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Careless Peacebuilding

A Poststructural Policy Analysis of the *Afghanistan Study Group Final Report:
A Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan* (2021)

Abstract

This thesis is a poststructural policy analysis, following the ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be’ (WPR) approach developed by Carol Bacchi (2016), of the *Afghanistan Study Group final report: A Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan*. Following the theoretical basis proposed by this method, the report is examined for discourses and power relations that construct the problem representation. The discourses identified of liberalism and ‘just war’ theory are shown to saturate the Afghanistan Study Group’s (ASG) report and can be traced through time, displayed by a genealogy of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (SCFR) hearings that took place between September, 11th, 2001 up until the ASG report was commissioned in 2019. It is argued that the peace recommendations and the analysis they are based upon are produced by the politicians and experts under a Western lens that perpetuates an Orientalist problem representation. The proposed lens, inspired by postcolonial theory, is argued to not only permeate the ASG report but also the mainstream peacebuilding discourse, among other fields which pertain to, and ultimately get in the way of, finding a pathway to peace.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, WPR, Discourse, Orientalism, Afghanistan

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction	4
Aim & Research Questions	4
Peace & Peace Operations	5
The Data	6
Delimitations	7
Method & Theory	9
What's the Problem Represented to be? (WPR)	9
The Theoretical basis of Poststructuralism & the WPR approach	10
Process: The Six Questions	10
Choice of Quotes	13
Self-Problematization & Positionality	14
Background	15
Analysis: Whose Peace is it Anyway?	17
Section 1- What's the problem represented to be in the ASG final report?	17
Section 2 – Embedded Knowledge	20
Section 3 – Archaeology & Genealogy: How did we get here?	24
Section 4 – The Western Lens	28
Section 5 – Effects & Lived Realities	32
Section 6 – Production & Disruption	35
Conclusion	38
References	40

Acronyms

ANSF- Afghan National Security Forces

ASG- Afghanistan Study Group

HTT- Human Terrain Teams

SCFR- Senate Committee of Foreign Relations

USIP- United States Institute of Peace

WPR- What's the Problem Represented to Be?

9/11- September 11th, 2001

Introduction

Samuel Johnson (cited in McElligott 1951:96) said of truth, “It is more from carelessness about truth than from intentional lying, that there is so much falsehood in the world”. I believe something very similar can be said of peace, that it is more from carelessness about peace than from sadist intentions, that there is so much violence in the world.

In February of 2021, a final report was published by a congress-mandated collection of experts called the Afghanistan Study Group (ASG). This report details policy recommendations and the “strategic logic behind a new approach” (ASG 2021:44) to peace which will influence the future of the United States peacebuilding strategy in Afghanistan. This topic sparked for me a question about what realities are constructed, and what power relations are produced, when external actors implement the ‘building’ of peace? There will be different answers depending on the context. The context of this study is the future of the United States’ foreign policy on peacebuilding in Afghanistan.

Aim & Research Questions

This study aims to uncover how the ASG experts understand peacebuilding and how this understanding represents, silences, and effects the subjects produced by the policy. My research question is: what discourses construct peacebuilding, and the relationship between Afghanistan and the United States, in the *Afghanistan Study Group final report: a pathway for peace in Afghanistan* (2021)?

The sub-questions which guide this aim come from the ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be?’ (WPR) approach and they are as follows:

1. What is the problem represented to be in the ASG report?
2. What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the “problem”?
3. How has this representation of the “problem” come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the “problem” be conceptualized differently?

5. What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the “problem”?
6. How and where has this representation of the “problem” been produced, disseminated, and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?

The lens of poststructuralism is relevant to my aim and research questions because “attention is directed to the heterogeneous practices, in particular the knowledge practices, that produce hierarchical and inegalitarian forms of rule” (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:4); or, in words which thematically link this concept to the foundations of peace, conflict & war, the legitimation of direct violence through the production of structural and cultural violence which hinder the establishment of peace (Galtung 1969, 1990).

Peace & Peace Operations

This thesis has relevance to the discipline of Peace & Conflict studies due to its examination of how peace is understood and deemed to be operationalized or, in to reference the ASG report, what the pathway for peace entails. Before the pathway to peace can be understood, peace as a concept must be made as unambiguous as possible. Based upon the definitions developed by Galtung (1969), peace is considered to be the negation of violence, and violence is the state “when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations” (Galtung 1969: 168). Violence is perpetrated in forms called direct, such as bodily harm, and indirect, also known as structural violence (ibid). Negative peace is the lack of direct violence and positive peace is the lack of all violence including structural and cultural (Galtung 1990: 291-292). Cultural violence consists of the discourses which legitimize structural violence; it normalizes violence. Its’ opposite is the creation of a culture of peace that supports positive peace (Galtung 1990: 291).

Terminology for establishing peace consists of *peacekeeping*, *peacemaking*, and *peacebuilding* (Galtung 1976). *Peace operation* will be used as a general term to encompass all three approaches when relevant. *Peacemaking* is the process through which the aim is an agreement to end a war and initiate a state of negative peace (Schellhaas & Seegers 2009:3). *Peacekeeping* has the same outcome but establishes order between the warring parties usually by use of military force.

Peacebuilding is the operative form of positive peace attending to the root causes of conflict (Schellhaas & Seegers 2009:4). Mainstream peace operation literature refers to peacebuilding, but it does not follow the same understanding as offered by Galtung. The 1992 UN *Agenda for Peace*, which serves for many policy-makers and scholars as the initiator of peacebuilding, presents it as the acquisition of negative peace through stabilization and ensuring certain measures are in place (Paffenholz 2010:45-46). The modus operandi of peacebuilding depends on how the actors and organizations involved in its implementation understand peace (Paffenholz 2010:44). *Liberal peacebuilding* and *sustainable peacebuilding* evolved out of the debates and criticisms that surrounded the 1992 report. The ‘liberal’ variety is based in the idea that democratic states are inherently more peaceful and that economic liberalization supports this peacefulness. The ‘sustainable’ form bases its understanding on the same liberal norms as the ‘liberal’ form but denotes a longer timeframe in which the activities should take place to have reconciliation within the society and has been more directly connected to the development community (Paffenholz 2010:47-49). *Statebuilding*, the process of creating and strengthening democratic government institutions (Call 2008:8-10) has been an integral part of peacebuilding due to the conception that weak states pose a threat not only to the people that inhabit the territory but to the rest of the world, expressed for example by the United States’ Global Fragility Act of 2019 (in ASG 2021:16-17); this idea which was applied to explain the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11) in the USA (Call 2008:11). The basic peacebuilding model of “democracy + market economy = peace” (Schellhaas & Seegers 2009:4) tends to be unchallenged in mainstream peace operations but there are concerns and criticisms (Schellhaas & Seegers 2009:5), that will be attended to in the analytical portion of this thesis, that validate the questioning what peacebuilding actually builds.

The Data

The ASG final report (2021) was researched, developed, and written by the ASG throughout 2020, to provide recommendations to, and influence the formation of new foreign policy for, the United States government and the new administration led by President Biden. The group was commissioned by the United States Congress and focuses on obtaining U.S. interests concerning Afghanistan. The group’s work was facilitated by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), an institution that was founded in 1984 by Congress. The ASG report builds upon the State Departments 2020 Global Fragility strategy, which is itself based upon another USIP study group

report titled, *U.S. leadership and the Challenge of State Fragility*. All USIP study group reports are available to the public on the USIP official website.

The policy recommendations pertain to the U.S.-led peace operation which includes objectives that can be categorized, based upon the definitions provided in the above section, as peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. The ASG offer four policy pathways. The first pathway is their recommended pathway which they detail throughout the report. The other three pathways are not described in detail but a basic overview of the recommendations, benefits and risks within each one is covered in the report. This study will pertain to the first policy pathway.

This pathway contains of five main policy recommendations for the future of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. Those being (ASG 2021:8-9):

- 1) the objective of an “independent, democratic and sovereign Afghan state with the governance, stability and security” to prevent the growth of terrorist groups,
- 2) to “reinforce the conditionality of a final U.S. troop withdrawal”,
- 3) to “clarify U.S. commitment to the current Afghan state”,
- 4) to “work diplomatically to promote the success of the negotiation process”; and
- 5) to employ an “overarching regional approach”

Delimitations

The scope of this thesis is the construction through discourses and practices of U.S. peacebuilding in Afghanistan. Peacebuilding has been chosen as the focal point because it is the part of the operation intended to remain active. The military has been a progressively less important feature of the United States involvement in Afghanistan over the last decade, and with the final troop withdrawal looming the peacekeeping and peacemaking chapter is ending.

