Marmara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilimler Dergisi • Marmara University Journal of Political Science • Cilt 13, Sayı1, Mart 2025
ISSN 2147-6926, ss. 141-160 • DOI: 10.14782/marmarasbd.xx

RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

Afghan-American Relations in the Pre-Cold War Era: 1921–1948

Soğuk Savaş Öncesi Dönemde Afgan-Amerikan İlişkileri: 1921–1948

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Abstract

Much has been written about Afghan-American relations during the Cold War and the post-9/11 periods. However, the interwar period (1921-1948) has received less scholarly attention, despite its critical importance in shaping the trajectory of bilateral ties. Afghanistan's repeated efforts to establish formal relations with the U.S. during this era were met with long-standing hesitation and delayed reciprocation. Despite Afghanistan's proactive and repeated diplomatic overtures, it took over a decade for the U.S. to recognize Afghanistan's independence and even longer to establish a permanent diplomatic presence in Kabul. In this context, this study aims to explore Afghanistan's diplomatic efforts during the interwar period to forge ties with the U.S., uncover its core motivations, and investigate the factors driving America's disengagement policy and reluctance. The study delves into the complexities of early Afghan-American relations, where geopolitical calculations, economic pragmatism, and misperceptions shaped interactions between the two nations. In doing so, it highlights a crucial yet under-discussed chapter in the history of Afghan-American relations, offering new insights into the dynamics of diplomacy during the interwar period.

Keywords: Afghanistan, U.S., Diplomacy, Cold War, Foreign Policy

Öz

Soğuk Savaş döneminde ve 11 Eylül sonrası dönemde Afgan-Amerikan ilişkileri hakkında yapılmış pek çok çalışma vardır. Ancak ikili ilişkilerin seyrini şekillendirme anlamında kritik öneme sahip olan iki dünya savaşı arasında kalan dönem (1921–1948) daha az akademik ilgi görmüştür. Bu dönemde Afganistan'ın ABD ile resmi ilişki kurma çabaları Washington'da uzun süre devam eden bir tereddütle karşılanmıştır. Afganistan'ın proaktif tutumuna ve ısrarlı diplomatik girişimlerine rağmen ABD'nin Afganistan'ın bağımsızlığını tanıması on yıldan fazla sürmüş, Washington'un Kabil'de daimi bir diplomatik temsilcilik açması ise daha da fazla vakit almıştır. Bu çalışma, Afganistan'ın iki savaş arası dönemde ABD ile ilişki kurma çabalarına ışık tutmayı ve Afgan hükümetinin bu hususa ilişkin temel gerekçelerini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Aynı zamanda ABD'nin Afganistan'la ilişki kurmakta çekingen ve isteksiz kalmasına neden olan faktörleri de açığa çıkarmayı hedeflemektedir. Bu kapsamda

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How to cite this article/Atıf için: Allahdad, A. (2025). Afghan-American Relations in the Pre-Cold War Era: 1921–1948. Marmara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilimler Dergisi, *13*(1), 141-160. DOI: 10.14782/marmarasbd.1554589

Makale Gönderim Tarihi: 23.09.2024 **Yayına Kabul Tarihi:** 11.11.2024

çalışma özellikle jeopolitik hesapların, ekonomik pragmatizmin ve yanlış anlamaların iki ülke arasındaki etkileşimi şekillendirdiği erken dönem Afgan-Amerikan ilişkilerinin karmaşıklığına odaklanmaktadır. Bu şekilde Afgan-Amerikan ilişkilerinin tarihinde önemli, ancak yeterince tartışılmamış bir dönemi öne çıkarmayı ve iki savaş arası döneme hakim olan diplomasi dinamiklerine dair yeni bir bakış açısı sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Afganistan, ABD, Diplomasi, Soğuk Savaş, Dış Politika

1. Introduction

Throughout their century-long history of interaction, Afghanistan and the U.S. have experienced significant transformations in their bilateral relations, ranging from passive engagement to active policy, from confrontation to stagnation, and from strategic alliance to unreliable partnership. Over time, Afghan-U.S. relations can be categorized into five main periods: the formative period (1921-1948), the development period (1948-1979), the deterioration and stagnation period (1979-2001), the strategic partnership period (2001-2021), and the cautious and pragmatic engagement period (2021-2024). Surprisingly, the first of these periods remains largely overlooked and underexplored in academic circles. Yet, this initial era marks the foundational decades of diplomatic and political relations between the two countries. From 1921 to 1948, Afghanistan persistently sought to establish formal ties with the U.S., making significant efforts to open diplomatic channels and foster bilateral cooperation. However, the U.S. responded with noticeable reluctance, hesitating to engage fully with Afghanistan and not being particularly receptive to its overtures. Despite Afghanistan's persistence, American interest remained minimal, and direct engagement stayed limited during these formative years.

This paper will explore Afghanistan's diplomatic initiatives during the pre-Cold War era, focusing on why the Afghan state was eager to establish relations with the U.S., the strategic goals it sought to achieve, and how it envisioned these ties benefiting its national interests. Additionally, the study will examine the reasons behind the U.S.'s hesitancy to engage more deeply with Afghanistan during this period, despite the Afghan state's persistent efforts. In summary, this study aims to analyze Afghanistan's pre-Cold War diplomatic efforts to forge ties with the U.S., uncover its objectives and motivations, and investigate the factors driving America's cautious and reluctant response.

By examining these early interactions, this study aims to provide insight into the formative stages of Afghan-American relations, highlighting the diplomatic challenges Afghanistan faced in its efforts to engage with the U.S. It will also shed light on the factors behind America's cautious stance during this period, offering a deeper understanding of the broader geopolitical dynamics that shaped both nations' foreign policies. Furthermore, this research will reveal the continuity and evolving dynamics that have influenced the trajectory of Afghan-U.S. relations since their inception. Although this early period has been largely overshadowed, it remains crucial for understanding the foundations of the diplomatic and political relationship between the two states and the enduring patterns in their bilateral ties. For a detailed exploration of the formation period

of Afghan-American relations and to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the factors shaping this critical era, this study has extensively utilized the U.S. Department of State's Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series, which consists entirely of firsthand official documents. These include letters exchanged between Afghan leaders and U.S. Presidents, analytical and policy recommendation papers from relevant U.S. government bodies, and telegrams sent between the U.S. Embassy in Kabul and the Department of State.

