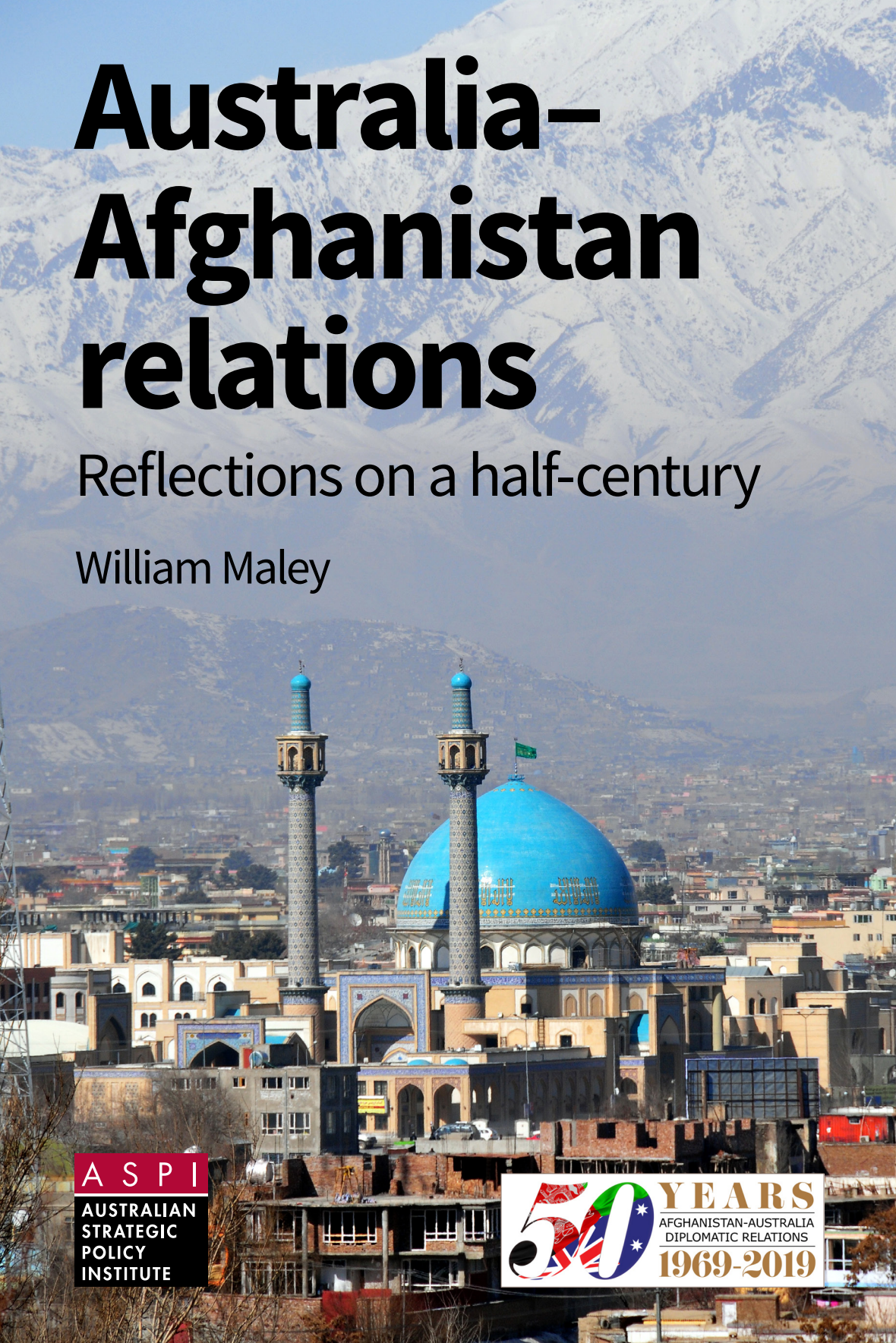
Australia–Afghanistan relations

Reflections on a half-century

William Maley



ASPI
AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE

50 YEARS
AFGHANISTAN-AUSTRALIA DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS
1969-2019


AFGHANISTAN
UZBEKISTAN
TURKMENISTAN
TAJIKISTAN
PAKISTAN
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN
CHINA
INDIA
Mary
Kerki
Amu Darya
Murgab
Kiroya
Termiz
Qurghonteppa (Kurgan-Tyube)
Dusti
Darya-ye
Murghob
Khorugh
Pamir
Qala-I-Panjeh
BADAKHSHAN
Fayz Abad
Rostaq
Jorm
Eshkashem
Hindu Kush
Andkhvoy
JAWZJAN
Shiberghan
Keleft
Jeyretan
Mazar-e-Sharif
KUNDUZ
Kunduz
Taloqan
Dowlatabad
BALKH
Kholm
Khanabad
TAKHAR
Baghlan
Farkhar
Sari Pul
Shulgarah
Aybak
Dowshi
Maymana
FARYAB
Qeysar
Tokzar
SAMANGAN
BAGHLAN
PANJSHER
Bazarak
Gilgit
Jammu and Kashmir
AFGHANISTAN
Gushgy
Towraghondi
Taybad
SARI PUL
BADGHIS
Qala-e-Naw
Mahmud-e-Raqi
NURISTAN
Kunar
KUNAR
Asad Abad
Morghab
BAMYAN
Bamyan
Chaharikar
PARWAN
KAPISA
Laghman
Purons
Mehtarlam
Herat
Karokh
Owbeh
Chaghcharan
Dowlat Yar
Harirud
Maydan Shahr
Kabul
KABUL
Jalalabad
WARDAK
Mardan
HERAT
GHOR
DAY KUNDI
LOGAR
NANGARHAR
Pul-e-Alam
Peshawar
Islamabad
Paywar Pass
Khyber Pass
Nili
Helmand
Gardez
Ghazni
GHAZNI
PAKTYA
KHOST
Rawalpindi
Shīndand
Qarah Bagh
Khost (Matun)
Anar Darreh
Khas Uruzgan
URUZGAN
Sharan
Bannu
FARAH
Farah
Now Zad
Tirin Kot
Arghandab
ZABUL
PAKTIKA
Harut
Farah
Kajaki
Qalat
Tarnak
Rowd-e Larah
Tank
Delaram
Lashkar Gah
Kandahar
Khash
Kadesh
Zabol
Zaranj
HILMAND
NIMROZ
Spin Buldak
Chaman
KANDAHAR
Zhob
Indus
Chehar Borjak
Hilmand
Deh Shu
Quetta
Zahedan
Gowd-e Zereh
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties.
0 50 100 150 200 250 km
0 50 100 150 mi
National capital
Provincial capital
Town, village
Airports
International boundary
Provincial boundary
Main road
Secondary road
Railroad

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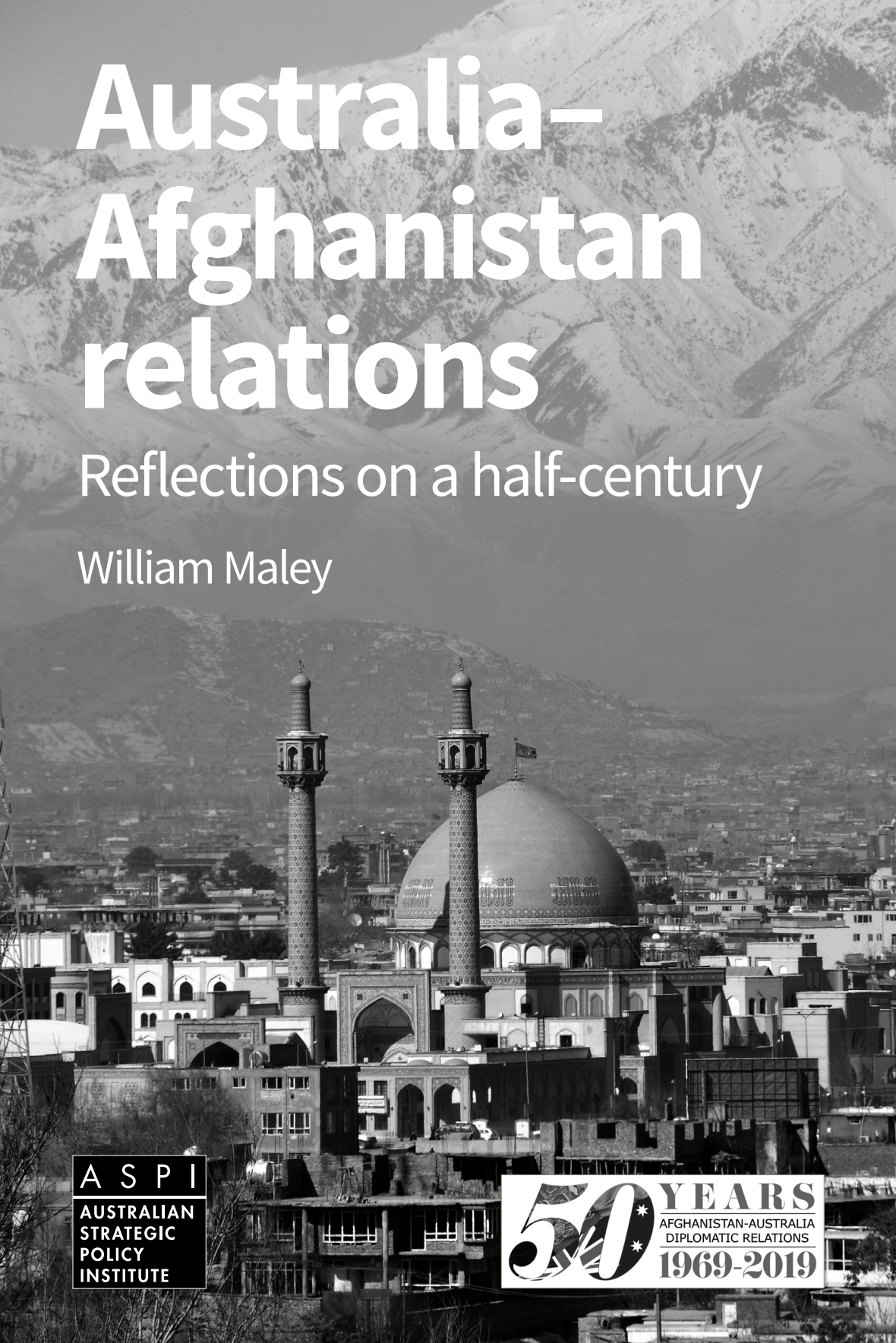

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Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
Canberra, Australia

Foreword

2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Australia and Afghanistan, and is an important milestone in the productive and longstanding relationship that has developed into the strong bond that our two countries share today. What we are celebrating this year draws attention to the ongoing efforts of Australia and its people to promote peace and security in Afghanistan, the contributions of Afghan-Australians who have made Australia their home, and the spirit of mutual support that binds them together. I see the distance that we have travelled together in the developments that this anniversary celebrates as being grounded in four major milestones, each of which offers another dimension to the strength of our bilateral relations.