There is a wide breadth of topics covered in the ASG final report such as drug trafficking, various terrorist groups and the influence of other state actors in the region. These points will be discussed insofar as they relate to peacebuilding and the discourses, practices, and effects which come from the report’s construction of peacebuilding in Afghanistan. Similarly, while the ‘alternative

pathways', offered as lesser choices to the new pathway approach but choices, nonetheless, may be discussed to the extent of their relevance, the WPR approach will not be applied to them.

Method & Theory

What's the Problem Represented to be? (WPR)

To answer the research question of, 'what discourses construct peacebuilding, and the relationship between, Afghanistan and the United States, in the ASG?', it is necessary to choose a method that originates from a constructivist orientation, and facilitates the examination of discourses and the relationships between the subjects those discourses are applied to. While I could have chosen a content analysis or a Foucauldian discourse analysis both of these options presented irreconcilable issues. A content analysis does not have the particular focuses and ingrained epistemological base that are necessary to approach this question, and although it would be possible to include them as a lens within a qualitative or mixed methods content analysis there are more apt methods that provide a deeper analysis that goes beyond uncovering messaging and patterns between concepts (Neuendorf 2017: 45,71). A Foucauldian discourse analysis would be apt but presents the issue of time and the fact that I do not have enough of it to complete one. The most logical and appropriate option was to do a poststructural policy analysis.

Poststructural Policy Analysis, or the WPR approach, was developed by Carol Bacchi, inspired by the work of Michel Foucault. This method employs an emergent design and is structured by six questions that dissect how the offered solutions represent the problem itself, in the unearthing of silences and unquestioned 'truths', leading to the identification of discourses (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:22-24). The choice to study policy in connection with these questions comes from the poststructuralist orientation which asserts that "lived realities are created by, rather than reflected in, social practices, including policy and research practices." (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:6). While the ASG report is not a policy per se, it offers policy recommendations of which the probability of them coming to fruition and becoming enshrined in actual legislation is very high considering the example from the fragility study group, mention in the data section.

Bacchi & Goodwin (2016) tackle the critique of methods based on poststructuralism which often centers around its lack of concrete solutions (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016: 24). They do not reject this criticism as false, rather, they emphasize the importance of research practices that aim to uncover

and reduce hegemonic discourses, and “reflect critically on *all* proposals for change” (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:25).

The Theoretical basis of Poststructuralism & the WPR approach

The main concepts pertinent to poststructural policy analysis are discourse, power, subjectification, objectification, and governmentality. This approach displays policy as discourse, highlighting the construction of ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ validated by discourse and put into practice by policy, whereby power is exercised. Power in poststructuralism permeates reality through constructed discourses of power relations which are productive; meaning they produce reality (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:29).

Policy has the capacity to produce and reaffirm dominant discourses. Subjectification and objectification are the processes through which subjects and objects are created in a policy, through normative discourses, as governable subjects and objects (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:23). This mentality put into practice through policy, authorizing the exercise of power, is referred to as governmentality (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:8-9). It is a form of governing, related to Foucault’s concept of bio-politics and can be seen in “contemporary Western democracies, in which the security, reproduction, productivity, and stability of the ‘population’ are concerns of the state.” (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:41).

Process: The Six Questions

The WPR approach involves the analysis of a given policy through six sequential guiding questions which can be seen in the introduction.

The first question, ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’, is the namesake of the approach and necessitates that the researcher combs the document for what solutions are offered to then extrapolate the problem representation, or what is assumed problematic in the policy. The word ‘problematic’ in this understanding is considered “[t]he process of putting something forward as a ‘problem’, to give a shape to something as a ‘problem’ (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:38). This involves locating the offered solutions and from there deriving the problem representation (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:21).

The next step involves identifying the assumptions that “underlie this representation” (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:20); what logic must be present for the problem representation to appear logical. The researcher is not seeking the hidden intentions of policy writers (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:21) but rather to show the uncontested assumptions which form the rationale for governance and, as will be explored in question five, affect the lived realities of people (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:6).

The third question asks how the problem representation came about and involves tracing what was found in the policy, as guided by the problem representation from the work in question 1 and the underlying discourses in question 2, backward through time by performing a “form of Foucaultian genealogy [through] the detailed mapping of practices that produce identified problem representations” (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:22). To do this I have chosen to use the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (SCFR) hearings that specifically center on Afghanistan. The SCFR hearings were chosen to be most appropriate for this because the ASG was created by Congress, the governmental body containing senators, and for it being the place where United States foreign policy is discussed and debated by experts and senators.

Following a similar logic of Foucault’s archeology, I worked my way backward from the last meeting before the publishing of the ASG final report until the first hearing occurring after September 11th, 2001, the date presented in the ASG final report as the start of the causal chain leading to the current situation. While there are many hearings after 2006 that are recorded and available to be viewed by the public, before then it is much more difficult to find, or recordings do not exist. To maintain a consistent approach, the same medium was chosen across all the hearings in the form of transcripts. In quoting the senators and the experts who give testimony at the hearings it is of note that in this study the senators are cited with that title then their surname, whereas the experts are cited with simply their surname. These individuals have varied experience and job titles, both governmental and non-governmental.

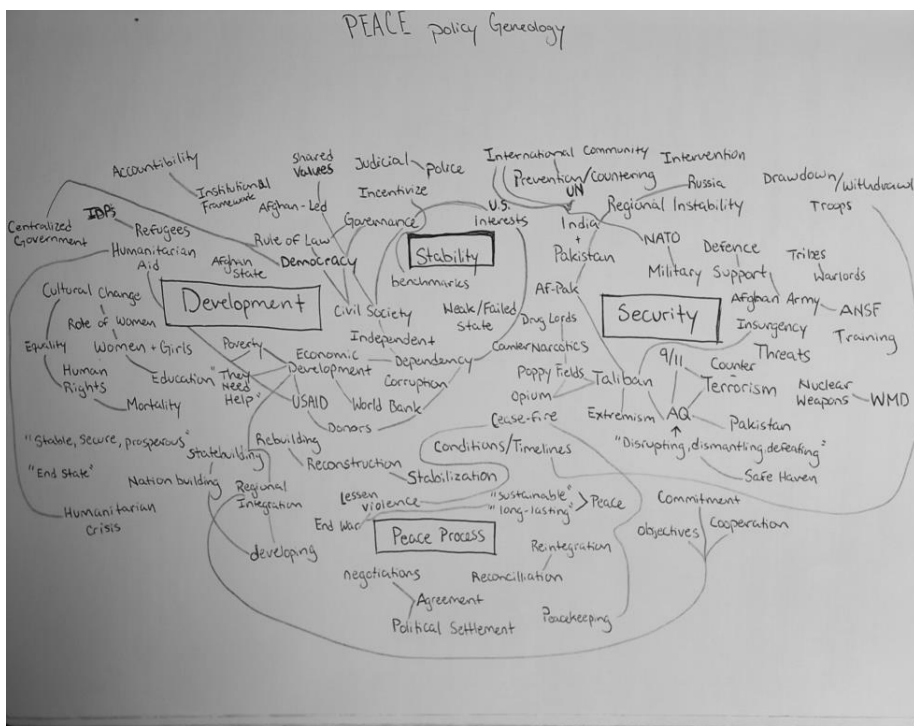
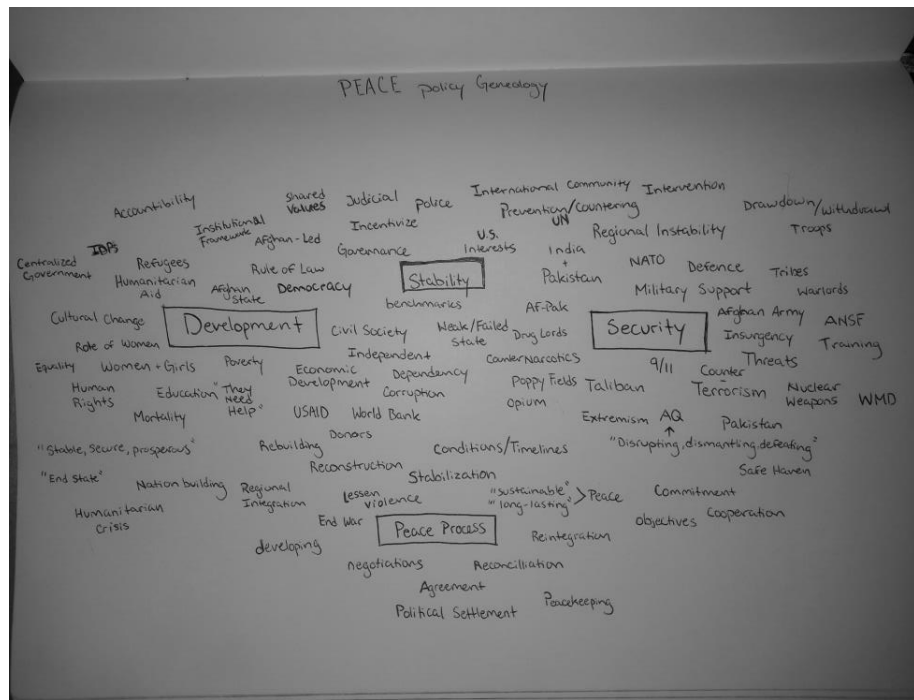
The archeology of these transcripts consisted of noting words and phrases which were traceable to the representations I had identified in the first two WPR questions. After reading through all the transcripts I compiled my notes, developing a mind map. I designed this map to resemble a galaxy, consisting of four main stars all with various planets and celestial bodies orbiting them, some in orbit of more than one star. Those closest to a star represent the denser concepts, those which are most relevant and central to the analysis.

