, despite being praised for its participatory and inclusive dimensions. In cases like these, the call for democratic governance may serve broader geopolitical and strategic objectives, rather than demonstrating a commitment to political pluralism. The USA, for instance, has often placed and regarded itself as a global advocate and defender of democratic norms. However, on the other side, some scholars argue that these normative agendas are not without strategic calculation and consideration, especially in regions of geopolitical sensitivity and importance such as the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia (Mateo, 2020; Monten, 2005; Morgenthau & Thomas, 1990; Talbott, 1996). The dependency on foreign assistance can also render recipient states vulnerable. In 2025, for example, a temporary halt to U.S. foreign aid to Afghanistan had various significant humanitarian consequences. According to Engeland, the suspension would have an imminent and devastating impact on global aid operations, particularly that affect vulnerable groups such as women and children (Greenfield, 2025). The episodic event buttresses the fragility of Afghanistan's humanitarian infrastructure and the risks associated with over-reliance on a single donor.

Previously, Washington conducted extensive geological surveys of Afghanistan's mineral reserves. While such surveys are arguably aimed at economic development of the country, they may also indicate long-term strategic interests. As demonstrated earlier in this thesis, the massive reserves of Afghanistan's untapped natural resources, which include lithium and uranium, raise important points and questions pertaining to the motivations behind prolonged foreign presence there. Washington has publicly made a statement that its primary objective in Afghanistan was not to build the country, but rather it was intended on eliminating terrorism (Simbar & Kikanlo, 2024). Despite so, the scale and scope of the particular intervention which ranges from investments in education, civil society to governance structures, implicitly suggest a broader agenda. Afghanistan's geostrategic

position, which is at the centre of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, further solidifies its importance and value in great power politics.

#### **4.2.1.3 Fiscal Challenge and the Exit Door**

Simbar and Kikanloo (2024) and Barrett (2022) observe that President Biden's decision to withdraw U.S. forces was partly driven by fiscal pressures, with the conflict costing American taxpayers approximately \$300 million per week. The US government has reportedly lost over 300 soldiers and spent more than \$2.2 trillion on Afghanistan since the start of its military operation in the country until its retreat in 2021 (Barrett, 2022; Simbar & Kikanloo, 2024, p. 4). These facts underscore the financial and political burdens of continued military engagement.

Another point to add to this analysis is the immense crisis precipitated after U.S. retreat along with its NATO allies. Reports from After Action which reviewed actions and ramifications of the significant changes that took place in Afghanistan before and after Washington's retreat, indicated that there is an immense crisis in Afghanistan spanning from economic to social crises (Akram & Akbar, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2022). In addition, a report from the British House of Commons indicated the failure of the NATO missions in Afghanistan. This is in line with what Brigadier Barry and Dr. Watling, two individuals that were involved in the mission and gave reviews regarding the failure. They noted that:

*“Brigadier Barry disagreed with these assessments: “We should be quite clear that the Taliban won and that the US, UK and NATO were defeated.” In his view, this was not just a military defeat but also a “wider defeat for the values of the West”. Dr Watling concurred: “if you are not able to acknowledge defeat, it will be very difficult for you to acknowledge that there is a problem and that you might need to learn from it”” (House of Commons: Defence Committee, 2023, p. 10)*

This report continues to mention that Washington and its NATO's allies retreat has indeed served as a strategic vacuum exploited by their enemy and even mentions that Afghanistan has become a safe haven for extremists to emerge with the Taliban rule as one of the motivating factors. This is further corroborated in statements present in the report that state that:

*“More than a year after the evacuation, it is obvious that the situation for most people in Afghanistan is far worse than it was before the*

*withdrawal. The Taliban have shown themselves to be no more inclusive or diverse or competent than they were in 2001, despite hopes to the contrary. The country faces multiple inter-connected crises, from governance, to the humanitarian situation, to the exclusion of women and girls from society.”* (House of Commons: Defence Committee, 2023, p. 11)

*“If the initial goal of the NATO deployment was mainly to prevent terrorist attacks against Western nations originating in Afghanistan, current evidence suggests that while there have been no such recent attacks to date, Afghanistan is once again becoming a safe haven for international terrorism. And it is impossible to argue that the mission has been a success if its goal was in part to ensure Afghanistan’s stability as a functioning state, with basic human rights for its population, including women and girls. The fall of the Afghan Government represented a serious strategic blow to NATO and its allies.”* (House of Commons: Defence Committee, 2023, p. 12)

The citations above once again indicate that the retreat from Afghanistan conducted by Washington and its allies has become a serious blow towards creating strategic power vacuum. Due to the absence of such forces, the adversaries were able to regroup and rebuild the power lost during the two decades of occupation. This has clearly indicated that there has been indeed a power vacuum that leads to strategic advantage exploited by rival factions of America that once defended Afghanistan as one of its geostrategic locations.

To conclude this analysis, although the U.S. presence has brought numerous positive impacts, such as expanded and wider access to education and the construction of public infrastructure, its wider strategic and national interests cannot be overlooked. America's activities in Afghanistan appear to have originated from an extremely complex combination of security concerns, economic and national interests, and ideological projection. Thus, an analysis of post-occupation Afghanistan must be able to deal with the duality of legacies of development and dependency on foreign presence, and the influence of global power dynamics.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 Conclusion

Several crucial factors have to be clearly identified when it comes to the examination and the observation of the structural shifts which occur in the Middle East and North Africa after Washington's retreat from Afghanistan. The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan marked the decline of its direct influence in the country as well as signalled a broader decrease in its perceived reliability as a regional partner. The retreat from Afghanistan has led to a ripple effect across the entire parts of the Middle East and North Africa, where several states have increasingly questioned Washington's commitment to regional stability. Simultaneously, there is growing scepticism towards the narrative that positions the United States as a stabilising force, particularly given its contested record on human rights in the region.

The evidences that have been presented in the work profusely support the conclusion that the structural realignment observed in the Middle East and North Africa after Washington's military withdrawal is connected to the intensification of geopolitical competition among Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. Shortly after America's retreat both countries tried to fill the power vacuum despite their strategical differences. These included economic investments, arms sales, and diplomatic overtures, often framed by a more non-interventionist stance in comparison to Washington's historically assertive approach, which has at times involved attempts to influence the domestic affairs of other states.

The use of Van Evera's theories especially First-Move-Advantage and Resource Cumulativity offers an incomplete explanation in this case study. While it is to be admitted that these theoretical frameworks have historically and significantly contributed to the understanding of geopolitical competition particularly after America's retreat from Afghanistan, they are not completely able to address cases where influential actors voluntarily disengage from strategically important areas due to internal constraints. Referring to the logic proposed by this theory, Washington should never have retreated from the country due to its strategic importance. In the case of Afghanistan, this retreat is precipitated by financial burdens borne by the U.S. government, which Van Evera's Eurocentric case studies do not fully account for. His theoretical frameworks that are largely based on conflicts such as the First and Second World Wars and the Cold War, may not sufficiently explain modern forms of retreat influenced by economic strain. In

summary, while Van Evera's theories provide a useful starting point, they require contextual adaptation to explain contemporary hegemonic recalibrations, particularly those beyond the Euro-Atlantic sphere. The withdrawal from Afghanistan may therefore be interpreted as a calculated, albeit costly, effort by the United States to consolidate its global position by relinquishing a strategic outpost to preserve broader structural resilience.

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