The first of these milestones is to be found in the foundations of this relationship, which were laid long prior to the beginning of formal diplomatic relations in 1969. Rather, the historical ties were first forged by those Afghan cameleers who arrived on the Australian continent from the 1860s onwards to contribute to the development of its inland regions and trade routes. The long-ago lives and experiences of the cameleers live on in the kinship they formed with Indigenous Australians, and their legacy is recognised in the train and communication cable between Adelaide and Darwin: the Ghan.

From these humble beginnings in the harsh environs of the Australian outback, the relationship between Australia and Afghanistan blossomed into a diplomatic partnership in 1969, which marks the second of the milestones in the journey from ‘then’ to ‘now’. On 30 March 1969, Mr LH Border became Australia’s first Ambassador to Afghanistan, and in 1975 Dr Ali Ahmad Popal presented his credentials as Afghanistan’s Ambassador to Australia. These diplomatic links were complemented by the visit of the then Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, to Kabul in the same year, further cementing the first formal link between the countries.

The next turning point in the Australian-Afghan relationship came with the tragic terrorist attack against the United States on 11 September 2001, following which Australia and Afghanistan’s bilateral relationship entered a new dimension, with Australia committing troops to support the establishment of lasting stability and security in Afghanistan. In the years that followed, Australia has been a friend to the Afghan people, and the ongoing pursuit of peace reflects this. Those 41 Australian soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice to this cause have created a bond that will never vanish from our collective consciousness.

Though sombre, this dimension of the bond between Afghanistan and Australia highlights our mutual support and commitment to preventing the spread of extremism, in addition to the many cultural, political, economic and sporting ties that have upheld this relationship as it has developed over the years. It is these contributions which were the subject of recognition during the historic visit of President Ashraf Ghani in April 2017, which marked yet another milestone as the first visit of an Afghan President to Australia. The discussions held during President Ghani's visit set the foundation for the future of this partnership, which we should aim to cherish and maintain as we continue into the next 50 years, and beyond.

The preservation of this bond and the promotion of this friendship would not be possible without the voices and talents of individuals such as Professor William Maley, who has always been a brilliant friend and an inspiring scholar, and to whom I wish to extend my deepest thanks for his contributions to what we all know of Afghanistan. This sentiment is reflected in the sincere thanks I extend to all those at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, in particular Peter Jennings, Executive Director of the institute, for his efforts in allowing this publication to be possible.

I look forward to what the next 50 years of the Afghan-Australian partnership, and the years beyond, will bring for generations to come.

Wahidullah Waissi

Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to Australia, New Zealand and Fiji

Introduction

It is now 50 years since diplomatic relations were formally established between the Commonwealth of Australia and the Kingdom of Afghanistan. Superficially, the two countries might seem to have little in common. While each has a population of less than 40 million, mainland Australia is at least ten times larger in area than Afghanistan, and is a relatively flat island-continent, while Afghanistan is a landlocked country bisected by a huge mountain range, the Hindu Kush, which is an offshoot of the Himalayas and a product of the confluence of the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates. The Australian population, although now distinctly multiethnic, still substantially reflects the effects of two centuries of predominantly European migration, while the population of Afghanistan remains dominated by its historical position as a crossroads between Asia and the Middle East.[1] Furthermore, Australia is a stable, secure and prosperous democracy, whereas Afghanistan in the past four decades has endured invasion, population displacement and severe economic dislocation.

Nonetheless, there is more to unite Australians and Afghans than one might think at first glance. Even before the Australian colonies federated to form the Commonwealth of Australia from 1901, Afghans had made their way to Australia to provide transport by camel in parts of Australia's hot and harsh inland, and the 1901 Census recorded the presence of 394 Afghanistan-born people in Australia. By the time of the 2016 Census, that had risen to 46,800. Furthermore, in the period following the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, more than 25,000 members of the ADF served in Afghanistan, building on earlier deployments of ADF demining specialists who did much to establish a positive reputation for Australians even before the post-9/11 era. For more than a decade, Australia has had a resident embassy in Kabul, and Afghanistan a resident embassy in Canberra. Recent years have brought Australia and Afghanistan far closer to each other than ever before in their history.

This study explores some of the key dimensions of the development of that relationship. It examines the early history of Australia's encounters with Afghans before outlining how the diplomatic relationship came to be established, and shows how the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, by reason of its global geopolitical significance, elevated Afghanistan significantly in Australia's thinking about the world. It demonstrates that, paradoxically, one of the consequences was a freeze in the development of the bilateral political relationship between Afghanistan and Australia, although Australia was involved in supporting ordinary Afghans in other ways. But with the collapse of the Communist regime in April 1992, fresh opportunities emerged for engagement; and the terrorist attacks on the US in September 2001 opened new vistas for the relationship between Canberra and Kabul.

Since then, the state-to-state relationship has developed additional dimensions—diplomatic, military, developmental and humanitarian—which have been augmented by significant people-to-people ties despite all the difficulties that surround travel between the two countries. Yet for all this, what ultimately binds the two countries together is that Australia has a strong interest in seeing the transition in Afghanistan that was inaugurated in 2001—a complex mixture of statebuilding, institutional development, economic change, civil society activism and enhancement of human rights and freedoms[2]—continue down the broad path that was laid out at that time. A failure in Afghanistan is likely to involve serious adverse strategic consequences for Australia.

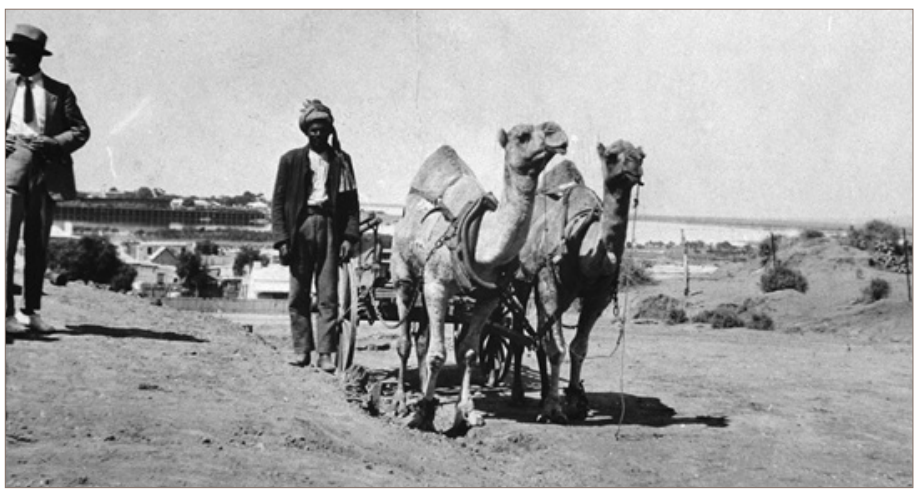
The Afghan Ambassador and Brendan Smyth, ACT's first Commissioner for International Engagement at the Afghan Embassy display, National Multicultural Festival, Canberra, 2019. Source: Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Canberra.

1. Afghans and Australians: the early days

The emergence of a sense of 'Australian' identity significantly preceded the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia as a political unit in January 1901, but, as Geoffrey Blainey's famous thesis about the 'tyranny of distance' serves to remind us,[3] the colonies that ultimately took part in the process of federation in the last decade of the 19th century occupied a vast space, and their main population centres were far apart.

Similarly, internal transportation challenges were very significant, given that Australia was the driest populated continent on the face of the Earth. Indeed, until well after Federation, Australians on the east coast could reach the city of Perth only by ocean voyage; traversing the continent by land was just not possible. This created an unlikely confluence of interest between Australians and Afghans: Australians had needs for transport services, and Afghans could offer ways of meeting those needs.

Two other factors played a facilitating role in this respect. One was that Afghans found themselves adjacent to India, the 'Jewel in the Crown' of the British Empire, and this offered a route of egress in Australia's direction via the port of Karachi. The other was that, contrary to 'Orientalist' imagery, Afghans had a much richer experience of connecting with the wider world, and with the world economy, than was often credited.[4] Strange as it may seem, the logic underpinning the emergence of the 19th-century relationship between Australians and Afghans was both straightforward and sensible.



Afghan cameleers in Alice Springs circa 1890. These cameleers represent the long-reaching historical roots of the Afghan-Australian relationship. Source: Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Canberra.