The first image is the initial version of the ASG galaxy mind map. The 'stars' are stability, development, security, and the peace process. Those words were chosen due to their importance throughout the hearings.

By importance I mean to suggest that these were the words that the senators and experts placed as focal to their aims and interests and that they were categorized with some distinction from each other. The majority of words related to the construction of peacebuilding by the participants in the SCFR hearings orbit around 'development' and the majority relating to peacekeeping orbit 'security', with stability in the gravitational pull of both.

The next step in the process involved drawing connections to concepts close to their original 'star' and some further away. The

orbital area relationship described in the text next to the first image can be seen here but these lines



also demonstrate how not all the celestial concepts can be seen in this static image as close to all the other orbits they would pass had this been a moving model of orbits. The lines are intended to represent orbits, a version with clearer circular and oval paths was attempted and failed many times. Nevertheless, the information derived from the connections, their proximity, and the sheer amount of overlap between the four ‘stars’, remains in this version.

The fourth question instructs the researcher to identify the silences in the policy, reconceptualize the problem representation and identify unquestioned discourses. The fifth question builds on question 4 with the aim of displaying the discursive, subjectification and lived effects of the problem representation (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:22-23). The examination of lived effects counters the presumption that poststructuralist work only pertains to what is inside the analyzed text (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:38). The sixth question pertains to the ways and places where the problem representation has been produced and defended out in the world as well as the possible ways that the problem representation can be challenged (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:23-24).

Choice of Quotes

Quotes from both the ASG report and the SCFR hearing transcripts are used to show the development of the analysis. The aim behind what specific quotes were chosen to be presented in the analysis was to display a clear illustration of the arguments and consensus within the material; meaning they were not chosen for their peculiarities but for their representivity. In both the report and the hearing transcripts there was an overwhelming wealth of material but for the sake of conciseness and readability, some quotes have been chosen over others. While some quotes were highlighted and saved early on, because of how well they fit what was developing during a particular step in the WPR, only some of these made it into the final analysis. The vast majority were compiled once the analysis, through the application of the WPR, had taken form. From that point choices were made based on how well they conveyed the point or argumentation of the writers, in the case of the ASG report, or speaker, in the case of the SCFR hearings. This allows the data to ‘speak for itself’ in a sense and therefore necessitating less explanation of meanings and more space to use for analysis.

Self-Problematization & Positionality

There is a seventh step called “self-problematizing” (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:24) in which the researcher applies the same critical thinking to their problematizations and proposals (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:40), which provides validity to the study (Creswell 2009:192). This study follows the procedures as they are outlined in Bacchi & Goodwin’s book (2016) to establish a consistent and reliable methodological approach (Creswell 2009:190). This is a step which was taken throughout the process of performing the WPR, by questioning and evaluating the conclusions drawn, and maintain the understanding that what is being produced through the analysis is not a singular objective reality but one of many conclusions that can be drawn dependent on the lens through which the ASG report is studied. The goal is to emphasize a plurality of practices and to question “[e]nlightenment assumptions concerning reason, emancipation, science and progress, and disquiet regarding connections between this thinking and social inequality”. This will be discussed, in its direct connection to the analysis performed in this thesis, in the conclusion.

Ethical considerations of this study surround how the findings could be used (Chambliss & Schutt 2019:294) and the question of whether any potential harm could come from this exercise. The same “self-problematizing” applies to the ethics of the study as well (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:24), meaning that it can be questioned how my problematizations produce their own hierarchies or contain their own silences. The process of reading and re-reading, guided by the WPR’s different prompts, aids in this reflexivity.

To briefly state my positionality, I was born and raised in the United States and was six years old at the time of 9/11. Growing up surrounded by the American rhetoric on war, terrorism and ‘the middle east’, as well as my complex inner journey with the concepts of patriotism and national identity, has influenced my critical position towards the United States’ military actions and international political presence. While my interest in this topic was enthused from this position, the intention is not to validate any presumptions, but to investigate; the interest derives from an inquisitive passion, not an angry one. As is acknowledged through the poststructural lens, human beings cannot be wholly objective, which is why active awareness of one’s biases and a diligent approach to method is paramount (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:8, 24-25). This awareness and diligence was my intention from the start and guided this thesis to fruition.

Background

The story of the peace process in Afghanistan begins with the initiation of war. In 2001 the United States President George W. Bush ratified a joint resolution condemning the 9/11 terrorist attacks and authorized military action “against nations, organizations or persons” (Authorization for use of Military Force 2001) that were deemed to have participated in 9/11 or protected those who did. The U.S. proceeded to remove the Taliban from governmental power, arguing that they protected the perpetrators of the terror attacks on the United States.

The Bonn Agreement of 2001, of which the Taliban was notably excluded, established an interim government while the U.S.-led coalition conducted military operations (Dobbins & Malkasian 2015:54) and the U.S.-backed interim government started the rebuilding and reconstruction process (ASG 2021:13). This has involved military support and training of the Afghan National Security Forces (ASG 2021:15), economic aid for the state and certain segments of civil society to promote democracy (ASG 2021:24-25, 49) and humanitarian assistance for the population of Afghanistan who lived, and continue to live, in “deep poverty, plagued by food insecurity and battered by droughts, floods, internal displacements, and other emergencies” (ASG 2021:50).

Throughout the first decade of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, peace talks had a fickle place in the United States policy towards Afghanistan largely to do with their refusal to work with the Taliban (Dobbins & Malkasian 2015:53). This was definitely the case until 2010, during the Obama administration when both parties at different points in time suggested an openness to negotiation however the back and forth over a potential peace agreement between the Taliban and the United States government continued on with little progress (Dobbins & Malkasian 2015:58).

During the Trump Presidency, talks began in a more official capacity and culminated in 2020 with the Doha Agreement (in ASG 2021:77-79). As a part of the Doha Agreement, the United States was to militarily withdraw from Afghanistan in May of 2021. Notably there has been a steady drawdown of troops for nearly a decade, with full withdrawal being a part of that conversation particularly after the 2011 death of Osama Bin Laden but this is the first agreement with a fixed timeline. The Biden Administration announced in April that it would not be adhering to the May deadline and instead the official withdrawal will be on the 20th anniversary of 9/11 (The White

House 2021). This decision and its implications will be discussed in the analysis but there is one factor that separates this withdrawal from the recommendations in the ASG final report.