2. Afghanistan's Struggle for Seeking Diplomatic Recognition: 1921–1934

Amir Amanullah Khan, after establishing diplomatic contact with neighboring and regional sovereign states, dispatched high-ranking delegates to Europe in 1921 to seek formal recognition and establish diplomatic relations with European sovereign states (Gregorian, 1969, p. 233). Additionally, the Afghan delegation was tasked with visiting the U.S., carrying a special letter from King Amanullah Khan to President Warren G. Harding. To achieve this goal, the head of the Afghan delegation, Muhammad Wali Khan, requested the assistance of the U.S. Embassy in Paris to facilitate an official visit to the U.S. and arrange an appointment with President Warren G. Harding (Clements, 2003, p. 257). The Secretary to the U.S. Presidency approved the visit, and on July 26, 1921, the Afghan delegates were received at the White House, where they presented President Harding with a letter from Amanullah Khan. In the letter, Amanullah informed the U.S. President of his ascension to power following his father's assassination and expressed a sincere desire to establish formal political and diplomatic ties and a lasting friendship with the U.S. (U.S. Department of State, 1936, Doc. 214). In response, President Harding congratulated Amanullah on his coronation and welcomed the friendly relations between the two countries, while emphasizing that any political agreement or formal diplomatic relationship with another sovereign state would require the approval of Congress (U.S. Department of State, 1936, Doc. 215).

In Afghanistan, this initial correspondence between the two states and the reception of Afghan delegates at the White House was perceived as a recognition of the Afghan state by the U.S. However, the issue of formal recognition of Afghanistan was neither thoroughly discussed nor officially considered by the White House or Congress. Despite this, President Warren Harding's reception of the Afghan mission and his congratulations to Amanullah Khan on his ascension to the throne can be viewed as a form of de facto recognition. Although the Afghan political elites were disheartened by the Harding administration's indifference and refusal to establish diplomatic relations or formally recognize the Afghan state, they continued to pursue an active engagement policy with the succeeding Calvin Coolidge administration. In October 1925, the extraordinary Afghan envoy, Sardar Muhammad Nadir Khan, presented a draft friendship treaty to the U.S. ambassador in Paris, expressing Afghanistan's sincere desire to foster cordial relations, appoint diplomatic representatives in both states, and initiate diplomatic communication and consular services (U.S. Department of State, 1941, Doc. 391). Unexpectedly, the Coolidge administration reiterated the statements of its predecessor, expressing gratitude for Afghanistan's

warm sentiments and affirming the friendly relations between the two countries. It also conveyed pleasure in cooperating toward mutual goals, while noting that the matter of establishing formal diplomatic ties would be thoroughly considered (U.S. Department of State, 1941, Doc. 329).

With the change of administrations in both states, Afghanistan once again raised the issue of recognition and formal political contact in 1931, hoping for a positive response from the U.S. This time, Afghanistan expressed its strong desire to establish formal relations through U.S. embassies in London and Rome (U.S. Department of State, 1946, Doc. 683 & 685). In response to Afghanistan's persistent pursuit of recognition, U.S. Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson stated that "no recent consideration has been given by this Government to the question of the establishment of official relations with the Afghan Government, and the present moment is not considered opportune to negotiate a treaty" (U.S. Department of State, 1946, Doc. 686). The U.S. response came as a shock to the Afghan political elite. For nearly a decade, Afghan leaders had consistently demonstrated their goodwill toward building bilateral relations, only to be met with the U.S.'s view that signing a friendship treaty was premature.

While the U.S. remained stubborn in its stance, resisting any concrete steps toward the official recognition of the Afghan state, Afghanistan, in contrast, continued to seize every opportunity with great effort and enthusiasm to entice the U.S. into granting recognition and building a bilateral relationship. This long-standing desire for recognition finally came to fruition in 1934, when new leadership took power in both countries: the ascension of Zahir Shah to the Afghan throne and Franklin D. Roosevelt's assumption of the U.S. presidency. In April 1933, King Zahir Shah wrote a letter to President Roosevelt, informing him of his father's death and his own ascension to the throne by the will of the Afghan nation. In the letter, Zahir Shah emphasized Afghanistan's persistent desire to establish and strengthen political and economic relations between the two countries (U.S. Department of State, 1951, Doc. 636). President Roosevelt did not dismiss Afghanistan's request, and on August 21, 1934, he officially recognized Afghanistan's sovereignty and independence (U.S. Department of State, 1951, Doc. 638).

This recognition was achieved largely due to the wisdom and persuasive recommendation of U.S. Acting Secretary of State William Phillips, who explained to President Roosevelt the strategic significance of recognizing Afghanistan and laid the groundwork for formal diplomatic relations. He had pointed out to President Roosevelt:

> "Since the Government of Afghanistan is recognized by all of the Great Powers and since the present regime [King Zahir Shah's government] appears to be a stable one, I can see no reason why we should withhold recognition of that country. I am therefore enclosing, together with a copy of the translation of King Zahir Shah's letter to you, an acknowledgment which has been drafted for your approval and which would constitute formal recognition of his régime. If this reply meets with your approval, I shall be glad to transmit it through appropriate sources to His Majesty Zahir Shah" (U.S. Department of State, 1951, Doc. 637).

Accordingly, President Roosevelt gave his approval to the formal recognition document prepared by William Phillips and conveyed it to King Zahir Shah. One year later, in 1935, the U.S. appointed William Harrison Hornibrook, its envoy in Tehran, as a non-resident envoy to Afghanistan. On May 4, 1935, Hornibrook officially presented his credentials to the Afghan state, marking the beginning of formal diplomatic relations between the two nations (Office of the Historian, n.d.).