The unique tool that Afghans could supply was the camel, and Afghan cameleers were required to manage the camels that formed trains to open up some of the more remote parts of the continent. There are now close to a million camels in Australia, descendants of those dromedaries and Bactrian camels that first arrived in the 19th century. While the first dromedary had been imported in 1840, it was on 9 June 1860 that the first cameleer reached Australia—Dost Mohammed, who arrived from Karachi on board a ship called the *Chinsura* and managed camels for the famous Burke and Wills expedition before dying in Menindee, where he is buried. Many other cameleers followed in his footsteps, but tracking them systematically has proved difficult for the historian, as it was only from 1897 that they were required to produce documentation in order to enter the country, and only from 1904 that a passport was required.[5]

Nonetheless, the services that the cameleers supplied proved extraordinarily useful. One mark of this was the persistence of the camel trains well into the 20th century. It was only in the 1920s, when the expansion of railroads combined with road freight transportation provided a viable alternative, that the camel trains finally faded away and the camels were abandoned to run wild.[6] Evidence of the cameleers' presence can still be found, but, as one researcher has put it, 'With their shallow roots in outback communities and an uncertain future, perhaps it is not surprising that most elements of the cameleers' material culture, known from documents or old photographs, turned to dust.'[7] For most modern Australians, the main reminder of the early history of engagement with Afghans comes in the form of the 'Ghan' luxury train that travels between Adelaide and Darwin.

Dutch sculptor Gabriël Sterk's statue of an Afghan cameleer, unveiled at Alice Springs railway station in October 1980. The name 'Ghan' reflects the legacy of the Afghan cameleers who supplied transport services to Australia's inland. Source: Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Canberra.

Afghans dancing at a feast, Coolgardie, 1898, online.

What *has* become clear from modern scholarship, however, is that those who came as cameleers were a complex and diverse collection of individuals with their own interests, social lives and links back to their land of origin. It was only with the drawing of the Durand Line in 1893 that a clear boundary between British India and Afghanistan was demarcated, and it has remained a point of some contention ever since.[8] Some of those who came to Australia as 'Afghans' in the 19th century may in fact have originated from British India, since the British routinely at that time used the term 'Afghan' to refer to ethnic Pushtuns, who populated various parts of the Northwest Frontier as well as Afghanistan proper.

For those who came from Afghanistan, ties to the homeland remained of importance, both emotionally and instrumentally. Afghans in Australia wrote letters to the editor of Afghanistan's first newspaper, *Seraj al-akhbar*, which was published from 1911 to 1918 and copies of which reached Australia.[9] They also communicated with Afghanistan's Amir, Abdul Rahman Khan: in an 1896 letter, the signatories asked him 'to intervene with the government of British India to obtain exemptions from the immigration taxes imposed on all Asiatics by the Australian government'.[10] Perhaps most remarkably of all, in 1906, Amir Habibullah of Afghanistan became the Trustee of the Perth Mosque as a way of putting an end to tensions that had been dividing various groups in that city's Muslim community.[11]

As I noted above, changes in transport patterns eroded the basis for the cameleers' undertakings. One other factor, however, also played a role in choking off the flow of Afghans to Australia: the emergence of the White Australia policy and the passing, as the first legislative instrument of the new Commonwealth Parliament, of the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*.[12] This was not particularly targeted at Afghans. There is no doubt that some groups in Australia had resented the arrival of the

cameleers and were not reticent in setting out their views, some of which reflected racialist ideologies while others were manifestly grounded in economic interest.[13] The main target, however, was the Chinese population in Australia. Many Chinese had been drawn to Australia by the gold rushes of the mid-19th century, and, as one recent study has put it:

> Initially not distinguished from the Indian and other Asian immigrants, and at mid-century seen as cheap labour substitutes for the convicts, the Chinese soon assumed a unique place in the Australian mind because of their numbers, the organised nature of their arrival, their cultural differences, their enterprise and the relative proximity and size of their country of origin.[14]

The measures that were designed to choke off Chinese migration caught Afghans in their net as well, and, as a result, it was to be many decades before Afghans again began to enter Australia in significant numbers.

A loaded Afghan camel. Source: Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Canberra.

2. The establishment of diplomatic relations and their early years: 1968–1979

With the Afghanistan-born component of the Australian population in decline, and with Afghanistan a neutral state in both World Wars I and II, in the first half of the 20th century there was little to draw the two states closer, although Afghanistan and Australia shared membership of both the League of Nations (which Afghanistan joined on 27 September 1934) and the United Nations (which Afghanistan joined on 19 November 1946).

In the second half of the century, however, several developments brought Australia and Afghanistan into closer proximity. One was the establishment of the Colombo Plan, of which Afghanistan became a member in 1963; the Australian Minister for External Affairs, Percy Spender, was a crucial player in the negotiations that led to the plan's initiation. This opened the door for Afghans to study in Australia under the Colombo Plan Long-term Scholarships Programme, set up in 1951. Facilitating this was the erosion and then the termination of the White Australia policy.[15]

Also important was increasing Australian travel to Afghanistan. Some of this was on the part of serious researchers; a recent volume, for example, has collected letters written during field work in Afghanistan in 1966 by Dr Verity Fitzhardinge,[16] who as 'Verity Hewitt' was proprietor of one of the first bookshops in Canberra, and who wrote a PhD thesis at the Australian National University (ANU) titled 'The establishment of the north-west frontier of Afghanistan, 1884–1888'. But other travellers to Afghanistan were young adventurers seeing the world. Many visited Afghanistan in transit to Europe; until the advent of wide-bodied aircraft, international air travel was almost prohibitively expensive for ordinary Australians, while the overland route through Afghanistan and Iran was relatively cheap, and easy to use until 1979, when the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan closed it off. This had the potential to create a need for consular support for Australians visiting Afghanistan.[17]

A more formalised relationship with Afghanistan therefore made sense, and the intention to establish diplomatic relations at ambassadorial level was announced on 17 December 1968 by the Australian Minister for External Affairs, Paul Hasluck.[18] This involved multiple accreditation rather than the establishment of resident embassies. During the period from 1969 to 1979, the Australian Head of Mission in Pakistan, based in Islamabad, was accredited to Afghanistan.

Lewis H ('Lew') Border, first Australian Ambassador to Afghanistan, and his family. Source: RC Maley.

The first Australian Ambassador to Afghanistan, Lewis H ('Lew') Border, presented his credentials—the formal prerequisite for the discharge of ambassadorial functions[19]—on 30 March 1969.[20] Border, like all his successors, was an accomplished career diplomat. At the end of the 1950s, he had served as Counsellor in the Australian Embassy to the US; and he was Ambassador to Burma from 1963 to 1965, Assistant Secretary in the South and Southeast Asia Branches in 1965 and 1966, and Ambassador to Vietnam from 1966 to 1968. His successor, Francis Stuart, who presented his credentials on 15 September 1970,[21] had earlier served as Ambassador to Cambodia, the United Arab Republic and the Philippines. Stuart's successor, Malcolm Morris, who presented his credentials on 23 September 1973,[22] had been Ambassador to Laos and to Austria. The final Ambassador in the first phase of Afghan–Australian diplomatic relations was John D Petherbridge, who presented his credentials on 26 January 1976,[23] and who had earlier served as Ambassador to Sweden. The relative seniority of these appointees reflected the importance of Australia's relations with Pakistan, which were longstanding and reinforced for at least some of the time by Pakistan's membership of the Commonwealth. Nonetheless, it did Afghanistan no harm to have senior and experienced Australian officials carrying some responsibility for the bilateral relationship, although the relationship remained low key.

Afghan representation in Australia was conducted via the Afghan Embassy in Japan, which had been established in October 1933 and resumed postwar operation in May 1956.[24] The Afghan Ambassador in Tokyo at the time that diplomatic relations with Australia were established was Dr Abdul Hakim Tabibi, who had been Afghan Justice Minister in 1965 and 1966 and went on in 1975 to serve as Chair of the 27th Session of the International Law Commission. He did not manage to present credentials in Canberra before his posting in Tokyo came to an end in 1970. His successor was an eminent Afghan political figure, Sayid Qassem Reshtia, a former Finance Minister and Ambassador to Egypt and to Czechoslovakia, whose career spanned some of the most significant events in modern Afghan history, including Afghanistan's participation in the Bandung Conference in 1955 and the drafting of Afghanistan's 1964 constitution.[25] He, too, did not manage to present his credentials: he was poised to do so in 1973, but the July 1973 coup that ousted King Zahir Shah and brought the King's cousin Mohammad Daoud to power as president led to the termination of Reshtia's posting.[26] Finally, on 1 May 1975, Dr Ali Ahmad Popal, a former Education Minister who had served as Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany, to Turkey and to Pakistan, presented his credentials to the Governor-General in Canberra.[27] Popal's successor in Tokyo from June 1977, Dr Hasan Sharq, did not present credentials in Canberra, and nor did his successor in Tokyo from July 1978, Abdul Hamid Mohtat, a Soviet-trained Marxist who was named to be Ambassador to Australia only on the eve of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.[28]

Former Governor-General Sir John Kerr meeting with President Mohammad Daoud in March 1975 during the first visit to Kabul by an Australian Governor-General. Source: Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Canberra.

In the first phase of the Australia–Afghanistan diplomatic relationship, the most significant development was the visit to Afghanistan in March 1975 of the Governor-General of Australia, Sir John Kerr. His stay in Afghanistan was part of a wider trip to Southwest Asia that also included attendance at the coronation of King Birendra of Nepal and visits to India, Pakistan and Iran. The visit was notable for being 'the first of its kind undertaken by any Governor-General of Australia'.[29] Accompanied by his daughter, Mrs Gabrielle Kibble, he travelled by road from Peshawar to Kabul through the Khyber Pass,[30] where he was met by the Afghan Commerce Minister, Muhammad Khan Jalallar. In his memoirs, he did not discuss the visit, but an account published in the *Australian Foreign Affairs Record* noted that he had meetings with President Mohammad Daoud and with the Deputy Prime Minister (at the time Dr Hasan Sharq), the Deputy Foreign Minister, the Commerce Minister and the governors of Kabul and Balkh; it described the visit as 'the first by a Head of State since President Daoud assumed power on 17 July 1973'. In a speech in Kabul on 7 March, Sir John remarked that 'The contacts which we have had in the past have been of great mutual benefit. We have enjoyed, for example, the presence in Australia of Afghan students and hope that we can continue to offer in some small way material assistance in this regard.'[31] His discussions also covered agriculture, which to this day remains an important potential field for cooperation between Afghanistan and Australia.