A Difference: Conditions & Timelines

The study group experts recommend a withdrawal governed by conditions, but the new president has decided to maintain the timeline-based approach. This decision differs from the main policy recommendations, although it is an option presented in the alternative pathways section. Ultimately this difference does not affect the outcome of the analysis as both conditions and timeline-based approaches are found to be influenced by the same discourses and power relations ingrained in the ASG final report. In the words of President Joe Biden, “While we will not stay involved in Afghanistan militarily, our diplomatic and humanitarian work will continue. We’ll continue to support the government of Afghanistan. We will keep providing assistance to the Afghan National Defenses and Security Forces.” (The White House, 2021-14-04)

Analysis: Whose Peace is it Anyway?

Section 1- What's the problem represented to be in the ASG final report?

The ASG report presents the “prospects for a sustainable peace in Afghanistan” (ASG 2021:17) as something which can be achieved by the United States peacebuilding efforts. That, through their influence and support politically, economically, and militarily, and through the strengthening of democracy, security institutions, and funding for civil society organizations with “shared values” (ASG 2021:49), Afghan society can be made peaceful. Through these efforts “[t]he United States has an opportunity to meet its core objectives in Afghanistan and help create a stable country with economic potential that is at peace with itself and its region” (ASG 2021:10). The solutions presented are based upon their experts analytical assessment of “Afghanistan’s internal economic, political, and social dynamics” (ASG 2021:11). The problem is therefore represented to be the political culture of the Afghan state. Peacekeeping and peacemaking are what pertains to the Taliban and any other forces of fragmentation, and these tactics are used to lay the groundwork for continued peacebuilding, which constitutes the changes to political culture of the state, civil society, and the population as a whole.

The first and third recommendations are most obvious in this characterization of what the state is, and therefore needs to be. Both recommendation 1 and 3 focus on the ultimate goal for a strong and secure Afghan state (ASG 2021:8), along with the promise of continued, albeit conditioned, monetary support for state institutions, civil society and humanitarian needs (ASG 2021:49-51). These recommendations are in line with the State Departments 2020 Global Fragility strategy and the USIP study group report titled, *U.S. leadership and the Challenge of State Fragility* (in ASG 2021:16-17). The ASG employs logics, consistent with and based upon, this report which posits that the U.S. foreign policy towards ‘weak’ states should be focused on prevention, stabilization, partnerships, and management. These goals demand active peacebuilding, civil society support, regional and international burden sharing, and a focus on economic growth (ASG 2021:16-17). Fragility is a central feature to the problem representation in the ASG report, it is the operative cause necessitating peacebuilding, for the sake of Afghanistan and the U.S. national security objectives. The report states that, “Afghanistan is a textbook example of a ‘fragile state’ given its

broken social contract, weak institutions, and the disputed legitimacy of its government” (ASG 2021:16). With the help of the United States,

“although Afghanistan’s institutions are imperfect, mechanisms have been put in place that allows for social inclusion, representative government, and the consolidation of the rule of law, and these remain the best way in which Afghanistan’s diverse communities can coexist within a stable polity” (ASG 2021:6).

One of the main goals within the objective of “an independent, democratic and sovereign Afghan state” (ASG 2021:8) is to mitigate the capacity of the Taliban to regain control over the country. This is argued to be because of their connections to terrorist groups, since they “accept assistance from al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups” (ASG 2021:39) and “retain close ties to the group [al-Qaeda] and have refused to disavow it” (ASG 2021:38). The ASG do not specify their barometer for what “close ties to” and “assistance from”, constitutes. The ASG contends that when the Taliban was in power, they “ruled harshly based on its extremist interpretation of Islamic law” (ASG 2021:38). This construction of the problem extends beyond Afghanistan, the ASG report positions that

“South Asia remains a critically important region for anti-American extremist groups due to its symbolic prominence in the jihadi mythology, its remote geography and rugged terrain, and its weak governments” (ASG 2021:22).

The study group is concerned that a return to power for the Taliban would lead to restrictions on “education, health, women’s rights, and human rights” (*ibid*). The Taliban is represented as the domineering force which uses the weakness of the Afghan state and society, “corruption, predatory governance, [and] warlordism... are exploited by the Taliban to gain support and, at times, legitimacy” (ASG 2021:18). The problem representation characterizes the Afghan state not just as weak but implies that this weakness makes it a threat to the international community, an idea supported by the causal link which constitutes the dominant American interpretation that, “the events of September 11, 2001, taught us that weak states like Afghanistan can pose as great a danger to national security as strong states” (2002 National Security Strategy in ASG 2021:16).

The second recommendation seeks to pivot the withdrawal of U.S. troops to a decision governed by conditions rather than timelines out of concern for their security objectives, which include active counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations against the Taliban and various

designated terrorist groups. This is done through the U.S. military's operations, but much more increasingly through supporting the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). This fulfills the security objectives and increases ability to for the state to keep the peace and be considered more legitimate considering "[o]ne of the fundamental features of statehood is the capacity to monopolize the legitimate use of force" (ASG 2021:36). The military focus is shown to be of dwindling importance stating, "we do not... believe that securing these interests requires a permanent U.S. military presence in Afghanistan" (ASG 2021:2). They do caution a military withdrawal sans a peace agreement, believing a preemptive final withdrawal could affect the stability of the country and the likelihood for the country to become a terrorist safe-haven increases (ASG 2021:15). The solution of conditions over timelines is centered around the use of United States military presence as leverage against the Taliban, with other options for leverage including the lifting of sanctions and travel bans (ASG 2021:47-48). This establishes the power dynamic of the United States military and government over the Taliban and assumes problematic the ability for a non-coercive solution. While the study group report suggests that the state "could include Taliban figures" (ASG 2021:8), considering the dependency of the Afghan state on international aid the ASG wonders, "how much of its doctrinaire positions the [Taliban] is willing to give up for U.S. and Western aid is clouded in uncertainty" (ASG 2021:39). This quote has two implications, that the Taliban do not have a place in the new Afghan state unless they are willing to acquiesce to the political and cultural norms established by the U.S. intervention, and that a Taliban ascendancy would be a threat to U.S. political and economic influence in the country and the region.

The fourth and fifth recommendations concern the peace negotiations, regional stability, and strategies for diplomacy. It is highlighted throughout these recommendations, and generally throughout the report, that is the United States interests in Afghanistan, and more importantly the region, "the U.S. focus on Afghanistan has impinged on broader geopolitical interests that the United States has in the region" (ASG 2021:6), interests which have been described by others as a goal of "ensuring access to Middle East oil, containing any aspiring regional hegemonic powers, and limiting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction" (Hadar & Preble 2008: 539). It should be mentioned that the ASG do not mention anything about oil in the report and they remain relatively vague on the details of these interests beyond national security concerns and an interest

in the regional economic integration of Central Asia and South Asia (ASG 2021:6. The ASG report states that “its recommendations present the best opportunity to protect U.S. interests” (ibid), and “[t]he central objective of that approach must be to align U.S. resources to increase the chances that the negotiations will end the immediate conflict, provide a basis for long-term stability in Afghanistan, and secure America’s key interests.” (ASG 2021:11). The effects of failed peace negotiations are presented as a threat to the stability of the Afghan state, as well as “hard-won gains” (ASG 2021:15) in the realms of civil society, rights for minorities and women, public health, education, and democracy, all of which the study group attributes to the U.S. peace operations.

The problem representation, of the political culture in Afghanistan, has been shown in this section to involve questions around the ability of the state to establish and maintain negative peace against the fragmenting forces of the Taliban, terrorist organizations and some regional actors. The solution to all of the problems is framed to be the necessity of the United States political and economic involvement through peacebuilding, with support from peacekeeping and peacemaking measures to obtain negative peace and a peace agreement. The problems representation and solutions also aid in the “safeguarding our [the U.S.] long-term interests” (ASG 2021:2).

Section 2 – Embedded Knowledge

For it to be considered reasonable and logical that the political culture of the Afghan state should be ‘fixed’ through peacebuilding by the United States government it must be presupposed that the U.S. has the knowledge of a superior and peace producing political-cultural model, as well as the authority to implement it outside their territory. As will be presented in this section, the basis of this ‘superior’ model for peace is the establishment of liberal democracy, economic development, democratic governance, and strong security, structures, rationalized by uninterrogated ideas that are presented as truth: that democracies are inherently more peaceful and have the moral responsibility to intervene, in the case of humanitarian crisis and human rights abuses, in another country. These assumptions are influenced by two dominant discourses that underlie the representation of the problem and form the theoretical basis for this section: liberalism and Just War theory. They are not applied lenses but rather the presuppositions that underlie the problem formulation by the ASG. These theories were revealed from within the ASG report, through the

archeological process which “draws attention to embedded knowledges” (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:46). I will first begin with liberalism which operates as the main and most salient of the presuppositions, and then display how Just War theory guides the rationale.