3. From Recognition To Establishment of Permanent Representation: 1934-1948

Afghanistan was undoubtedly frustrated by the repeated diplomatic rebuffs and the U.S.'s recalcitrant stance on recognizing Afghanistan's independence and sovereignty. However, after receiving the recognition letter from President Roosevelt, the Afghan ruling class sought to expand and strengthen the friendship and political relationship between the two states by pursuing economic and trade agreements. Afghanistan's primary goal was to persuade the U.S. to establish a legation in Afghanistan, reciprocate with an Afghan legation in the U.S., and appoint permanent envoys in both countries. The Afghan leadership understood that in order to convince the U.S., they needed to emphasize the availability of tangible economic and trade opportunities in Afghanistan, in addition to advocating for the extension of diplomatic ties. To this end, in September 1934, a senior Afghan diplomat, Shah Wali, conveyed Afghanistan's sincere desire to conclude a friendship and commercial agreement during discussions with U.S. envoy Jesse Isidor Straus in Paris (U.S. Department of State, 1953, V.I. Doc. 421). In response, the U.S. administration expressed that while it was not principally and fundamentally opposed to a friendship and trade agreement with Afghanistan, it deemed a less formal treaty sufficient for achieving the two countries' shared goals under the current circumstances (U.S. Department of State, 1953, V.I. Doc. 422).

The U.S. did not entirely reject the Afghan government's request and instead proposed negotiations based on the agreement it had signed with Saudi Arabia in 1933. This proposed agreement consisted of six articles, with the first three addressing diplomatic and consular matters, while the latter three focused on key commercial arrangements. After thorough consideration, the Afghan authorities agreed to and welcomed all provisions of the accord, except for the fourth article, which mandated the unconditional and immediate reciprocal enforcement of the most-favored-nation treatment in relation to imports, exports, customs affairs, and other trade regulations (U.S. Department of State, 1953, V.I. Doc. 422). The principle of most-favored-nation treatment is founded on the idea that a state should act indiscriminately and maintain an equal policy toward its trading partners, refraining from granting special privileges to any specific partner in commercial matters (Britannica, n.d.). In global economic interactions, trading partners should be treated based on the principle of equality, ensuring that no country is placed in a position of undue advantage or disadvantage.

The Afghan authorities communicated their consent to all terms of the draft agreement and expressed their readiness to sign, provided that the most-favored-nation clause was removed

(U.S. Department of State, 1953, V.I. Doc. 424). The Afghan government justified this request by pointing out that it had not included this clause in its commercial and transportation treaties with the Soviet Union and the UK (U.S. Department of State, 1953, V.I. Doc. 424). Afghanistan was reluctant to jeopardize its commercial and political relations with these states by agreeing to the clause exclusively with the U.S. Conversely, the U.S. found the removal of the most-favored-nation principle unacceptable, insisting that it was a necessary prerequisite for any trade agreement with foreign nations (U.S. Department of State, 1953, V. III. Doc. 1). As neither side was willing to compromise on this issue, the bilateral discussions became protracted, leading to a delay in the signing of the commercial and diplomatic agreement.

After extensive deliberation and consultation, Afghanistan agreed to include the most-favored-nation principle but resisted the phrases "immediate and unconditional" (U.S. Department of State, 1953, V. III. Doc. 1). Despite this significant concession from Afghanistan, it was deemed unsatisfactory by American authorities, who continued to insist on their original position. To facilitate mutual understanding, the U.S. ultimately decided, after months of delay, to omit all contentious items and language from the draft and to proceed with an informal bilateral friendship agreement. Consequently, the U.S. State Department authorized its envoy in Paris to sign the friendship agreement with the Afghan envoy, removing all disputed articles from the draft. As a result, the friendship agreement was signed on March 26, 1936, after two years of delays stemming from both states' inability to reach a consensus on issues related to trade, transportation, and customs (U.S. Department of State, 1953, V. III. Doc. 5).

3.1. A Petroleum Exploration Treaty with an American Company

Afghanistan remained steadfast in its determination to strengthen its ties with the U.S. through political engagement and commercial treaties. One of the first concrete steps taken in this direction was the offer of an exclusive oil concession to the Inland Exploration Company, an American oil exploration firm affiliated with Seaboard Oil Company of Delaware (Shroder, 214, p. 307). After six months of extensive negotiations, an agreement was finalized between the Afghan authorities and the company in November 1936 (U.S. Department of State, 1954, Doc. 458). The exclusive concessions and rights granted to the Inland Exploration Company under this agreement were significant (U.S. Department of State, 1954, Doc. 459). Afghanistan's decision to offer special concessions to the American oil exploration corporation was shaped by a range of political, economic, cultural, infrastructural, and technological incentives. Primarily, Afghan political leaders believed that the successful realization of this project would lay the groundwork for constructive dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding with the U.S., helping to dispel existing prejudices, biases, and misconceptions. Moreover, the Afghan government aimed to assess the extent of its untapped natural energy reserves, which could provide a significant source of wealth and revenue. This would reduce the government's economic and financial dependency while creating direct and indirect employment opportunities for **its** citizens and private companies across the country.

With the initiation of this project, American engineers, mechanics, experts, and support staff would move to Afghanistan to oversee the installation of drilling machines and equipment. The presence of these American professionals could inspire and encourage further investments from their fellow citizens in various sectors, including business ventures, tourism to historical sites, and scientific research in Afghanistan. This influx of expertise and investment would naturally promote cultural exchange and economic cooperation between the two nations. Furthermore, the company planned to transport the oil discovered in Afghanistan to Iran, necessitating improvements to existing roads and the construction of railroads connecting the Afghan oil fields to the Persian Gulf (Shroder, 2014, p. 311).

Politically, the Afghan state anticipated that the significant influx of U.S. citizens into Afghanistan would encourage the U.S. to establish a permanent diplomatic presence and consular services. Indeed, in June 1937, top officials from the Inland Exploration Company formally requested their government to open a representative office in Afghanistan. They emphasized the importance of consular services to protect the company's personnel, facilitate travel documents to and from Afghanistan, ensure the safe and efficient import and export of funds, and support the development of their commercial activities (U.S. Department of State, 1954, Doc. 462). Taking advantage of the situation, in July 1937, Afghan Foreign Minister Faizy Mohammad met with the U.S. permanent envoy in Iran, Cornelius Van Engert, to express his government's sincere desire to strengthen and enhance bilateral relations with the U.S. During this meeting, the Afghan Foreign Minister emphasized the necessity of establishing a U.S. legation in Kabul and an Afghan legation in Washington. He argued that such diplomatic representation would lay a solid, reliable foundation for bilateral relations and make them more interactive and effective (U.S. Department of State, 1954, Doc. 463). The U.S., in accordance with its persistent non-engagement and passive policy towards Afghanistan, deemed sufficient its diplomatic contact and representation in Afghanistan, which was conducted through the U.S. mission in Tehran, Calcutta, and Karachi (U.S. Department of State, 1954, Doc. 466). Nevertheless, the U.S. authorities added that they would closely watch the Afghan state's internal developments and the extent to which American interests were available there. Should the right circumstances arise for the materialization of American interests, careful consideration would be given to opening a legation in Kabul (U.S. Department of State, 1954, Doc. 466).