Former Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, inspects a guard of honour in Kabul, March 1975.
Source: Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Canberra.

3. The long hiatus (1979–2001)

In April 1978, a violent coup in Kabul mounted by the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) overthrew President Daoud, who was killed along with many members of his immediate family.[32] This triggered a period of extreme turbulence in Afghan politics, marked by an ideologically driven attempt to instigate a 'revolution from above', complicated by murderous factional divisions within the PDPA that left the regime severely weakened.[33] It was in this context that the Soviet Union in December 1979 decided to invade Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion elevated revolts into resistance. The resistance, which came to be known as the *Mujahideen* movement, linked commanders and communities in Afghanistan with a range of political parties of diverse character—Sunni and Shiite, as well as Islamist and traditionalist.[34] The invasion also drew the instant attention of the wider world,[35] and the US sought ways of arming resistance groups based among the rapidly expanding refugee population in Pakistan.[36]

The Fraser government, which viewed the Soviet invasion very much in a Cold War context, condemned it unequivocally[37] and suspended diplomatic relations with the new regime in Kabul headed by the Soviet puppet Babrak Karmal. This policy persisted throughout the 1980s. In November 1985, Foreign Minister Hayden stated that 'The Government does not recognise the Government of Afghanistan.'[38] In January 1988, when the Hawke government decided that 'the practice of formally recognising or withholding recognition of foreign governments should be abandoned', it explicitly stated that 'The Government will not take any steps under the new policy to establish formal relations with either Afghanistan or Kampuchea.'[39] One of the factors that underpinned Australia's approach was the view, again voiced by Foreign Minister Hayden, that 'It is an established fact that the Afghan Government has limited autonomy. All substantive government policy and activity is directed by Soviet advisers.'[40]

This did not, however, mean that Australia had lost interest in Afghanistan—although Minister Hayden somewhat awkwardly stated that 'Time constraints did not permit a discussion of Afghanistan' during his May 1984 meeting in Moscow with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko.[41] In several ways Australia remained engaged, albeit within limits. Some Afghan refugees were resettled to Australia, and successive governments provided funding for Afghan refugees in Pakistan, multilaterally via the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The Hawke government was not prepared, however, to take part in the US-funded Afghan Medical Programme run by the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration, designed to assist 'wounded Afghan refugees in Pakistan' who required

'specialized medical care not locally available';[42] the government cited 'significant practical problems', such as 'distance, language and costs, together with health and immigration regulations' to justify its refusal.[43]

Nonetheless, diplomats at the Australian mission in Islamabad followed Afghan events closely, regularly visiting Peshawar to talk with leaders of Afghan resistance groups. Furthermore, Australia ingeniously contrived to lease a house in Kabul, and, periodically, a Pakistan-based Australian diplomat would fly from Delhi to Kabul to pay the rent and use the opportunity to consult with Western agencies with a presence on the ground.[44] These ties proved notably useful when two Australian aid workers, Robert Williamson and Jenny Lade, were kidnapped in somewhat murky circumstances in Baluchistan in May 1985 and transported to Afghanistan, where they were imprisoned by the regime before being released to fly to Delhi on 31 December.[45] The war in Afghanistan was also covered by some courageous Australian or Australian-based journalists and photographers. Anthony Davis reported on Afghanistan over a number of years for *Asiaweek* and *Jane's Intelligence Review*. The Italian-Australian photographer Raffaele Favero died in October 1983 when he was accidentally struck by a tank; he was buried in Urgun in the province of Paktia.[46]

Another link between Afghans and Australians emerged in 1982, when, following a request from the Islamic Union of Afghan Mujahideen, a fractious network of Sunni parties with headquarters in Pakistan, an 'Afghan Information Office' was opened in Canberra. The initial head of the office was Ghairat Baheer, an energetic 26-year-old activist from Hezb-e Islami, led by the Islamist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. While no one seriously doubted that the funds he raised went to the Hezb, he was meticulous in giving public voice to the concerns of the *Mujahideen* as a whole, rather than those of a particular faction, and he proved an effective and popular spokesman. After he left Australia in 1988, he represented the Hezb-e Islami in Islamabad. He was detained by the US from 2002 to 2008, but, in a typically Afghan reversal of fortunes, was sworn in on 16 September 2018 as a Senator in the Upper House of the Afghan Parliament (*Meshrano Jirga*) as a nominee of President Ashraf Ghani, who had succeeded Hamed Karzai as president in 2014 and moved to reconcile with Hekmatyar and the Hezb-e Islami.

It was when Baheer left Australia that the information office ran into trouble. As Foreign Minister Evans put it, 'it was left to the seven-party alliance to nominate a representative,'[47] and Baheer's successor from 1988, Dr Abdul Aziz Majidi, proved to be an aggressive partisan of the Hezb-e Islami and speedily alienated members of the Afghan community. In early 1989, Hekmatyar visited Australia, and, faced with the prospect of protests, a spokesman for the Department of Foreign Affairs imprudently remarked that 'It would be unfortunate if the mujahideen were not able to maintain a united front with the visit of a major representative'; this boomeranged later in the

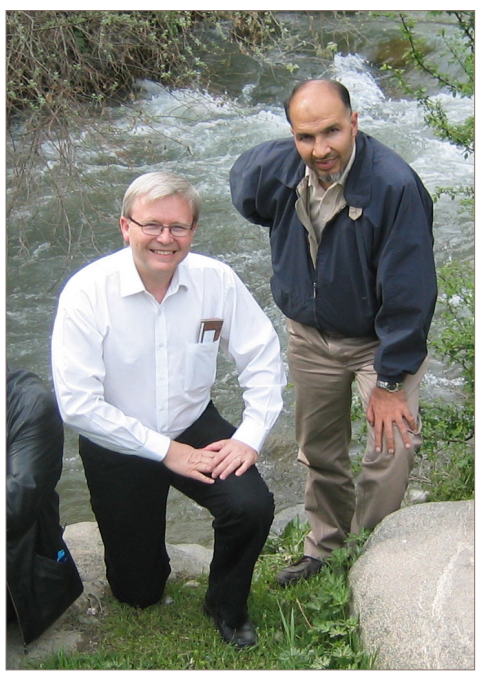
year when a report linked Hezb-e-Islami figures to narcotics production.[48] Finally, Professor Sebghatullah Mojadiddi, President of the 'Islamic Interim Government of Afghanistan', wrote to the Australian High Commissioner in Pakistan to request that Dr Majidi 'not be treated as [the Afghan Interim Government] representative' by the Australian Government.[49] When Dr Majidi applied for a temporary entry permit to remain in Australia for a further year, it was decided that his application should not be approved, and he left the country. This terminated the operations of the Afghan Information Office.

In one specific area—humanitarian demining—Australia at this time made a very important contribution to the wellbeing of the Afghan people, and it also marked the first deployment of ADF personnel in the context of Afghanistan's troubles. The Soviet Union made extensive use of antipersonnel mines during its intervention—the UN estimated in 1993 that 10,000,000 mines and items of unexploded ordnance littered the country[50]—and the air-delivered PFM-1 ('Butterfly') mine proved particularly dangerous. Australia became involved in addressing the problem from 16 July 1989, training Afghans in mine-clearance techniques via the UN Mine Clearance Training Team (UNMCTT), and providing Australian army officers as technical advisers to the Mine Clearance Programme, attached to Afghan mine action NGOs, notably Afghan Technical Consultants and the Mine Clearance Planning Agency. The heads of those two agencies, Kefayatullah Eblagh and Sayed Aqa, travelled to Australia in October 1993 to lecture at the School of Military Engineering at Moorebank and visit the Australian Defence Force Academy. From 8 June 1991, Australian personnel had

De-mining expert detects land mines for clearance. Kunduz, Afghanistan, 21 October 2008.
Photo: unmultimedia.org/flickr.

been permitted to enter Afghanistan, which allowed them to perform a monitoring function as well.[51] As the regional manager of the Demining Office in Peshawar put it in 1993, 'The Australian Army contingent remains the only foreign military contingent responsible for training, monitoring and mine incident investigation within the Programme.'[52]

It was therefore extremely unfortunate that, in 1993, acting largely at the instigation of civilian Defence Department staff, the then Defence Minister, Senator Robert Ray, decided to discontinue Australian participation in the program.[53] As is now clear from *The official history of Australian peacekeeping, humanitarian and post-Cold War operations*, he endorsed the proposal to withdraw knowing that 'the CGS, the Land Commander, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the High Commissioner and the Defence Adviser in Islamabad did not agree'. Nor did Foreign Minister Evans.[54] A subsequent report from the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade of the Australian Parliament concluded that 'Australia's "good international citizen" image' had been 'somewhat tarnished by its withdrawal of support of UNMCTT'.[55] The decision caused consternation among Australian Army personnel in the field, and a number of senior and experienced staff left the ADF in order to continue to work under contract in mine-afflicted countries.[56] Many became prominent advocates for the ban on landmines that was embodied in the 1997 Ottawa Treaty, which was to prove very effective in establishing a norm anathematising this weapons system.[57] In this advocacy, they were joined by Australian organisations such as AUSTCARE, which had partnered with organisations including the International Rescue Committee, AVICEN and Save The Children to run community development and vaccination projects for Afghans funded by the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau. A dynamic AUSTCARE officer, Patricia Garcia, played an instrumental role in organising a lecture tour in December 1994 by a remarkable Afghan disability advocate, Abdul Rahman Sahak, who had lost both legs and an arm in a mine blast.