Liberalism's roots are often traced back to the 1795 essay ‘Perpetual Peace’ by Immanuel Kant (Navari 2013:33). Kant writes of the occurrence of wars that, “there is a constant threatening that an outbreak may occur[...] thus, the state of peace must be established” (Kant 1795: 118), and peace is to be achieved through the formation of a federation of democratic states. He argues that all states constitutions should be republican and that universally applicable laws should govern all people within such states (Navari 2013:34). Kant also advocated that states should abolish standing armies, abide by non-interference and condemn imperialism, but as is noted by Navari these latter recommendations were brushed aside by 19th century liberals in favor of the liberalism to peace connection (ibid). The modern interpretation of this idea can be seen in the *Democratic peace thesis* by Michael Doyle which states that “democratic states do not make war with other democratic states” (in Navari 2013:40) and opines that the path to peace is to “encourage democratic systems, the universal respect for human rights and the development of civil society” (Navari 2013:41). Liberalism is not an easy pinned-down concept. Bell describes it as somewhat amorphous, having been in a state of constant reinvention and redefinition (Bell 2016:90) and consists of elaborate and often contradictory ideas (Bell 2016:5). For argumentation here, the concern is not to find an exact definition of what constitutes liberalism but rather how liberalism, and the norms which coalesce around it in the American ethos, functions in the production of policy.

The ASG’s suggested new approach,

“should be aligned to promote a more responsive and less corrupt state, provide basic services, support civil society, and meet humanitarian needs rather than to undertake ambitious projects that have little chance of success in a chronically insecure environment” (ASG 2021:44).

Furthermore,

“any future political order should secure the gains made in democratic, political, human, and women’s rights, not as an attempt to impose our own values on Afghanistan but

because bolstering and respecting rights is essential to securing a lasting peace and reflects the will of the Afghan people.” (ASG 2021:9)

Neoliberal economics, also known as ‘the Washington consensus’, considers poverty and underdevelopment as caused by issues “internal to the state rather than external/structural or a combination of both” (Thomas & Williams 2013:301). The state is conceived to be in service of maintain good governance and supporting conditions favorable for private sector growth (ibid).

The importance placed upon liberalized economic development in the conceptualization of peacebuilding is displayed in the two following quotes:

“But a poor regulatory framework, weak rule of law, and lack of vision for the contributions of the private sector have prevented business leaders from making more substantive and productive investments. The ongoing lack of security was probably the dominant factor in the lack of private sector investment[...] a well-governed Afghan state can be expected to pursue growth strategies that will develop all of the above-mentioned opportunities.” (ASG 2021:28)

“The matrix should cover, at a minimum, the following incentives and disincentives... Bilateral assistance programs, including those administered by USAID [and] Trade facilitation programs under the United States Trade and Development Agency and the Export-Import Bank of the United States.” (ASG 2021:54)

Indications of the specifically liberal, market-based economic, structure can be seen in the descriptions presented above through the focus on trade and private sector growth (Navari 2013:35, Thomas & Williams 2013:301).

Mainstream modern peacebuilding adheres to a conception of peace through which international actors establish democracy and promote economic development, usually with an initial stage of demilitarizing the actors in the conflict to establish ‘order’ (Schellhaas & Seegers 2009:4,7). Liberalism’s roots can thus be observed in peacebuilding. This conceptualization of peacebuilding operates on a binary which can be categorized as liberal/illiberal, containing illusions to a state or entities level of development, stability and international legitimacy which positions it as either strong or weak. Some examples of this include, “inclusive governance would prove more stable than prior decades of communist, warlord, and theocratic rule” (ASG 2021:31) and that, “fragile states suffer from deficits of institutional capacity and political legitimacy that increase the risk of instability and violent conflict and sap the state of its resilience to disruptive shocks” (ASG

2021:16). In comparing the U.S. to their adversaries they say, “the Taliban must recognize that the United States is capable of maintaining [...] a force that is sufficiently strong to prevent the Taliban from achieving their objectives by force” (ASG 2021:44).

The ASG contends that with this liberal model,

“the United States has an opportunity to [...] help create a stable [Afghanistan] with economic potential that is at peace with itself and its region, and that can contain threats to the rest of the world” (ASG 2021:10).

Their initial intervention twenty years ago and the current goals are presented in the report as necessary for world peace. As the ASG states in the introduction, “the effort made by the United States and its allies and friends over the past two decades has helped to transform Afghanistan for the better” (ASG 2021:11). This understanding of intervention, military and otherwise, as virtuous is indicative of Just War theory. The European tradition of Just War theory has Christian roots, its origins attributed to Christian figures such as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Just War theory contends that war, intervention, and military violence can be considered justified under certain circumstances, one of which being to bring about peace, “as St. Augustine says, the end of and aim of war is the peace and security of the state” (Vitoria 2007:71). War is moral when those that are good act against evil, that “if some man is dangerous to the community... it is praiseworthy and wholesome that he be slain in order to preserve the common good” (Aquinas 2007:68), but that “there can be no security in the State unless enemies are made to desist from wrong by fear of war” (Vitoria 2007:71). That those who perpetrate war for the right reasons, to “punish wrongdoers and promote good” (Carr & Kinsella 2007:55), retain their morality. The morality of just war theory implies certain binaries, in the words of St. Augustine, “he that can discern between good and bad, between order and confusion, may soon distinguish the godly peace from the wicked” (Augustine 2007:65).

Just War theory operates on a series of binaries, particularly that of good and evil, which can be seen in the report, in such binaries as ‘ally’ and ‘enemy’. The ASG puts particular importance on the need to “show this nation’s enemies that they cannot prevail” (ASG 2021:4) and their unwillingness to “[provide] them with a narrative of victory against the world’s most powerful country” (ibid). The ASG presents the U.S. through these quotes as, inspired by the alignment system,

lawful-good whereas their enemies are chaotic-evil. Both entities are powerful but their intentions are distinctly different, the U.S. “is giving adversaries no reason to suspect that America might be weak or irresolute” (ASG 2021:15), but the immensity of the threat their enemies pose

“requires our constant vigilance and that our broad system of alliances is essential to that vigilance, a deterrent against attacks, and a powerful latent coalition we can call upon when we need to defend ourselves against future threats” (ASG 2021:8).

Liberalism, like Just War Theory, is founded on morality-based norms, such as democracy and respect for human rights, which can be used to legitimize mass violence such as war and imperialism (Darby 2009:706, Bell 2016:21, Altwaiji 2014:320-321). Humanitarian intervention is not supported by international law, yet it persists in contemporary global politics argued upon for its moral basis (Nardin 2007:196). This further evolves into the position that “[i]f prevention is important, the challenge for humanitarian policy is to move from responding to humanitarian crisis to forestalling them” (Nardin 2007:204). The assumptions supported by Liberalism and ‘just war’ theory made way for the representation of the ‘problem’ in the ASG and justify the actions taken to rectify it.

Section 3 – Archaeology & Genealogy: How did we get here?

This section takes on the task of tracing and subsequently disrupting the linear causality. The causation can be seen from an internal perspective and an external one. Looking from within the paradigm where the representation occurs, shows the reason why the problem exists in the understanding of policy makers and experts. Examining from an external position the causal links can be seen as a system of constructed logics which built the problem representation; it can thus be disrupted. As described in the methods sections this is done using the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (SCFR) hearing transcripts, of which the participants are the same categories of people as those involved in the ASG report: senators and experts specializing in war, peace, development, military strategy and a whole host of other specializations that pertain to the situation in Afghanistan. The analysis in this section will lay out the narrative that the SCFR hearings, and likewise the ASG report, produce around the problem representation and then it will be challenged by highlighting the East/West binary which guides the SCFR senators and experts logic.