3.2. Shifting Sands: The Oil Treaty's Demise and the Eruption of World War II

Two significant incidents severely hindered the advancement of Afghan-American relations and stalled the potential establishment of legations: the first was the termination of the oil covenant by the Inland Exploration Company in 1938, and the second was the outbreak of World War II in 1939. In 1938, Seaboard Oil Company unexpectedly announced its decision to terminate the concession agreements it had signed with both Afghanistan and Iran (Rouland, 2014, p. 30). While the exact motivations behind this sudden decision remain unclear, three explanations were offered by an official from the company. First, the oil wells the company discovered in Iran and Afghanistan

were located in the northern regions of the respective countries and were very far from the seaport. This meant that it would not provide much profit to the company as it would double the drilling and transportation costs. Since the costs surpassed the profits, naturally, it was reasonable to withdraw from the proceedings of the project. Secondly, the outbreak of the economic crisis in the U.S. prompted national companies to be more cautious about their investments in foreign countries. Third, international political developments presented a more demoralizing and disturbing picture instead of a promising and encouraging picture for international companies (U.S. Department of State, 1954, Doc. 613). Despite the fact that the decision was made by the company for allegedly legitimate and reasonable economic, political, and logistic motives, the Afghan government was not only taken aback by the decision but also became resentful and discontented. The Afghan authorities described the company's unexpected decision as malicious and indicative of sneaky political plans (Poullada, 1981, p. 180; & Shroder, 2014, p. 311). Yet, the Afghan government announced its readiness for negotiating and ensuring additional concessions to the company on the condition that the corporation would reconsider its abrupt decision and make a vow to encourage other American companies to invest in Afghanistan (U.S. Department of State, 1954, Doc. 620). The efforts of the Afghan state in this direction, unfortunately, did not yield any concrete and desired results.

Regarding World War II, it created both opportunities and obstacles for Afghan-American relations. Initially, the outbreak of the war in 1939 had a detrimental effect on the burgeoning relationship between the two states. Afghanistan adopted a policy of neutrality and maintained a non-aligned stance throughout the conflict. Before the onset of World War II, some U.S. foreign affairs officials, including Wallace Murray, head of Near Eastern Affairs, believed that steps would be taken in 1939 to establish a permanent representation and construct an American legation in Afghanistan (U.S. Department of State, 1954, Doc. 466). However, the war's outbreak and its progression in Europe shifted U.S. attention toward the ongoing conflict in the Pacific and the European theater, stalling any diplomatic advancements with Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the spread of the war to South and East Asian regions and political developments in the Middle East, especially the fact that the Middle East appeared of vital importance for the interests of the U.S. and Afghanistan was an important strategic region for the security of the Middle East, stimulated the U.S. to reconsider and avert its conventional non-engagement and indifference policy towards Afghanistan. By 1941, amid a world grappling with political, economic, ideological, and humanitarian crises, the U.S. sought to explore the potential for establishing permanent and direct diplomatic contact with the Afghan state. This shift came at a time when great powers were vying for influence and seeking to form political and military alliances with smaller and middle-sized sovereign states to bolster their own positions. So, the evolving geopolitical landscape highlighted Afghanistan's strategic significance, prompting the U.S. to reconsider its diplomatic stance. The war's impact not only intensified global competition but also illustrated how smaller nations like Afghanistan could play pivotal roles in larger geopolitical strategies.

To this end, Wallace Murray instructed the U.S. envoy in Tehran, Louis G. Dreyfus, to not only submit his letter of credence to the Afghan authorities but also to observe and evaluate

the conditions on the ground to enhance diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. In his correspondence, Wallace Murray emphasized the importance of understanding the local context and dynamics that could influence the potential for deeper engagement. He wrote to Dreyfus:

> "When you are in Kabul, we should like you to explore the ground with a view to ascertaining whether, in your judgment, it would be worthwhile to consider entering into negotiations with the Afghans with a view to concluding a more formal and more comprehensive arrangement than the Provisional Agreement of 1936" (U.S. Department of State, 1959, Doc. 198).

The U.S. authorities, as reflected in Wallace Murray's remarks, sought to determine whether the time was right for a more comprehensive and formal agreement with Afghanistan, surpassing the informal friendship arrangement established in 1936. The U.S. was aware of Afghanistan's long-standing aspirations and demands, which had been articulated for nearly two decades. However, for various reasons, the U.S. had hesitated to sign an official friendship and diplomatic agreement. With the evolving global landscape and the necessity for adaptation, it became an opportune moment for the U.S. to reconsider its previously rigid stance. The changing circumstances prompted a willingness to compromise on the most-favored-nation principle, something that had been strictly resisted just a few years earlier. This shift indicated a recognition of the need for diplomatic engagement and the potential benefits of stronger ties with Afghanistan amid the turmoil of World War II. By being open to compromise, the U.S. aimed to enhance its influence in a strategically vital region, aligning its diplomatic goals with the realities of the evolving international order.

Though the issue of opening a permanent representation in the U.S. was brought up in early 1941, the installation of permanent diplomatic representation did not occur until June 1942, after one and a half years of intensive discussions and correspondence between Afghan-American envoys in Europe and Iran. One of the main reasons why the process in this direction progressed very slowly was the fact that the title and authority of the representative to be appointed became a disputed subject. To elaborate, when the U.S. envoy, Louis G. Dreyfus, visited Afghanistan in June 1941, he submitted to the Afghan authorities his letters of credence, as well as expressed the wish of his government regarding the possibility of setting up a permanent representation there (U.S. Department of State, 1959, Doc. 199). The Afghan state was ecstatic to receive this pleasing news from the U.S. ambassador and deemed it **a** glimmer of hope for the realization of its constantly voiced intention to consolidate and expand its relationship with the U.S. Therefore, the Afghan authorities drafted an unofficial friendship treaty that addressed a wide range of subjects, including the functions of the consulate, the rights of consulate personnel, as well as commercial and customs-related matters, in a total of nine articles, and handed it over to the U.S. envoy in June 1941 with great pleasure and enthusiasm (U.S. Department of State, 1959, Doc. 200).