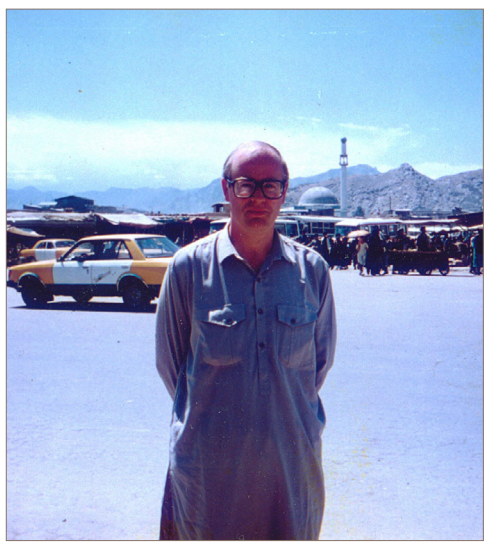


Kevin Rudd MP and Ambassador Mahmoud Saikal by the Salang river, Afghanistan. Source: Mahmoud Saikal.

In April 1992, the communist regime in Afghanistan, which had been headed since 1986 by Dr Najibullah, abruptly collapsed. Its position had been precarious from February 1989, when the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, undertaken by a new Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev, was completed,[58] and it was doomed by a cut-off of Soviet aid from the end of 1991.[59]

The collapse of the communist regime and its replacement by a *Mujahideen* administration created fresh opportunities for government-to-government relations between Australia and Afghanistan. Initial contacts came when Dr Najibullah Lafraie, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of the new Islamic State of Afghanistan, visited Australia from 9 to 12 September 1992, but a key figure in re-establishing the relationship was Mahmoud Saikal, a 31-year-old Afghan-Australian with a degree in architecture from Sydney University who, after the collapse of the communist regime, accepted an appointment as First Secretary (and later Minister-Counsellor and *chargé d'affaires*) at the Afghan Embassy in Japan. He also pursued the idea of renewing official ties between Australia and Afghanistan.

While the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade was cautious about moving immediately to renew *diplomatic* relations, it was quite amenable to the idea of establishing *consular* relations. Consular relations, focused on the provision of practical services to individuals,[60] are legally and conceptually distinct from diplomatic relations, but nonetheless put in place a formal relationship with the potential to evolve in an organic fashion. Australian approval for the establishment of consular relations, in which Afghanistan was to be represented by an Honorary Consul, was granted on 16 April 1993 during a visit to Canberra by an Afghan foreign affairs delegation led by Abdul Sattar Murad, Head of the First Political Division of the Foreign Ministry. The first nominee for the position was Mir Zamanuddin Moslih, an Afghan community elder who had graduated in veterinary science from the University of Ankara, but ultimately he did not take the position up. From 29 September 1994, the position of Honorary Consul was held by Mahmoud Saikal himself, who occupied the post until 2002.



The author in Kabul, May 1995.

The seizure of Kabul in September 1996 by the Pakistan-backed Taliban,[61] of whom Mr Saikal was a strong critic, did not put an end to the consular relationship, as for a number of years the Taliban continued to accept visas issued by consular staff they did not control, and Afghans in Australia continued to lodge applications for Afghan passports. He also used whatever opportunity he could find to warn of the succour that the Taliban were providing for terrorist groups.

Dr Ravan Farhadi addresses the Security Council as it meets to consider the situation in his country, 19 December 2000. Photo: unmultimedia.org/Evan Schneider.

4. 2001 and new opportunities

The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US, orchestrated by Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, which had found refuge under the Taliban,[62] produced an immediate Australian reaction, not least because the Australian Prime Minister was in Washington DC at the time. The Howard government offered unconditional support to the US in its time of need, and on 14 September formally invoked the provisions of Article IV of the 1951 ANZUS Treaty—the first time that this had happened.[63] This was not surprising, since the Australian–American alliance, although asymmetrical, was of very long standing.

Somewhat derivatively, Australia also took up the American discourse of a 'Global War on Terror', and did little at the time to articulate a distinctively Australian position with respect to the rapidly evolving global situation. Australia strongly endorsed the US's decision to strike at al-Qaeda operatives and at the Taliban, who had provided them with sanctuary in Afghanistan, but the argument for doing so was cast not in terms of the need to assist the people of Afghanistan, but the need to confront the threat of terrorism and show solidarity with Australia's most important alliance partner.[64] This lack of focus on Afghans, needless to say, was not at the time a source of immediate concern for the Taliban's Afghan opponents. Afghanistan's seat at the United Nations had never fallen under the Taliban's control, and the Afghan Ambassador and Permanent Representative at the United Nations, Dr AG Ravan Farhadi, a very experienced diplomat who had been a Visiting Fellow at the ANU

The Australian War Memorial's exhibition on Australia's engagement in Afghanistan after 2001.
Source: Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Canberra.

in 1985, raised no objection to the use of force to obliterate the Taliban regime. A consequence, however, was that Afghanistan's foreign supporters did not begin with a clear set of objectives for *transition* within Afghanistan, or even a consistent strategic vision to shape NATO's involvement in Afghanistan more broadly once the Taliban regime was removed.[65]

As well as invoking Article IV of the ANZUS Treaty, Australia also provided ground troops. Some 120 special forces personnel were dispatched to play kinetic roles as part of the US's Operation Enduring Freedom, and other forces were deployed in support roles. The mission was a dangerous one: on 16 February 2002, Sergeant Andrew Russell died when his long-range patrol vehicle struck a mine in the Helmand Valley. But in its initial phase, it was also relatively short, lasting only until November 2002, when the special forces were withdrawn, not least because, as an ASPI analysis put it, 'they were required for impending operations in Iraq.'[66] Thereafter, Australia's strictly military presence in Afghanistan—until special forces returned in September 2005[67]—consisted of one or two soldiers serving at headquarters level.

The significance of Iraq as a distraction should not be underestimated. It is central to the story of how Australia within a short space of time found itself enmeshed in its longest military commitment in a seemingly unlikely part of the world. The invasion of Iraq from March 2003 distracted attention and diverted resources from the process of stabilising Afghanistan and gave rise to a range of serious problems in Afghanistan that could have been avoided, but which subsequently drew Australia and other US allies back into the Afghanistan theatre of operations. As Dr Robert M Gates, US Secretary of Defense from 2006 to 2011, wrote in his memoirs:

> As much as President Bush detested the notion, our later challenges in Afghanistan, especially the return of the Taliban in force by the time I became defense secretary, were, I believe, significantly compounded by the invasion of Iraq.[68]

That said, it is important to note that Afghanistan never became a controversial deployment in either elite or mass opinion in Australia. In this respect, it differed greatly from the Vietnam conflict,[69] over which the government and opposition came to be sharply divided, and which provoked street demonstrations demanding the withdrawal of Australian troops from South Vietnam. The crucial difference was most likely the deployment to Vietnam of conscripts as well as regular soldiers, and the higher level of mortality: some 521 Australian soldiers died in the Vietnam War.[70]

5. The new diplomatic relationship and its management

The overthrow of the Taliban regime was followed in short order by the holding of an international conference in Bonn that brought together non-Taliban Afghan political actors to trace a pathway to a sustainable political future. The outcome was the December 2001 Bonn Agreement, which provided for the establishment of an interim administration to be headed by Hamed Karzai. The new administration was strongly supported by the US and endorsed by the UN Security Council in Resolution 1383 of 6 December 2001. The US moved immediately to reopen its Kabul embassy, which had been closed in 1989. But the consolidation of the position of the new administration depended upon more than simply a relationship with the US, and thus the establishment of diplomatic relations with a wider range of actors was an early imperative for the new Foreign Ministry, headed by Dr Abdullah.

Since consular relations were already in place, Australia was an obvious candidate for the enhancement of the relationship. Article 8.2 of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations provides that members of the diplomatic staff of a mission 'may not be appointed from among persons having the nationality of the receiving State, except with the consent of that State which may be withdrawn at any time'.[71] Given the obvious advantages of working with someone already well known to the Australian authorities, consent was granted for Mahmoud Saikal to become Afghanistan's first resident ambassador in Australia despite his dual nationality, but on the understanding that similar consent would not be forthcoming for future nominees. He formally presented his credentials to the Governor-General on 27 June 2002 and served until 2005.

Australian diplomatic representation in Afghanistan went through two phases. Establishing resident relations in Kabul was not a straightforward undertaking, given the logistical complexities of operating a mission from the Afghan capital. Thus, Australia initially resumed its approach of accrediting the Australian High Commissioner in Pakistan to serve also as Ambassador to Afghanistan; Howard Brown (2002–2004) and Zorica McCarthy (2004–2006) operated in that capacity. The first resident Ambassador—a career diplomat, Brett Hackett—was appointed on 9 August 2006 and presented his credentials on 14 September. In announcing the appointment, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer stated that 'Our decision now to appoint a resident Australian Ambassador to Kabul is a further important step in the growing engagement between our two countries.'[72] Mr Hackett and a small team initially operated from rooms in the Serena Hotel in Kabul, but were forced

to evacuate when the hotel was attacked by the Taliban on 14 January 2008; six people were killed, although none of them Australian.[73] Since then, Australia has not advertised the exact location of its embassy in the capital.