The SCFR hearings display what is accepted to be the narrative of U.S. actions in Afghanistan, and is as follows,

“The United States played a role in creating the Taliban and al-Qaeda: They grew and thrived amidst the chaos that followed the Soviet withdrawal and subsequent international neglect. Saint Augustine taught that ‘the purpose of war is to build a better peace,’ but America built nothing in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, and the Taliban filled the vacuum that its inaction allowed. Afghanistan became the viper’s nest in which al-Qaeda grew, and the United States paid a price for its inattention and strategic neglect of the region.” (Nagl 2009-16-09:14)

The events on September 11th, 2001, gave the United States reason to intervene militarily in Afghanistan, and with the above understanding of cause and of consequence one senator states,

“[t]he elimination of bin Laden and his associates from Afghanistan will be followed by a longer, internationally supported process that aims to rebuild and bring lasting stability to the war-torn country to prevent it from being a safe haven for terrorists in the future.” (Rocca 2001-06-12:7)

Afghanistan is characterized as, “a very tribal society” (Senator Udall 2011-08-09:26) and “a terribly underdeveloped country with a weak government” (Boucher 2008-31-01:28), which is inextricably linked to the security threats outlined above. This leads to a peacebuilding, or stabilization, mission involving military and humanitarian intervention, of which it is argued that “Without U.S. or U.N. peacekeepers, we’re left with the third option: letting Afghanistan degenerate into the state of lawlessness that made way for the Taliban” (Senator Biden 2002-26-06:3). There is consensus exhibited in regard to democracy, governance, security support and humanitarian intervention having been positive impositions. The argument being that “we are investing in Afghanistan to improve the quality-of-life for Afghanistan in ways that they desperately need” (Sampler 2016-15-09:19) and “[e]very day that Afghanistan moves closer to peace, freedom, tolerance, and economic viability, the terrorists are weakened” (Senator Lugar 2004-27-01:3).

It is further argued that “[i]t is much harder to make peace than war” (Senator Cardin 2018-06-02:2) and the cost of continuing the various programs is questioned regarding benefit for both donor and recipient, “I think we are spending too much in some of our economic programs, fueling a culture of dependency and corruption” (Neumann 2011-03-05:21). It is consistently agreed that

the reason the U.S. is militarily and politically involved in Afghanistan is because of 9/11 however, over time it has been increasingly debated between senators and experts, as to just how much relevance this still has on the remaining military engagement after the death of Osama Bin Laden in 2011. In a poignant display of debate is the argumentation of Senator Paul who questions “whether this has anything left to do with 9/11” (2018-06-02:23).

Stability was a main focal point identified through the genealogy, which aligns with the importance that stability plays in the ASG, as outlined in Section 1. The United States’ security objectives, development goals, and peace negotiations in Afghanistan all orbit around stabilization, the intention of which is,

“to help the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) gain the support of the Afghan population by reducing the conditions that give rise to the insurgency, while also helping enable Afghan-led transition by the end of 2014 by establishing a foundation for longterm development assistance.” (Senator Clinton 2011-23-06:42)

The senators and experts often highlight the difference between the United States western values and institutions, albeit noting the need to “incentivize our investment in Afghan institutions by requiring them to make the necessary adjustments to meet Western standards” (Sampler 2016-15-09:24) with one senator opining,

“I have no illusions of a Western style modern state, which has never existed in Afghanistan. What we must aim for is a stable state that provides sufficient security and services to its people, so that it is preferable to the Taliban alternative” (Eikenberry 2009-09-12:80).

The binary is sometimes more distinct than East/West, wherein it becomes Muslim/American for example. The “American goals of combating terrorism, promoting peace, stability, democracy, human and gender rights, and fighting narcotics trafficking” (Tomsen 2002-26-06:45) are set up as the basis for “a model of an American-led international operation, helping a Muslim population to throw off extremism, Muslim extremism, and returning to the road of democracy, and economic development, and moderate Islam” (Tomsen 2002-26-06:60).

The western conception of freedom and rights of Afghan women (Mohanty 1984:337,) are utilized to lend credence to the East/West or the Muslim/American rhetoric, saying of U.S. intervention, “we’ve developed other ideas for Afghanistan, such as the promotion of women’s rights” (Senator Lugar 2009-01-10:29). This thinking defines empowerment of women and gender equality based on western values and culture. The practice of veiling is particularly subjected to this discourse, as one expert says, “Women are more free to participate in public life than they’ve ever been before... they are increasingly appearing in scarves, not in burqas.” (Taylor 2003-16-10:9). In what is perhaps one of the most flagrant displays of this rhetoric, then Senator Biden asks Fatima Gailani, then advisor for the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan,

“In a democratic Afghanistan, do you believe that women will be represented?[...] what I observed on the international broadcasts were when the Taliban was driven out of Kabul men flocking to barber shops in resistance to shave off their beards, but none of that happening in rural areas; women still wearing burkas in rural areas, whereas in Kabul women defiantly demonstrating that—it is like there is a mantra in a child’s fable, ‘Ding-dong, the witch is dead.’ Everybody can come out now. Well, ding-dong, the Taliban has gone, I can take off my burka.” (Senator Biden 2001-6-12:54-55)

The SCFR hearings and the ASG report both contain statements denying the imposition of a western model, that “the current democratic republic is not a Western imposition”(ASG 2021:31) and “[o]ur goal is not nation-building, nor are we attempting to impose a Western model of governance,” (Eikenberry 2009-09-12:27). The point of contention here is not whether there is historic precedent of democracy in Afghanistan, but rather that there is great irony in these rejections of imposition, and the use of Afghan political history to rationalize actions which are to the benefit of U.S. interests, and based upon a doctrine, the theory of democratic peace and the moral obligation of humanitarian intervention (section 2), which validates violence for the sake of democracy. As will continue to be argued in this analysis, the knowledge which constructs the understanding of the problem in both the ASG report and the discussions in the SCFR hearings is based upon deeply ingrained western discourses, and that, “the history of Western conquest is so deeply implicated in shaping the present order that it permeates liberal political thinking and practice” (Bell 2016:21).

The problem representation, that the political culture of Afghanistan must be fixed in order for peace to be established and for the U.S. to obtain their interests, is developed throughout the SCFR

hearings. My understanding of how prevalent the liberal norms and ‘just war’ rationalizations discussed in section 2 are in the mainstream American understanding of peacebuilding in Afghanistan was deepened through this genealogical exercise. It also illuminated how the ally/enemy and liberal/illiberal binaries in section 2 are part of an East/West binary. This will be elaborated on in the next section.

Section 4 – The Western Lens

Having placed the puzzle pieces of the policy together, identifying the problem representation, the political culture of the Afghan state which presumably needs fixing by the United States, mostly through peacebuilding (section 1), the normative discourse of liberalism and the binaries of just war theory that support the representation (section 2), followed by the tracing of logics and practices over time (section 3), the next step can be taken. The intention of this section is to identify the silences and destabilize unproblematized ‘truths’ (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:22). The identified discourses which construct the problem representation can be described as operating from a western lens. The western lens not only has the issue of silencing other, non-western, perspectives, but it reproduces imperialist hierarchies and legitimates violence (Said 2003:95, Mohanty 1988:335, Bell 2016:21-25, Darby 2009:706, Altwaiji 2014:320-321). Meaning that the more costly overt violence is not a necessity anymore because its covert facsimile, indirect and structural violence, is fashioned as valid through cultural violence.

To engage with the western lens, Postcolonialism and Orientalism must be brought into the conversation. Postcolonial critique shines a light on how the dominant discourse of western superiority is imposed onto the culture, historical narrative, and identity of ‘the other’ with an essentializing effect (Said 2003:108). The production of knowledge and representations of ‘the other’ that is given normative power through continuous reproductions is called Orientalism (Said 2003:6). Orientalism is, “a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and, later, Western Empire” (Said 2003:203). The western ‘us’ studied ‘them’ and claimed to know ‘them’, institutionalizing this knowledge of the antithetical relationship between ‘us’ and ‘them’; wherein the Western ‘self’ is superior and the Eastern ‘other’ is inferior (Bhabha 2004:118, Altwaiji 2014:317). The binary

depictions, shown in section 2, are an expression of Orientalism. Neo-orientalism describes the same practice but is temporally placed in the post 9/11 world wherein the neo-colonial and neo-liberal interests of the United States in the Middle East are rationalized by the claimed superiority of American values (Altwaiji 2014:316). It is presented as the ‘burden’ for western states to create non-western states in their own image (Bell 2016:107) and, through the rationalizations provided by their interpretation of liberalism and the influence of Just War theory, bring democracy and assure human rights, while simultaneously ensuring their economic and security interests (Altwaiji 2014:321).