However, Afghanistan received a response to its conveyed draft from the U.S. after a long hiatus. In December 1941, the U.S. informed Afghanistan of its readiness to set the basis of the American

legation in Kabul and to appoint someone as a Minister Resident or Consul General from its foreign service officers (U.S. Department of State, 1963, Doc. 33). The Afghan mission, alongside appreciating this move by the U.S., suggested to the U.S. envoy in Tehran that it would be more suitable for the U.S. to nominate a Minister Plenipotentiary to its legation in Afghanistan rather than a Minister Resident or Consul General. The logical and cogent justification of the Afghan government for opposing the nomination of a Consul General by the U.S. was that other states' diplomats accredited to Afghanistan and Afghan diplomats in other states were bearing the title of Ambassador or Minister Plenipotentiary (U.S. Department of State, 1963, Doc. 34). The U.S. was not principally averse to the suggestion of Afghanistan, but pointed out the unfeasibility of the appointment of a Minister Plenipotentiary at the time, since the nomination of a Minister Plenipotentiary required a legal procedure which would take a long time and cause considerable delay in the establishment and commencement of the legation in Afghanistan (U.S. Department of State, 1963, Doc. 35). The U.S. counter-proposal was to immediately begin the legation's opening and appoint a temporary representative, and after the legislative process was completed, a Minister Plenipotentiary would be dispatched to Kabul to take over the legation's leadership (U.S. Department of State, 1963, Doc. 36).

The U.S., which had consistently and deliberately overlooked the Afghan state's most frequently expressed desire for enhanced diplomatic ties, suddenly rushed to establish a legation and elevate its diplomatic relations in early 1942. Wallace Murray's subsequent statements, addressed to the Assistant Secretary of State on January 8, 1942, offer insight into the motivations behind this abrupt surge in interest:

> "In view of recent developments in the Near East, it is considered highly desirable that the office at Kabul be opened as soon as possible. It would be appreciated, therefore, if a decision might be reached at the earliest possible moment" (U.S. Department of State, 1963, Doc. 35).

The issue of the title was only resolved with Turkey's mediation and President Franklin Roosevelt's instructions. The Turkish ambassador in Washington, Mehmet Munir Ertegün, who represented Afghan interests in the U.S., drew the attention of U.S. officials to the point that appointing a lower-ranking envoy for a great power like the U.S. would be unfortunate and unsuitable, especially while other states were sending high-ranking diplomats to Afghanistan. Hence, the Turkish envoy recommended dispatching an envoy at the rank of chargé d'affaires as a convenient and reasonable resolution for both sides (U.S. Department of State, 1963, Doc. 35). Later, the Turkish foreign minister also discussed the relevant issue with the Afghan envoy in Ankara and managed to persuade the Afghan side to accept the chargé d'affaires rank as the U.S. mission to Afghanistan (U.S. Department of State, 1963, Doc. 44). As a result of these mediations and consultations, both sides reached a mutual understanding and consensus on the chargé d'affaires rank. In this manner, an American permanent legation was finally opened in June 1942, paving

the way for establishing a direct line of diplomatic communication between the two states (U.S. Department of State, 1963, Doc. 46).

With the onset of the Cold War, the U.S. found it necessary to recalibrate its diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, upgrading its mission from a Legation to an Embassy on June 5, 1948 (Votichenko, 1948, p. 447). By upgrading the diplomatic mission, the U.S. aimed to enhance its influence and engagement in Afghanistan, signaling a shift from passive observation to active participation in regional affairs. This move also underscored U.S. efforts to counterbalance Soviet encroachment in the Middle East and South Asia. The Afghan government welcomed this diplomatic shift, as it aligned with Afghanistan's own foreign policy objectives. The Afghan state was eager to strengthen ties with the West and reduce its reliance on the Soviet Union. The elevation of the U.S. mission provided Afghanistan with greater access to American political, economic, and financial support, furthering its strategy of balancing between major powers to safeguard its sovereignty.

4. Afghanistan's Incentives for Boosting Relations with the U.S.

One can assert that, considering historical events and examining the diplomatic documents and telegrams exchanged between U.S. and Afghan diplomats from 1921 to 1948, Afghanistan's persistent intention to forge ties with the U.S. was based on four main incentives. First, Afghanistan sought qualified human resources to accelerate its modernization initiatives by leveraging the expertise and skills available in the U.S. Second, the Afghan leadership perceived the U.S. as a leader in advancing a new civilization, aligning with their aspirations for progress. Third, collaborating with the U.S. offered an opportunity to engage with a powerful nation without the fear of military invasion, thereby safeguarding Afghanistan's sovereignty. Lastly, Afghanistan aimed to counterbalance the increasing influence of other foreign powers within its borders, positioning the U.S. as a strategic partner in this effort.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Afghan political leaders endeavored to achieve two essential goals: safeguarding Afghanistan's independence in foreign affairs and accelerating the country's modernization process. Amanullah Khan (1919-1929), shortly after successfully restoring Afghanistan's independence, embarked on implementing extensive Western-style reforms across various strata of government and society (Rasanayagam, 2010, pp. 17-19). This comprehensive reform agenda included agricultural innovations, the exploration and extraction of oil, the construction of highways and railroads, the establishment of schools and universities, and initiatives aimed at enhancing the military and financial sectors, among other infrastructural projects (Runion, 2007, pp. 87-92). The initiation and execution of these projects necessitated qualified human resources and financial reserves, which Afghanistan lacked. The number of experts, technicians, engineers, and university professors in the country probably did not exceed a thousand during that period. The Afghan ruling class was aware of this unfortunate reality and recognized their desperate need for aid from foreign states to initiate, carry out, and complete developmental and infrastructural projects. Accordingly, establishing diplomatic ties

and concluding a close friendship agreement with the U.S.—one of the most developed and industrialized nations in the world—could ensure the human resources and financial support necessary for Afghanistan to achieve these projects. For this reason, Afghanistan frequently expressed its cordial intentions to the U.S. through European-based diplomatic channels.