Seven ambassadors, all career diplomats, have served since Ambassador Hackett: Martin Quinn (2008–2009), Paul Foley (2009–2012), Jonathan Philp (2012–2015), Matthew Anderson (2015–2016), Richard Feakes (2016–2017), Nicola Gordon-Smith (2017–2019) and Geoffrey Tooth (from 2019). Since Kabul is a 'non-family' post, ambassadors (and other diplomatic staff) have tended to be posted for relatively short terms, and to return home regularly for breaks during an appointment. There has been no shortage of applicants keen to serve in the embassy in Afghanistan, which many diplomats have found an extraordinarily interesting posting despite the constraints of security.

When the Afghan embassy opened in Canberra in 2002, it initially operated from rented premises in Deakin. One of the key objectives of Ambassador Mahmoud Saikal was to establish a more permanent foundation for the embassy's operations, and his background as an Australian-trained architect proved of great value. The Afghan Government provided funding for the establishment of a permanent building, and the new Afghan embassy was opened on 18 August 2005 by the visiting Afghan Foreign Minister, Dr Abdullah, and the Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer. Shortly thereafter, Saikal left for Kabul to be Deputy Foreign Minister, and he went on to serve from 2015 to 2019 as Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the UN in New York, where he masterminded Afghanistan's successful campaign for election to the UN Human Rights Council and served as Chair of the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly.

The new Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in the Canberra suburb of Deakin. Source: Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Canberra.

Since 2005, four Afghan ambassadors have served in Canberra: Anwar Anwarzai (2005–2007), Amanullah Jayhoon (2007–2011), Nasir Andisha (2011–2015) and Wahidullah Waissi (since 2017). Ambassador Anwarzai served only briefly before being recalled, but his three successors served longer terms, allowing them to work systematically to promote the bilateral relationship. Dr Jayhoon went on to serve as Afghan Ambassador to Turkey, and Dr Andisha served as Deputy Foreign Minister before being posted in 2019 as Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the UN in Geneva. Ambassador Waissi had served as Director-General for Economic Cooperation in the Afghan Foreign Ministry before taking up his appointment in Canberra, and had been chief negotiator of the 2016 Transit and Transport Agreement between Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey (the 'Lapis Lazuli Route'), and the 2017 Transit and Transport Agreement between Afghanistan, Iran and India (the Chabahar Agreement).

Dr Nasir Andisha, Ambassador of Afghanistan to Australia 2011–2015. Source: William Maley.

One Australian institution with which the Embassy regularly engaged was the ANU. Staff of the university travelled to Kabul from 8 to 15 December 2005 to conduct a training program for the Foreign Ministry, and also met with Foreign Minister Abdullah and Dr Ashraf Ghani, at that time the Chancellor of Kabul University. Furthermore, a First Secretary at the Embassy, Ahmad Shayeq Qassem, completed a part-time doctorate at the ANU, as subsequently did Ambassador Andisha; both later produced scholarly publications based on their research.[74]

A number of other channels also existed for high-level political engagement. Apart from his visit in August 2005 to open the new embassy, Dr Abdullah had visited Australia in December 2002. And in April 2017, President Ashraf Ghani visited Australia in the first visit to Australia by an Afghan head of state; he had earlier visited Australia to deliver a keynote address at an International IDEA conference held at Parliament House in Canberra in November 2012. From the Australian side, Kevin Rudd paid a private visit to Afghanistan even before becoming Prime Minister, and in the context of the Australian military presence in Uruzgan (discussed below) there were regular visits to Australian forces in the field by prime ministers, other ministers of the government and the Governor-General, although for reasons of security those visits were typically not announced in advance.

Dr Ashraf Ghani, President of Afghanistan, and former Governor-General of Australia, Sir Peter Cosgrove, inspect a guard of honour at the Presidential Palace, May 2016, Kabul. Source: Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Canberra.

In addition, in 2009 and 2010, US diplomat Richard Holbrooke served as Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, although his sudden death in December 2010 cut his mission short. How much weight he carried even in US policy circles remains debatable,[75] and his forceful approach certainly contributed to the suspicion of President Karzai that the US was keen to see him defeated in the 2009 Afghan presidential election.[76] The office of Special Representative was finally disestablished in June 2017. Nonetheless, Holbrooke's appointment led many other countries to make parallel appointments; Australia's first Special Representative was Ambassador Richard C ('Ric') Smith, an eminent diplomat who had served as Ambassador to China and to Indonesia, and as Secretary of the Department of Defence; he was able to speak to Holbrooke very much as an equal. His successors were senior officers from within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade rather than external appointees—which reflected the relative decline in the salience of the role within US policy circles following Holbrooke's death.

6. Military deployments and the Uruzgan mission

The establishment of a resident embassy in Kabul was in no small measure due to a significant increase in Australia's military field presence from 2005–2006. With the US distracted by a deteriorating situation in Iraq, the Taliban and their backers seized the opportunity to return to the field in significant numbers, and this created the need for a response on the part of Afghanistan's Western supporters. The optimal approach undoubtedly would have been the expansion beyond Kabul in early 2002 of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) for which the Bonn Agreement had made provision. However, with combat in Iraq looming, there was no appetite in Washington for such a step; by the time it was finally taken in late 2003, critical momentum had been lost. From 2005, special forces with significant kinetic capability were one part of the response, and Australia deployed personnel from both the Special Air Service Regiment and the 2nd Commando Regiment. Furthermore, Western actors developed the idea of establishing 'Provincial Reconstruction Teams' (PRTs) in which military and development actors would deploy cooperatively with a view to stabilising the various provinces of Afghanistan.

An Australian decision to become involved in PRT activity was taken only late in the day by the Howard government, and, by the time it came about, the provinces that were left were somewhat unpromising from a developmental perspective. Australia's contribution was under the auspices of ISAF, which by 2006 was under NATO command. As part of Operation Slipper, Australia deployed a Reconstruction Task Force (RTF) from September 2006 with the Dutch in the province of Uruzgan, one of the least developed parts of Afghanistan. After the Dutch finally withdrew in 2010, Australia worked with the US until the process of transition (*inteqal*) saw Australian forces leave. As Raspal Khosa has noted:

> Subsequent rotations of ADF contingents in Uruzgan were renamed Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force (MRTF), Mentoring Task Force (MTF), and finally, Adviser Task Force (ATF), to reflect the changing emphasis of their mission from reconstruction to security force assistance.[77]

On 28 October 2013, Prime Minister Tony Abbott, accompanied by Opposition Leader Bill Shorten, flew into Uruzgan and announced the end of Australia's military deployment. 'Australia's longest war', Mr Abbott stated, 'is ending, not with victory, not with defeat, but with, we hope, an Afghanistan that is better for our presence here.'[78]

The then Prime Minister Tony Abbott talks with former leader of the opposition Bill Shorten onboard a Royal Australian Air Force C17 Globemaster. Photo: Australian Department of Defence, online.

The Australian forces undoubtedly left a significant legacy of physical reconstruction projects, perhaps most importantly the Tarin Kot Hospital. Yet, given the tenuous security situation in Uruzgan, it is debatable exactly what long-term effects such construction projects can have in improving the lives of locals: there is a concrete danger that, in a conflict zone, a building intended to be a school or a clinic can end up being destroyed, neglected or even used as headquarters for armed militants. This does not reflect so much a lack of strategic vision on the part of Australia, but rather an endemic problem that afflicted the PRTs: they were not well suited to addressing the problem of ambient insecurity that confronted Afghanistan because of the sanctuaries in Pakistan from which the Taliban could safely operate. In the face of such threats, it is unrealistic to expect to be able to stabilise a country such as Afghanistan on a province-by-province basis.

Furthermore, there was no particular mechanism to ensure effective coordination across the different PRTs, which were essentially exercises in improvisation and varied greatly according to the resource endowments that they enjoyed from the contributing states and to the military cultures of the various armed forces that supplied personnel for the PRTs' operations.[79] In addition, there was no guarantee that their activities would meld effectively with the Afghan National Development Strategy; all too often, the assumption was made that the priorities voiced by the provincial governor were also the priorities of the Afghan Government as a whole, even though detailed studies suggested that the various provinces of Afghanistan had their own complex political lives, in which external actors could be unwitting participants,[80] especially if those actors' focus was on finding friendly strongmen

with whom to work rather than on fostering the development of institutions to enable ordinary Afghans to rule well. Time pressures all too often militated in favour of the former, with unfortunate consequences. The high level of formal centralisation in the Afghan state also had the effect of making PRTs useful resources for local players.[81]

Given the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, the story of Australia's involvement inevitably had darker dimensions. In the light of several episodes that allegedly took place in 2013, the Inspector-General of the ADF was charged with investigating 'rumours of possible breaches of the laws of armed conflict in Afghanistan', with a broad remit covering the period from 2005 to 2016. Major-General Paul Brereton of the Army Reserve, also a judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, was tasked with conducting the investigation.

Tragically for Australian families, the deployment to Afghanistan involved more deaths than in any theatre of conflict in which Australians had served since Vietnam. Following Sergeant Andrew Russell, a further 40 Australian servicemen died in Afghanistan. Of those, six were killed by rogue Afghan National Army soldiers: Bryce Duffy, Ashley Burt and Luke Gavin (on 29 October 2011); and Stjepan ('Rick') Milosevic, Robert Poate and James Martin (on 30 August 2012). The latter three deaths were the subject of a detailed coronial inquiry, and while from the outset there was no doubt as to the identity of the killer, the coroner identified 'a failure at a number of levels in the chain of command to form and implement a plan to ensure the soldiers on the ground received appropriate orders and guidance with respect to force protection'.[82] The danger of rogue killings can never be entirely eliminated, and still faces the smaller number of Australian military personnel, around 300, who remain in Afghanistan to help strengthen the Afghan National Security and Defence Forces.[83]

In 2015, a detailed appraisal by Professor Peter Hall of the cost for Australia of the Afghanistan war identified the forms that costs could take and discussed in detail the budgetary, social, economic and macroeconomic costs of the conflict. Hall concluded that the costs, in total, of the conflict probably fell between $12.2 billion and $13.6 billion, but he offered a range of reasons why those figures might be conservative, given the uncertainties associated with some of the calculations.[84]

By any reasonable understanding, the cost of Australia's contribution to military activity in Afghanistan in recent years has been substantial. Given the human and material costs, it is tempting to question whether the returns on Australia's investments have been worth the cost. To answer that question in a meaningful fashion, it is necessary to probe a little deeper into the aggregate effects of international involvement in Afghanistan since 2001.