The process through which the Afghan people are produced as subjects for the policy places them into one of two segments, displayed by the ally/enemy binary in section 2, where the Afghan people and Afghan organizations are either enemies to be defeated or people in need of saving. The latter segment displays a hierarchical discourse that can be referred to as the savior narrative in which the United States saves the Afghan people, in most examples from themselves, or segments of the Afghan population; “They need our help” (Sampler 2016-15-09). Humanitarian intervention and development are predicated on the concept of the wealthy, be they states, organizations or individuals, helping the needy; in other words,

“the very meaning of development is an imposition of institutions and values by the West on areas deemed to be in need of development, guided by an over-ambitious, all-explanatory development theory” (Hettne 2009:2).

This can be seen in advocacy for women’s rights in Afghanistan, with the depiction of the veil as being oppressive. This was seen in then Senator Biden’s remarks about women wearing burqas in (section 3), thus removing the practice from its cultural contexts and disregarding subversive and empowered interpretations (Mohanty 1988:347, Billaud 2009:126). The depiction of Afghan women’s agency in the report as, “insecurity, underdevelopment, and patriarchal norms continue to limit their rights and opportunities in much of the country” (ASG 2021:34), evokes an orientalist conception of the need for “Western, particularly American, assistance to be ‘liberated’ from various forms of oppression, be it Soviet, Islamic, or ethnic” (Hanifi 2018:52). The discourse in the report and the SCFR hearings describe the plight of women in Afghanistan in a way that produces a monolith of female subjects and establishes their place at the bottom of a hierarchy constructed to represent Afghan society (Altwaiji 2014:318). They are represented either as

victims of the undeveloped and oppressed society, or as a tool (Bacchi & Goodwin 104) to prove the positive outcomes of the development work, displaying “the much-invoked oppressed subject (as Woman), speaking, acting, and knowing that gender in development is best for her” (Spivak 1999:259). Women as a category in development discourse often presume a homogenous economic and social status as well as wants and needs (Mohanty 1988:344).

This extends to any subjectified group that is being argued by development practitioners to need aid and development. Agency is misapplied in their attempts to empower women (Feldman 2001:367) or develop civil society in the global south, dictating empowerment and development through a western lens (Mohanty 1988); often turning subjects into agents or instruments in service of empire (Spivak 1999:200-201) which, specifically applied to the ASG, would be in service of the U.S. interests. Based on the problem representation the people of Afghanistan, and people of the ‘underdeveloped’ global south, appear “as legitimate objects for development intervention” (Hettne 2009:2) and the insistence that

“any future political order should secure the gains made in democratic, political, human, and women’s rights, [this] is essential to securing a lasting peace and reflects the will of the Afghan people” (ASG 2021:9)

effectively silences non-liberal perspectives and conceptions of rights and political systems which could arise, or have arisen, from Afghan society.

The knowledge that is constructed to form the Orient or the subjectified other can be referred to as technology which in this understanding refers to power or knowledge and the mechanisms of governing (Said 2003:127, Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:44). Exemplifying this are the western imperialists of old, dictating the delineation of borders and names of places, through which Afghanistan became the specified name, geographic region and people it now constitutes (Hanifi 2018:51). Another example is the coloniality of the term ‘tribe’ (Manchanda 2018). This term used as a descriptor for the societal structure of rural Afghanistan has imperialist and orientalist origins. “While many Americans associate Afghanistan with ungovernability and tribalism, the country has a long history of sovereign nation statehood and, indeed, of constitutional rule” (ASG 2021:30), the implication here being that although they have these ‘negative’ attributes they have the potential to maintain these positive ones; showing that ‘they’ can be like ‘us’.

Some of the information produced about Afghanistan for the U.S. military comes from Human Terrain Teams (HTT). HTT's are groups made up of social scientists of varied specific disciplines, given the task of systemizing knowledge about the local population in Afghanistan. HTT's have been criticized as neocolonial for their use of social sciences to essentialize Afghan identity and rationalize the dogma of the 'war on terror'; this includes racialized and hierarchical power affirming claims about Afghan culture and society (Manchanda 2018:183).

Part of the peacebuilding model is economic development and integration into the global market economy. While wealthy countries benefit from economic liberalization, poor countries tend to be affected negatively, both economically, and socially (Thomas & Williams 2013:302). Based upon the argumentation of Immanuel Wallerstein's World-systems theory (1975), the economic ambitions attached to the peacebuilding enterprise can be critiqued as perpetuating the global inequalities of capitalism and the core/semi-periphery/periphery world system that benefits core, often western, states (Paffenholz 2010:50). The colonialism to capitalism link suggests that the formal process of decolonization existed to instate a more effective model of colonial power (Wallerstein 1975: 412), the bio-power and bio-politics of capitalism (Dubois 1991:9). Schellhaas & Seegers (2009) consider two approaches in the critique of the mainstream peacebuilding model. The first approach considers the formula of peace unproblematic "but the implementation needs to be reformed" (Schellhaas & Seegers 2009:5). Conversely, the second approach questions the international system and draws parallels to imperialism (*ibid*). The analytical point of view argued in this paper falls in the second camp whereas the subject of analysis, the ASG report falls into the first. The final report purports a *new* pathway to peace but the recommendations repeat mainstream peacebuilding discourses.

It can be argued that peace operations are constructed through a discourse framework which "facilitates the imposition of liberal norms and values to sustain Western hegemony in the international system" (Pugh 2013:394). Peace operations may consolidate a form of peace that represents the end of a war, but regarding positive peace and a culture of peace, it cannot be seen to have done so in Afghanistan. This postulation is the subject of the next section.

Section 5 – Effects & Lived Realities

The western lens involves the discourse of Orientalism, the objectification of the East and the subjectification of the people who inhabit it. The ASG report evokes this lens through neo-Orientalist discursive practices, the objectification of Afghanistan along with the regional in general, and the subjectification of the Afghan people. The effects of the discourses, subjectification's and problem representation are varied and at times contradictory. This relates to the productive nature of power, which has the capacity to create compliant and resistant subjects. Both effects validate the existence of the problem representation and bring it into reality by either complying to it or resisting to it (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:29-31). This section shows how the ASG report constitutes the problems it purports to fix and how the discourses and subjectification translate into reality (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016:23).

The effects of the knowledge/power construction through Orientalist discourses and subjectification's can be observed in many different spaces and inside many different relationships between groups and individuals. I begin first with women because women have long been the battleground through which imperialism and other forms of violence have legitimized themselves (Spivak 1999:244).

As a result of the Western presence, the question of the veil became symbolic, not unlike it had been in the colonial era, of resistance (Billaud 2009:126-127). Those who argue both for or against the veil end up concentrating the fight for women's rights in the realm of culture, as something between East or West (ibid). The western approach to women's empowerment in Afghanistan has had the effect of being perceived as something dictated by outsiders which reinforces the idea that women's empowerment is lodged within a battle between cultures. As described by Human rights activist Samira Hamidi,

“[international] individuals and organizations kept pushing for women's rights, they also created a huge hatred toward them, causing the conservative but influential rural men to say that women's rights are against religion and Afghan values.” (New York Times, Ingber 2013-23-08)

The western occupation and imposition create something to resist. This further deepens the East/West binary as well as creates new, or reopens old, fragments in Afghan society. The

importance of locally anchored “processes and institutions” (ASG 2021:32) are presented in the report to be an important part of peacebuilding, a central feature of this point being civil society. The study group establishes that there is a difference between Western and Afghan civil society, referring to Afghanistan as having “a rich history of civic engagement, social activism, community governance, and self-help” (ASG 2021:34) while also stating “the development of a robust civil society, [...] is one of the brightest legacies of Western intervention” (ASG 2021:33). This implies that although Afghan civil society existed previously, it was not to Western standards.

The report recommends coordination between the U.S. government and the various donors “who, with us, have helped rebuild Afghanistan over the past twenty years” (ASG 2021:3). Afghanistan having been objectified as a governable space by U.S. and other international development and peacebuilding organizations brought economic growth and opportunities through programs and private donors (ASG 2021:28). This influx of foreign funds had repercussions on ethnicization and traditionalization of the society (Adelkhah 2017:21). The donor/recipient relationship has been observed to have been affected in two different directions where it can destabilize and erase tradition (Adelkhah 2017:36) or overly emphasize its place in certain areas of Afghan life (Adelkhah 2017:35). In addition, over reliance on donors has been noted to reinforce hierarchical relations (Rippenburg 2005:51).

