Chapter 2 – Contextualization of Afghan Politics

2.1 Background

I have divided chapter two into four main sections. I shall start by exploring the historical emergence of Afghanistan as a nation state and the importance of its strategic location in geopolitics. Once the historical facts of its geopolitical implications are established, I shall examine Afghanistan’s relationship with its neighbors and global players during the Cold War, the Afghan civil war and the War on Terror. The observations from the above study shall guide me to analyze the linkages between local, regional and global players in the Afghan conflict and how have these players have changed within the pyramid of peace actors.

The geographic centrality of Afghanistan has made it a strategic location in geopolitics. For centuries Afghanistan has been at the cross road between the East and the West bringing trade, religion and various empires to the region. Although it became a nation in the 18th century, it got sucked into the regional political rivalries beginning in the 19th Century107 and since then, it has been at war with its neighbors or the ‘superpowers’.108 Being an ardent student of Afghan history, the pattern that comes to light repeatedly is the direct or indirect interferences of foreigners in the internal political dynamics of the country. A good example of this can be found in the book called the Great Game,109 which illustrates the rivalries between Czarist Russia and the British Empire vis-à-vis Afghanistan.

2.1.1 Terminology

I would like to explain that while writing this book, I am faced with the dilemma whether or not to use the widely applied terminologies in regard to the Afghan reconciliation and conflict in the past three decades.

As mentioned in chapter one, most of the literature I am referring to throughout my text is based on the school of realism and realpolitik. Although, I am making use of the widely applied terminologies such as the ‘superpowers’,

108 The usage of terminology is further explored under the terminology section in chapter 2. Please see as to why I have chosen to use the term superpower in my thesis.
109 Hopkirk, The Great Game.
‘Cold War’, ‘international community’ or ‘War on Terror’ to refer to the literature I have quoted, I am aware that such categorization and labeling of actors in conflict transformation could be even more problematic. Through labeling, a conflict is framed and thus frozen, hindering the options for creative exploration to bring about social healing and reconciliation. Furthermore, at times this labeling also generalizes the context of conflict in a way that otherwise would remain very dynamic and robust.

Being aware of this dilemma, I have consciously chosen to apply the widely used term ‘superpowers’ to keep consistent with the references I have made, but my understanding of the superpowers is not on the basis of realpolitik. Instead, I see them as the main actors in the Afghan reconciliation processes, which I am analyzing.

In the upcoming chapters, I shall refer to the continuing conflict in Afghanistan from the Cold War era to the War on Terror by not framing or giving it a name. Having worked with the Afghan youth in social projects of healing, I realized that the labeling of the conflict was an extremely sensitive matter, as it exposed the background of the person and thus their affiliation with certain political factions, regional powers and so forth.

For example, if a member of the youth group I worked with called the Afghan conflict the years of Jihad, it implied that he or his family supported the Jihad. His affiliation with a certain political group and regional country depended on what ethnicity, which part of the country he belonged to and where he had taken refuge.

I remember an incident with one of the youth participants who was supposed to attend a roundtable discussion I had organized on peacebuilding. He called me the previous night to confirm that he was no more participating in the discussion because by associating himself with me, he will be labeled ‘pro-communist’ and this could cause his family or him trouble when he returns back to Afghanistan from India.

I have made a conscious effort not to label the Afghan conflict for two reasons:

i. Afghans have different interpretations of the Afghan conflict, some call it Jihad, some state terrorism or resistance against the