Here, it is important to recognise that the most important gains for Afghanistan's people have not necessarily come either in the form of specific constitutional provisions or specific projects, but rather from the way in which an international presence in Afghanistan has opened the country to the effects of globalisation, from which it had been substantially isolated in preceding decades. The effects of globalisation have been complex,[85] but one effect of real significance has been the emergence of a new generation of very gifted, globally oriented young Afghans. This new generation offers the brightest hope for the consolidation of what has been achieved,[86] and they are very much aware of the debt they owe to those who lost their lives when assisting Afghans to transition to a better world.

An Australian Combat Engineer assists a locally employed contractor (LEC) on a construction site in a Forward Operating Base in Afghanistan. Photo: Australian Department of Defence, online.

7. Australian aid

Afghanistan suffered enormous damage during the years of Soviet occupation and subsequently, and in 2001 it lacked anything like the capacity to mobilise internally the resources required for reconstruction. As a result, aid flows on a large scale were necessary to reconstitute an Afghan state—an objective to which the international community had committed itself when supporting the Bonn Agreement.

The experience of aid delivery, however, proved decidedly mixed and had some notable paradoxical elements. Aid directed at human capital formation certainly contributed to the development of a new generation of extremely talented young Afghans, on whose shoulders many hopes for a better future now rest. But flows of aid that exceeded absorptive capacity fed corruption and fostered the development of a 'neopatrimonial' system in which bureaucracy and patronage were entwined to an unprecedented degree.[87] Furthermore, aid flows created a 'parallel public sector', resulted in upward accountability to donors at the expense of accountability to the Afghan people, and gave rise to a situation in which 'some strongmen and private entities unintentionally competed with the state in implementing projects'.[88] As Dr Nematullah Bizhan of the ANU's Crawford School of Public Policy has put it:

> Aid can reinforce or hinder state building, depending on the alignment of donors' interests with recipients' needs, the recipient's type of state, the state's capacity, and whether the interaction between aid and domestic institutions ensures continuity and supports or undermines the state capacity.[89]

Aid projects can also fuel conflict, creating stakes over which local actors can struggle for control, or attracting armed militants into provinces or districts where they can attack new high-profile targets.[90]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Australia's aid record in Afghanistan proved similarly mixed. Some extremely dedicated and proficient officers of the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) put up their hands to serve in Afghanistan and won the respect of their colleagues and local interlocutors. Australia was particularly sensitive to the needs of historically vulnerable groups such as Afghan women, and also sought to strengthen institutions such as the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, chaired initially by Dr Sima Samar and now by Ms Shaharzad Akbar, both of whom have paid a number of visits to Australia.

Nonetheless, many staff in the field were aware of implementation problems. David Savage, who was very seriously injured by a suicide bomber on 26 March 2012, later documented a number of social factors that led some projects to fail.[91] At higher levels, however, AusAID seemed more inclined to try to bury its mistakes. A May 2013 report of the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee

David Savage and his Afghan interpreter Yonus Rezai at the Australian War Memorial, Anzac Day, 2014. Source: William Maley.

was highly critical of AusAID's performance on a number of fronts. One related to monitoring. The committee concluded that the annual Afghanistan Aid Program performance report was 'extremely weak on analysis and evaluation', and notable for 'broad statements bordering on meaningless'. It concluded that 'without a robust evaluation of Australia's aid projects in Afghanistan, there can be no genuine understanding of whether the various programs represent value for money and are likely to make a lasting difference for the better for the Afghan people.'[92] This made the severing of relations with The Liaison Office (an NGO that provided high-quality critical evaluations of development projects) particularly unfortunate.

The committee was also harshly critical of the management of AusAID's scholarships program in Afghanistan, which was in the hands of a private contractor, GRM. In a ministerial submission dated 17 August 2012, AusAID had informed the Foreign Minister that the program had been suspended pending a comprehensive review to address risks of fraud; a preliminary investigation had already found 'systemic weaknesses in GRM's management processes'.[93] Most unwisely, AusAID did not choose to share that information with the committee; the problem of fraud became public only when the Director-General of AusAID mentioned it (and only in response to a direct question) before *another* committee on 14 February 2013. In its May 2013 report, the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee stated that AusAID 'needs to investigate its own conduct with respect to not only the circumstances that led to the program's suspension, but to AusAID's oversight of the program'.[94] Following the change of government in Australia in September 2013, AusAID was disestablished, and its functions were returned to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Imprudent use of contractors is one risk in the world of aid delivery; another is overlooking the need to match skills with tasks. This was arguably a problem in the deployment to Afghanistan of officers from the International Deployment Group of the Australian Federal Police (AFP). The reconstitution of a policing capacity is very important in stabilising a disrupted state, since policing fills the critical gap between the coercive capacity provided by a country's armed forces and the social norms that routinely regulate the behaviour of individuals without the involvement of the state. Nonetheless, a careful analysis by Dr Martin Hess, a highly experienced police officer who served with the AFP in Afghanistan, concluded that 'due to fast-changing and often ambiguous strategic directions, there was little prospect that the AFP would be able to make any meaningful progress, and its members were exposed to high risk for very low return'. Hess argued that:

> in order to administer justice and 'keep the peace', there must be a 'peace to keep'. There is no prospect of justice, very little chance of detection of offences and almost zero chance of benign crime prevention, in a liberal-democratic sense, until there is such a peace. In the case of Afghanistan, particularly in Regional Command (South) including Uruzgan province, such a peace was and remains highly elusive.[95]

The deployment ran into difficulties when the idea took shape that the AFP should progress from training and mentoring of the Afghan National Police to 'outside-the-wire' operations, which would have required a paramilitary rather than civilian policing approach. As a report from the Australian Civil-Military Centre later put it:

> For all their professionalism and experience, however, the AFP is not set up, trained or equipped as the sort of paramilitary force that would have been required to undertake joint counter-insurgency training patrols with the ANP and some of what was expected of the AFP went beyond what it is trained, prepared and equipped for, which led to some frustration.[96]

A number of private Australian agencies have contributed notably to assisting Afghans on the ground, often with little publicity. They include the Indigo Foundation, for which Ali Reza Yunespour, an Afghan-Australian now at Melbourne University, serves as a Partnership Coordinator, focusing on rural schooling; and Mahboba's Promise, an NGO focusing on aiding orphans that was established by Mahboba Rawi OAM, who tragically lost her son in a drowning accident at Kiama in 1992 but thereafter committed herself with great energy to assisting other children at risk.[97] Such agencies have delivered important services very economically to vulnerable and needy groups.

8. Refugee issues

The presence in Australia of substantial numbers of Afghanistan-born persons is largely a consequence of refugee flows. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, refugees were resettled to Australia, predominantly from Pakistan. At the end of the 1990s, however, Australia witnessed an influx of asylum seekers arriving by boat, the bulk of them indisputably 'refugees' within the meaning of the term under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.[98] A large number were members of the Afghan Hazara ethnic group, which has a long history of experiencing social and political marginalisation.[99] The trigger for this outflow was a particularly gruesome massacre of Hazaras carried out by the Taliban in August 1998 in Mazar-e Sharif. As Rupert Colville of UNHCR described it:

> Some were shot on the streets. Many were executed in their own homes, after areas of the town known to be inhabited by their ethnic group had been systematically sealed off and searched. Some were boiled or asphyxiated to death after being left crammed inside sealed metal containers under a hot August sun. In at least one hospital, as many as 30 patients were shot as they lay helplessly in their beds. The bodies of many of the victims were left on the streets or in their houses as a stark warning to the city's remaining inhabitants. Horrified witnesses saw dogs tearing at the corpses, but were instructed over loudspeakers and by radio announcements not to remove or bury them.[100]

Afghan refugees at the Roghani refugee camp, Chaman, Pakistan, 1 December 2001.
Photo: unmultimedia.org/Luke Powell.

This sent shock waves throughout Afghanistan and drove Hazaras into the arms of people smugglers, who offered the best opportunity for escape to a safer region of the world.