In addition, the U.S. was regarded by Afghan political leaders as the vanguard and forerunner of a new world civilization. In 1925, the Afghan senior diplomat Muhammad Nadir, in a transmitted diplomatic letter to the U.S. envoy in France, expressed that Afghanistan aspired to initiate "the establishment of regular diplomatic intercourse with the great American power, which is a pioneer state of civilization and progress in the entire world" (U.S. Department of State, 1941, Doc. 391). The U.S. demonstration of politico-military power during the First World War significantly shaped the perceptions of Afghan political leaders. By participating in the war, the U.S. altered the course of the conflict, and traditional European powers, such as the UK and France, could only achieve victory with American support. This context highlighted, on one hand, the decline of European great powers and, on the other, showcased the U.S.'s technological advancements, sophisticated military capabilities, economic strength, and political influence. The Afghan ruling class's understanding of the U.S. as a leading global power was rooted in this compelling reality. Therefore, the persistent effort to establish diplomatic ties and forge a close partnership with a powerful state like the U.S. was a strategic and visionary policy embraced by Afghan statesmen.

Moreover, compared to regional and European powers, Afghanistan viewed the establishment of diplomatic and commercial ties with the U.S. as a low-risk and secure option. This trust and confidence in engaging with the U.S. were strengthened by the country's geographic remoteness and its reputation as a non-colonial power. As a result, Afghan leaders believed that fostering relations with the U.S. would provide a stable and supportive partnership, free from the historical baggage of colonialism that characterized many interactions with neighboring states. Amin Saikal (2004) posited that Afghanistan sought to forge formal relations with the U.S. since the U.S., unlike Great Britain and Tsarist Russia, could assist the Afghan government without gaining geographical clout due to its remoteness from Afghan territory (p. 64). Approaching and seeking assistance from regional and European powers posed significant risks of military invasion, as these nations could use their political, economic, and humanitarian aid to gain influence and ultimately resort to armed conflict. The memories of Russia's occupation of Central Asian countries and the three wars of independence against Britain were still vivid in the minds of the Afghan people. In this context, engaging with a powerful state like the U.S., which was geographically distant and lacked military ambitions in Asia, became a crucial foreign policy strategy for the Afghan government. The U.S. was seen as a partner that would not threaten the territorial integrity or survival of the Afghan state, making cooperation a more appealing option.

Furthermore, the Afghan government aimed to balance the growing influence of regional and European states by fostering cordial ties with the U.S. In 1919, Afghanistan reached out to Russia, which became the first nation to recognize its independence, and both states signed a friendship treaty in 1921 (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007, p. 108). In the following months, Russia provided

substantial military and financial aid, capitalizing on this newfound relationship (Janse, 2021, p. 2). In subsequent years, European powers such as Germany, France, and Italy established political relations and accredited envoys alongside engineers, instructors, experts, and doctors to Afghanistan. Governmental and private organizations from these states began infrastructural and commercial investments in Afghanistan. While benefiting from the aid provided by these states, the Afghan government acted cautiously and vigilantly. In particular, Afghanistan approached Russian political cooperation and other relief efforts warily, as Afghan political elites were ideologically opposed to Russia, which was seen as a guardian and defender of communism, while they adhered strongly to liberal values and systems. In this context, by forging formal and sincere relations with the U.S., the Afghan authorities aimed to avoid becoming dependent on a single state, prevent regional and European powers from exercising a monopoly over economic and commercial fields in Afghanistan, diversify and augment political partnerships in the international domain, and demonstrate their pursuit of a balanced, neutral, and engaging policy among great powers. Therefore, this strategic engagement with the U.S. was seen as essential for countering external pressures and securing Afghanistan's sovereignty amid competing interests.

5. U.S. Reservations in Forming and Elevating Diplomatic Relations with Afghanistan

The U.S.'s firm reluctance and heedless stance toward Afghanistan's long-held ambition and frequently voiced desire for closer diplomatic relations is indeed a thought-provoking issue. The latent and deep-rooted factors behind this hesitation can be analyzed from multiple perspectives: political, economic, and ideological. In my view, several driving factors contributed to this reluctance, including the lack of significant economic opportunities in Afghanistan, a general absence of political interest, the scarcity of U.S. citizens and commercial presence in the country, security concerns, and biased or baseless perceptions held by U.S. officials. Additionally, the U.S.'s traditional policies of isolationism and exceptionalism further undermined the chances for more robust diplomatic engagement. Together, these elements disrupted the natural and expected course of recognition, hindering the blossoming and evolution of Afghan-American bilateral relations.

First and foremost, the deficiency of economic opportunities played a crucial role in impeding the political approach between Afghanistan and the U.S. For the U.S., as a liberal and capitalist state, the existence of strong political and economic incentives has always been a prerequisite for establishing diplomatic relations and enhancing bilateral ties with other nations. Afghanistan, however, could not offer attractive economic or trade opportunities to American businesses and investors. The country's landlocked status, lack of access to a coastal harbor, rugged terrain, poor transportation networks, and underdeveloped infrastructure were significant barriers. Additionally, Afghanistan's geographic distance from the U.S., combined with its lack of vast oil and natural gas reserves like those of Iran or Saudi Arabia, further diminished its appeal. Unlike countries with large populations that could serve as substantial markets for American

goods, Afghanistan's relatively small population and limited market potential made it less of a priority for U.S. economic interests. These factors collectively reduced the U.S.'s motivation to engage more deeply with Afghanistan. When U.S. Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes informed President Harding about the arrival of an Afghan mission tasked with presenting the Afghan government's request to establish diplomatic ties, he highlighted the lack of economic opportunities in Afghanistan. In his memo to President Harding, Hughes pointed out that Afghanistan, at that time, offered little in terms of economic prospects that could justify deeper engagement from the U.S. government. He wrote to the President:

> "My inquiry as to the commercial opportunities for our people in Afghanistan indicates that they are extremely limited; in fact, so far as our present information goes, there is little or no opportunity for trade, aside from the products of the sapphire and of the lapis lazuli mines" (U.S. Department of State, 1936, Doc. 212).