In 1999–2000, some 4,174 people came to Australia by boat without prior authorisation.[101] The numbers involved were small, but the political climate virtually guaranteed a febrile response. At the 1998 election, the far-right One Nation party had taken votes from the governing parties on the strength of its anti-Asian and anti-immigrant platform, and the government had no desire to see any more votes haemorrhage in that direction. Thus, Afghans fleeing the Taliban found themselves in the unenviable position of being political footballs in Australia. That culminated in the Tampa affair of 2001, when a Norwegian freighter that had rescued refugees from a sinking boat in the Indian Ocean and taken them to Christmas Island was boarded by Australian special forces to prevent the refugees from setting foot on Australian soil.[102] The refugees were dispatched to the unsavoury Pacific micro-state of Nauru—a country 'accused of laundering around $70 billion in Russian mafia money'.[103] The human consequences were disastrous.[104] This so-called 'Pacific solution', discontinued by the Rudd government, was taken up again by Prime Minister Julia Gillard and carried on with fervour by prime ministers Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison. Driven by domestic politics, it does not enhance Australia's international standing, and it exposes the refugees consigned to Nauru and to Manus Island in Papua New Guinea to misery and danger.[105]

On a positive note, the prevalence of Hazaras among recent arrivals has been one of the factors contributing to high achievement by a number of members of Australia's Afghanistan-born population. Education has historically been the way that marginalised groups have escaped their marginalisation, and that has continued in Australia. While the social integration of Afghans in Australia is yet to be the focus of a full-scale sociological analysis, Afghans certainly seem to have been performing very well. Akram Azimi, a refugee from Afghanistan, was chosen as Young Australian of the Year in 2013. Afghan-Australians are to be found teaching in universities and serving in the professions, the armed forces and the public service. For example, Professor Amin Saikal (ANU), Dr Nematullah Bizhan (ANU), Dr Niamatullah Ibrahimi (Deakin University), and Dr Ali Azimi (University of Sydney) have been active in the tertiary education sector. Besmellah Rezaee is principal solicitor at BR Legal in Adelaide. Dr Homa Forotan and Dr Hasib Ahmadzai are medical practitioners at the Mater Hospital, Brisbane, and the Prince of Wales Clinical School in Sydney, respectively. Jawad Zeerak is a Melbourne-based engineer, and Ali Mullaie, also Melbourne-based, is an IT consultant. Kobra Ali from Adelaide became the first woman originating from Afghanistan to serve in the Australian Army, and Sekandar (Alex) Danishyar, a graduate in aeronautical engineering, is an officer in the RAAF. Abdul Karim Hekmat in Sydney is a respected freelance journalist. Muzafar Ali, a

Besmellah Rezaee, Principal Solicitor and Partner, BR Legal, Adelaide. Source: Besmellah Rezaee.

Flight Lieutenant S Alex Danishyar, RAAF, in the Sand to Sand charity run in Tarin Kowt, Uruzgan, 17 August 2013, in support of Soldier On. Source: Corporal Mark Doran.

founder of the Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre in Indonesia, has continued to promote refugee education from his new home in Adelaide, notably by speaking at screenings around the country of *The Staging Post*, a documentary by Jolyon Hoff that tells the centre's story. Ali Reza Yunespour, mentioned above, served as an officer of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade before undertaking PhD studies at the University of New South Wales and teaching at the American University of Afghanistan. Khushal Taniwal is a Melbourne-based public servant in the Department of Defence; his father, Hakim Taniwal, a distinguished and courageous Afghan sociologist who returned to Afghanistan from Australia after 2001 to aid the stabilisation of his country and became governor of Paktia, was murdered by a Taliban suicide bomber on 10 September 2006.[106] Nasiba Akram in Sydney and Dr Nouria Salehi, AM, in Melbourne, have been energetic advocates for assistance to Afghanistan, and to humanitarian causes more generally. Some Afghan-Australians are now internationally famous, including Yalda Hakim, presenter of *Impact* on BBC World Service television, and Saad Mohseni, Chair and CEO of Moby Group and a pioneer of free media in Afghanistan, who serves on the board of trustees of the International Crisis Group.[107]

9. Whither the relationship?

As a result of nearly two decades of globalisation, Afghanistan is a very different country now from what it was in 2001, and Australia has been part of this story. One effect of these changes has been to enhance the scope for cooperation in the future between Australia and Afghanistan. It was in recognition of this that on 20 May 2012, the text of the 'Comprehensive Long-term Partnership between Australia and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan' was signed by Prime Minister Gillard and President Karzai. In such agreements, there is inevitably much that will be simply aspirational, but, nonetheless, they can provide windows into future opportunities and help identify areas of shared interest, on which the Government of Afghanistan is keen to build.

The then Australian Prime Minister, the Hon Julia Gillard MP, is welcomed to the Afghanistan Presidential Palace in Kabul by President Hamed Karzai during their first official meeting.
Photo: Australian Department of Defence, online.

One area highlighted related to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The text provides, among other things, that:

> the Governments will develop long-term cooperation on shared national security challenges and continue to work together to build the capacity of the ANSF and to promote international support for the ANSF … Beyond transition, the range of support options may expand to include a program of defence cooperation with opportunities for professional training in Australia. (paragraph 11)

Officer Cadet Rahmatullah Barati, one of the two first Afghans to study at the Royal Military College of Australia, Duntroon. Source: Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Canberra.

This has paved the way for Afghan officers to study at the Australian Defence College at Weston Creek, and for cadets to train at the Australian Defence Force Academy and at the Royal Military College of Australia at Duntroon. Furthermore, in keeping with the spirit of the section of the partnership dealing with 'Development' (paragraphs 13–19), Australia continues to supply aid to Afghanistan. Following President Ghani's 2017 visit, training initiatives have been pursued in the areas of engineering and water management (including via a memorandum of understanding between Kabul Polytechnic and Griffith University), mining and public administration. The 2019–20 federal budget allocated $80 million for Afghanistan—the largest allocation for any country in South and West Asia.[108]

The partnership also deals with 'Cultural and people-to-people links', providing that:

> The Governments will seek to cooperate in preserving and promoting Afghanistan's cultural heritage and to promote direct ties between the people of Australia and Afghanistan, including through sporting activities and cultural exhibitions … The Governments recognise the importance of higher education for Afghanistan and cooperation between their universities and institutions of higher education. Australia will continue to promote educational links including through Australian scholarships (paragraphs 25–26).

A range of developments have linked Afghans and Australians. Successful people-to-people dialogues were held in 2017 and 2019. The diplomat and folk singer Fred Smith not only served in Uruzgan, but has given concerts in many parts of

Delegation of Afghan women accompanied by DFAT and Embassy staff on International Women's Day, during their visit to Canberra as part of the 2nd Annual Afghan-Australian People-to-People Dialogue 2019, at the Australian War Memorial. Source: Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Canberra.

Australia, performing songs inspired by his Afghanistan experiences, which he also described in a fascinating book.[109] An Afghan-Australian musicologist, Dr Ahmad Sarmast, who obtained his PhD in music from Monash University, is the founder of the hugely impressive Afghanistan National Institute of Music. Its students have performed at Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Centre, but their commitment to their art has not been without risk: Dr Sarmast was seriously injured in a Taliban bomb attack on a concert in Kabul on 11 December 2014,[110] but has remained dedicated to his task.

Australia also has sporting ties with Afghanistan. While Afghan competitors took part in the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, few at the beginning of this century would have expected Afghanistan and Australia to be facing each other in a World Cup cricket match in Bristol on 1 June 2019. Furthermore, four Afghan cricketers—Rashid Khan, Mohammad Nabi, Najib Zadran and Qais Ahmad—were signed to play in the 'Big Bash League' for 2018–2020.

In addition, in the sphere of economic linkages, Afghanistan is increasingly positioning itself as a supplier of low-bulk, high-value exports such as saffron, which is cultivated in Herat and other parts of Afghanistan and featured prominently at a trade fair in Mumbai in September 2018. Afghan saffron is highly competitive in terms of price and offers a considerable return for entrepreneurs who become involved in its production and distribution.

Afghanistan national cricket team following their victory in a qualifying match for the 2019 Cricket World Cup. Source: Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Canberra.

Ultimately, however, what ties Afghanistan and Australia most strongly to each other is a shared strategic interest in seeing the Western-supported transition in Afghanistan continue to progress. To understand why this is in Australia's interest as well as Afghanistan's, one need only reflect on what some of the consequences of a demonstrable failure would be.

To start with, such a failure would undoubtedly fuel a narrative similar to the one that appeared following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989: that radical religion is a force multiplier that can defeat even a superpower. This would likely have the effect of stimulating the growth of radicalism all the way from the Arab Middle East to the Indonesian archipelago, undermining years of effort directed at countering violent extremism in Australia's neighbourhood and beyond. A failure in Afghanistan could also trigger very large new flows of Afghan refugees. But, most seriously of all, such an outcome could inspire a Pakistan-based extremist group such as Lashkar-e-Taiba to flex its muscles and attempt another major terrorist attack in India, along the lines of the Mumbai attack in November 2008. The consequences for regional and global security could be catastrophic.

It is incumbent on those who care about Afghanistan's future to work to ensure that such outcomes are avoided, and that the aspirations of ordinary Afghans to be constructive partners of an increasingly globalised world can be realised.

Notes

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
AFP	Australian Federal Police
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
ANU	Australian National University
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
CEO	chief executive officer
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	non-government organisation
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RTF	Reconstruction Task Force
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNMCTT	UN Mine Clearance Training Team

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Australia–Afghanistan relations

Reflections on a half-century

It is now 50 years since diplomatic relations were formally established between Australia and Afghanistan. Superficially, the two countries might seem to have little in common, but there is more to unite Australians and Afghans than one might think at first glance. Resident embassies have been in place in Canberra and Kabul for more than a decade, and by the time of the 2016 Australian Census, there were 46,800 Afghanistan-born residents of Australia. Furthermore, in the period following the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, more than 25,000 members of the Australian Defence Force served in Afghanistan, building on earlier deployments of ADF demining specialists who did much to establish a positive reputation for Australian even before the post-9/11 era.

This study explores some of the key dimensions of the development of this relationship. It examines the early history of Australia's encounters with Afghans before outlining how the diplomatic relationship came to be established, and shows how the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, by reasons of its global geopolitical significance, elevated Afghanistan significantly in Australia's thinking about the world. With the collapse of the communist regime in April 1992, some fresh opportunities emerged for engagement; and the study details how the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 2001 opened further vistas for the relationship between Canberra and Kabul.

Since then, the state-to-state relationship has developed additional dimensions—diplomatic, military, developmental and humanitarian—which have been augmented by significant people-to-people ties despite all the difficulties that surround travel between the two countries. Yet for all this, what ultimately binds the two countries together is that Australia has a strong interest in seeing the transition in Afghanistan that was inaugurated in 2001—a complex mixture of statebuilding, institutional development, economic change, civil society activism and enhancement of human rights and freedoms—continue down the broad path that was laid out at that time. A failure in Afghanistan is likely to involve serious adverse strategic consequences for Australia.