This observation reflected the American perspective that diplomatic efforts were closely tied to tangible economic interests, which Afghanistan—due to its geographic, infrastructural, and resource limitations—could not readily provide. The dearth of economic opportunities in Afghanistan tempered the U.S.'s enthusiasm to explore forming a formal bond with the Afghan state and further fueled its reluctance. Afghanistan's lack of accessible markets, natural resources, and strategic trade routes discouraged the U.S. from pursuing deeper engagement, reinforcing a cautious and hesitant approach to forging stronger diplomatic ties.

From a political perspective, the U.S. viewed Afghanistan as a state under the regional influence of both Britain and Communist Russia. American authorities perceived Afghanistan as holding a semi-independent position in its foreign affairs, with one prominent proponent of this view being U.S. Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes. Hughes' stance was somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, he facilitated the arrival of Afghan diplomats to the U.S., encouraged President Harding to meet the Afghan delegation at the White House, and coordinated their bilateral discussions. On the other hand, he opposed granting official recognition and establishing direct diplomatic ties with Afghanistan, considering it neither appropriate nor beneficial for the U.S. at the time (Rakove, 2023, p. 19). Prior to the meeting, Hughes urged President Harding to defer the question of recognition and avoid making any promises to the Afghan delegation (U.S. Department of State, 1936, Doc. 212). His approach significantly influenced President Harding's decision-making and left a lasting impact on the trajectory of U.S.-Afghan relations. Charles Evans Hughes, a presidential nominee in the 1916 election and a highly influential Secretary of State, maintained a close relationship and regular communication with President Harding. His decisions and recommendations in U.S. foreign relations were rarely disregarded by the president (Trani & Wilson, 1977, pp. 109-110).

From the U.S. perspective, regions like the Far East, South Asia, and the Middle East were largely dominated by European powers, while Central Asia and the Caucasus were under the influence of Communist Russia. This prevailing view in U.S. foreign policy during the 1920s and 1930s

had a profoundly negative impact on the initial diplomatic contact between Afghanistan and the U.S. The U.S. deemed direct engagement with Afghanistan unnecessary, believing it could monitor political developments there through its diplomatic missions in British-controlled areas and Iran, rendering a formal accord with Afghanistan superfluous. This approach reflected a broader reluctance to establish ties with states perceived as being under the sphere of influence of other powers.

In addition, the U.S. hesitated to establish a permanent political representation in Afghanistan for years due to perceived security concerns. The U.S. believed that Afghanistan lacked modern security institutions, a strong and well-equipped military, and adequately trained police forces. American officials were skeptical about the Afghan state's ability to ensure the safety and security of U.S. diplomats and citizens, as well as their property, within the country. For example, in 1934, when U.S. Under Secretary of State William Philip raised the question of recognizing Afghanistan and attempted to persuade President Roosevelt to formalize diplomatic relations, he highlighted these security concerns. He emphasized that without a stable security apparatus in place, establishing a U.S. diplomatic mission could be risky.

> "We have been naturally conservative on the subject of establishing relations with Afghanistan owing to the primitive condition of the country, the lack of capitulatory or other guarantees for the safety of foreigners, and the absence of any important American interests" (U.S. Department of State, 1951, Doc. 637).

According to William Philip, the structural impoverishment and underdevelopment of Afghan society, along with security concerns and the absence of tangible U.S. interests in Afghanistan, were among the primary obstacles that made previous U.S. administrations cautious about establishing ties with the Afghan state. In this context, the U.S. saw little justification for opening a permanent diplomatic representation in a country that could not reliably guarantee the safety and security of its diplomats and citizens. This caution reflected broader U.S. foreign policy priorities, which focused on regions with clearer strategic or economic significance.

The scarcity of U.S. citizens residing in Afghanistan was another significant obstacle to the development of Afghan-American relations. The lack of a substantial American presence in Afghanistan dampened the U.S.'s enthusiasm for elevating diplomatic ties with the Afghan state. In an effort to address this, Afghan officials made a strategic move in 1936 by offering special concessions to a U.S. private oil exploration company, aiming to attract American experts, technicians, scientists, and citizens to Afghanistan. Their intention was to create a growing flow of U.S. residents, which would foster political and cultural interaction and eventually prompt U.S. officials to consider increasing diplomatic relations. This initiative proved effective. By 1937, Wallace Murray, a longtime proponent of the U.S.'s non-engagement policy with Afghanistan, recommended that the U.S. Secretary of State reconsider the establishment of a permanent diplomatic mission in Afghanistan, highlighting the fact that several hundred U.S. citizens were expected to travel and reside in the country as a result of the 1936 oil concession agreement. He

emphasized in his July 27, 1937 memorandum to the U.S. foreign affairs department that "we must face the realities of the situation and consider the advisability of a suitable increase in our representation there" (U.S. Department of State, 1954, Doc. 464). He meant that acknowledging the realities of the situation was necessary to protect U.S. citizens, facilitate their legal procedures, and shield the government from public criticism in case of any failure to protect U.S. citizens' lives and property. Sadly, the 1938 withdrawal of the firm from the pact led to the failure of the plan, and the establishment of a permanent representation was no longer a top political priority for the U.S. administration.

Another significant factor impeding U.S.-Afghan relations was the biased, prejudiced, and often baseless perceptions held by influential officials within the U.S. State Department. Notably, individuals responsible for monitoring, reporting, and recommending policies for the Far East region fostered discriminatory views about Afghanistan's state structure, society, and culture. According to these officials, Afghanistan lacked a modern legal and judicial system, and its governance was not based on the rule of law but rather on tribal customs. From their perspective, the Afghan state was seen as a tribal entity, and its people were perceived as warriors, highwaymen, and non-compliant. Wallace Smith Murray, the chief of Far Eastern Affairs at the State Department, was a prominent figure in promoting these views. In one of his 1930s Congressional testimonies, he explicitly voiced these prejudiced opinions, which greatly influenced U.S. policymakers and reinforced the reluctance to establish formal diplomatic ties with Afghanistan.

> "Afghanistan is doubtless the most fanatic, hostile country in the world today. There is no pretense of according to Christians equal rights with Moslems. There are no banks and treasure caravans are plundered. No foreign lives can be protected, and no foreign interest is guaranteed" (Irwin, 2012, 83).

Murray characterized Afghanistan as a "precarious region of the world" (U.S. Department of State, 1954, Doc. 464). Jeffery Roberts notes that the widespread misinterpretations of Afghan society and culture, shaped largely by British writers and amateur travelers' accounts, profoundly influenced senior officials and experts within the U.S. State Department. Many U.S. policymakers viewed the Afghans as treacherous savages, deeming the exchange of ambassadors both wasteful and potentially dangerous (Roberts, 2003, p. 161). These pervasive and biased perceptions undoubtedly contributed to the U.S. administration's prolonged hesitation to develop and establish diplomatic ties with the Afghan state, stalling progress for many years.

Lastly, the pursuit of an ideologically driven strategy and liberal expansionism in the Middle East and Southeast Asia was not the primary focus of U.S. foreign policy prior to the Cold War. During the interwar period, U.S. foreign policy was largely Europe-centric, concentrating on political and military developments within Europe. The aim of exporting and promoting liberal institutions and values in the Islamic world was not a priority. U.S. ideological incentives played a limited role in forming alliances, as the U.S. did not actively seek to topple non-democratic regimes or install liberal democratic states in the region. Instead, the emphasis was on political,

economic, military, and security advancements in Europe and the Middle East. If the U.S. had pursued a liberal-based policy, it likely would not have declined the request from the liberal and pro-Western Afghan ruler, Amanullah Khan, for support in 1921.

The reasons mentioned by U.S. Secretary of State George Catlett Marshall in the memorandum to President Harry S. Truman regarding the elevation of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Afghanistan from a Legation to an Embassy substantiate the factors we have briefly outlined above (Afghanistan's motivation and the long-standing reluctance of the U.S.). He highlighted in his memorandum to Truman:

> "As a consequence of the participation of an American engineering firm and American technicians and teachers in the development of the country, the American community in Afghanistan is now larger than that of any other foreign state. A growing tendency on the part of Afghanistan to look to the United States for assistance in many fields is reflected by visits during the past year of two Prime Ministers and the Minister of Public Works, who have discussed Afghan problems with officials of this Government. As a member of the United Nations and an increasingly active participant in international conferences, Afghanistan, subject to the difficulties implicit in its contiguity to the Soviet Union, endeavors to align itself with the western democracies. This Government has now exchanged ambassadors with practically all countries in the area from Iraq to Siam, and it is believed that our interests in Afghanistan warrant the extension of ambassadorial representation to that country on a reciprocal basis. A number of countries, including the Soviet Union, have embassies in Kabul, and France is currently considering making its Legation an Embassy" (U.S. Department of State, 1975, Doc. 394).

6. Conclusion

Afghan-American relations during the pre-Cold War era were characterized by the Afghan government's enthusiastic pursuit of diplomatic engagement, contrasted with the U.S.'s reluctant approach and passive response. This formative period, spanning from 1921 to 1948, revealed how geopolitical considerations, economic pragmatism, and misperceptions shaped the trajectory of their relations, with Afghanistan actively seeking an American partnership while the U.S. hesitated due to various internal and external factors. Afghanistan's motivations for engaging with the U.S. were primarily driven by key factors: the desire for human resources to aid in modernization, the perception of the U.S. as a leading global power, the security assurance that the U.S. would not pose a military threat, and the need to balance the growing influence of regional powers, especially European states and Russia. Afghan rulers such as Amanullah Khan (1919-1929), after securing Afghanistan's independence, sought to modernize the country through wide-ranging reforms aimed at developing Afghanistan's infrastructure, military, and public institutions. For Afghan leaders, the U.S. represented a new kind of power—one that had demonstrated its might during World War I and was perceived as less threatening due to its geographic distance and non-colonial history.

However, from the American perspective, Afghanistan held little strategic value in the early 20th century. One of the primary reasons for the U.S.'s hesitance to establish formal relations with Afghanistan was the lack of substantial economic opportunities. Afghanistan's landlocked position, challenging terrain, and underdeveloped infrastructure did not present the kind of economic incentives that typically drove U.S. foreign policy engagements. U.S. officials also viewed Afghanistan as a state heavily influenced by Britain and Communist Russia, two major powers with vested interests in the region. The U.S. considered Afghanistan to retain only a semi-independent position in its foreign affairs, which further diminished its perceived relevance. Moreover, concerns about security played a crucial role in delaying U.S. engagement with Afghanistan. American officials doubted the Afghan state's ability to protect the lives and property of U.S. diplomats and citizens. Afghanistan's security institutions were viewed as weak, and its military and police forces were seen as ill-equipped and undertrained. The scarcity of U.S. citizens in Afghanistan further dampened any enthusiasm for building formal relations.

Biases and misconceptions about Afghanistan's state structure, culture, and society further exacerbated U.S. reluctance. American officials viewed Afghanistan as a tribal and lawless society. Figures such as Wallace Smith Murray, the chief of Far Eastern Affairs at the State Department, painted Afghanistan as a dangerous and unstable region, unsuitable for diplomatic engagement. These stereotypes, often exaggerated and based on incomplete information, significantly impacted U.S. policymakers' views of Afghanistan, leading to a perception that diplomatic relations would be both wasteful and hazardous. Finally, U.S. foreign policy in the interwar period was largely defined by isolationism and a focus on Europe, with minimal interest in promoting ideological or liberal values in regions like Asia or the Middle East. While Afghanistan's rulers were liberal and pro-Western in their outlook, the U.S. did not prioritize the promotion of democracy or liberal institutions outside of its core areas of interest during this period. This lack of ideological drive contributed to the U.S.'s continued disinterest in elevating relations with Afghanistan, despite repeated Afghan overtures.

In conclusion, the pre-Cold War era of Afghan-American relations was marked by Afghanistan's persistent efforts to engage with the U.S., met with American reluctance due to economic, political, security, and ideological factors. While Afghanistan sought modernization and international recognition, the U.S. remained focused on Europe and saw little value in forging ties with a distant, underdeveloped, and geopolitically peripheral state like Afghanistan. This dynamic began to shift only with the changing geopolitical landscape of the post-World War II.

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