It is specifically recommended that “the United States should focus its support on civil society efforts led by those Afghans who promote values shared by the United States” (ASG 2021:49), meaning that it is the segments of civil society which correspond to western norms that are worthy of economic and political support. Simultaneously, however, the proliferation “of democracy and equal opportunities lead to a politization of ethnicity” (Rippenburg 2005:48). The ASG suggest incentivizing the Afghan government and civil society groups to adhere to American norms, saying that “financial support must be linked to progress in the negotiations and respect for some basic principles of democratic governance and human rights.” (ASG 2021:44). The same aid which the ASG has recommended to hold over the heads of potential recipients is known and acknowledged to be highly necessary. This is unequivocally acknowledged when the ASG states “[t]he state is dependent for its survival on donor funding [and] will remain unable to raise sufficient revenues to sustain itself for many years to come” (ASG 2021:16).

Rewards are used to motivate the changing and maintaining of certain behaviors, which are guided by liberal norms, in society. These groups are incentivized to acquiesce to the will of external actors who have deemed their own perceptions of what is necessary for Afghan society to be more relevant. What does this mean for groups who are deemed to not have shared values and therefore not to be valid? The lack of support will either silence them and their cause or possibly drive them into resistance (Goodhand & Sedra 2006:86). Some have employed resistance donor conditionalities through ‘acquiescence’, wherein they use the appearance of Western orientation with donors as political capital (Goodhand & Sedra 2006:82).

Then there is the section of society that is actively resistant to the United States presence, or to Western influence in general, is characterized in a myriad of ways, being in support of the Taliban support, anti-American, or spoilers to the peace process. The ally/enemy divide can be expressed in another way, that for the U.S. government all Afghan people ‘are either with us or against us’. Exhibiting the productive power of neo-orientalism, the United States created this division through their presumptions about Afghan society and people, bringing it into fruition (Altwaiji 2014:314). When the United States left the Taliban out of the Bonn Agreement (2001) “[they] reconstituted themselves as a fighting force in resistance to what they described as the international ‘occupation’ of Afghanistan” (ASG 2021:38). The Taliban’s main objective becoming, “to end what they view as the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan” (ASG 2021:39) and “to replace the current Afghan government, which they see as the illegitimate, imposed creation of the Western-dominated Bonn process” (ASG 2021:39).

From 2001 onwards not only did the actions of the U.S. military bolster the Taliban’s argument about foreign occupation, which lead to increased support in some areas (Dorransoro 2009:25) it also lead to “a fragmentation of authority along much of the same lines as those that prevailed prior to the Taliban's emergence” (Rippenburg 2005:45). The actions and divisions made by U.S. policy sowed discontent and further fragmentation among ethnic groups (Rippenburg 2005:38-39) and in many cases drove support for the groups which the U.S. identified as the enemy. The planned continuation of U.S. involvement economically and politically has the potential to exacerbate, and create rifts in Afghan society.

There are countless more effects, some which may be accessible through studies and research

already in existence but are not presented here due to the time and space allotted for this study. Regardless, it is important to note that the effects of the problem representation are numerous and in constant production. Some effects have and will play out on a more noticeable scale with more widespread and identifiable results, as the ones presented in this sections which have focused on advocacy, economic relationships and political affiliations relating to civil society; but others exist in more subtle ways, mundane places, and very individual experiences. The mundane spaces, places, and objects, as well as the nuanced way the effects are realized, would make for interesting future research but it is beyond the scope of this study.

Section 6 – Production & Disruption

Sections 2 and 3 lay the groundwork for this question, with the goal being to identify what does or could challenge the authority of the problem representation.

As has been established the problem, that which is working against positive peace in Afghanistan, is represented to be the political and cultural character of the Afghan state; a characterization extended into Afghan society. I contend that this problem representation is produced through those who develop knowledge on peacebuilding, development, and security, as well as experts who claim to ‘know’ Afghanistan; knowledge based upon liberal norms and the Just War rationale, that affirm the western lens and reproduce Orientalist binaries. The representation is justified and ‘proven’ based upon the research and expertise of the above, and relayed to those whose authority it is to turn knowledge into policy. The discourse is then debated and discussed, eventually detailed into legislation which is disseminated to the public through the organizations and institutions who will apply the policy on the ground. This section will cover production, of the report in the real world, which includes more details on who was involved in its creation and its dissemination, and the possibilities for disruption.

The Afghanistan Study Group is comprised of individuals with varied expertise pertaining to U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. The co-chairs consist of individuals whose former jobs were as U.S. senator, U.S. military general and CEO of the USIP. The rest of the group is made up of individuals with similar credentials as well as professors, lawyers, business and finance experts, and other peace, security, and development experts (ASG 2021:61). The USIP has a role as a producer and

disseminator, through their website and in the holding of online events to discuss and promote the ASG final report. The USIP was highly involved in the ASG final report, through their facilitation efforts, specific individuals in the ASG and through their previous work providing the basis for perspectives in this final report. An example of this has been mentioned previously in the thesis, that being the work from the Fragility Study Group whose report was the basis for the 2019 Global Fragility Act and the 2020 *United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability* (in ASG 2021:16-17). This demonstrates the influence and direct relationship between the legislative sectors of the U.S. government and the USIP. Many members of the ASG as well as consultants are USIP experts. According to their website the experts the USIP employs,

“specialize in many of the world’s violent conflicts and in issues such as the role of religion, countering violent extremism, advancing rule of law, electoral violence, governance, peace processes and the use of technology in peace and conflict” (USIP).

Peering through the poststructuralist looking glass, as has been the task throughout this thesis, the argument can be made that the politicians and experts who produced this report operate in a self-referential paradigm under the Western lens. The politicians ask the experts for knowledge and the experts construct that knowledge through research under Orientalist pretenses and eventually feed that information back to the politicians who then produce policy which in turn forms a particular reality. This problem representation is produced by those experts who construct knowledge about what causes conflict while creating a peace that feeds western hegemony and liberal paradigm (Schellhaas & Seegers 2009:10-11).

In Annex 4 of the ASG report the ‘red team’ experiment was explained to be a policy pathway tested to explore an immediate troop withdrawal (ASG 2021:66). The contents of the red team’s version of the policy is not what is interesting in regard to disruption, rather that the ASG included an exercise in their methodological approach which “challenged the Study Group’s assumptions” (ibid). As a part of their methods procedure, future study groups could designate teams and perform exercises that specifically challenge the mainstream understandings of the topic and past reports or policies which are likely to influence their work. This could involve scholars with diverse viewpoints as well as the voices of those who are likely to be affected by the report’s

recommendations. While this does not dismantle the system wholesale it would be an improvement.

Disrupting the problem representation involves disrupting the cycle of knowledge production between politicians in the United States government and experts, creating space for alternative and system challenging perspectives. By this I mean that mainstream peacebuilding research can be more self and system reflexive by questioning the dominance of the western lens and prioritizing currently marginalized voices and perspectives, both in the academic community and of the populations studied. One way to do this is to break the Western paradigm and,

“to challenge conceptualizations of both violence and underdevelopment as a problem embedded in the difference of the non-European world... to carry out a spatial reorientation, focusing for a bit on here and not there and showing how ‘we’ are heavily implicated in ‘their’ predicament.” (Darby 2009:713)

Conclusion

In this thesis I set out to answer the question, ‘what discourses construct peacebuilding, and the relationship between Afghanistan and the United States, in the *Afghanistan Study Group final report: a pathway for peace in Afghanistan* (2021)?’. In section 1, it was explained how the ASG formed their solutions to peace in Afghanistan through representing the problem to be the political culture of Afghanistan. Section 2, the presuppositions of liberalism and Just War theory, which steered the ASG in their development of the report, were uncovered. Section 3 displayed the genealogical mapping of practices and discourses over time through quotes from the SCFR hearings. Section 4 introduced another way to understand the problem through the concepts of Orientalism and the Western lens. Section 5 discussed the effects, both potential and already realized, of the ‘knowledge’ which produced the problem as represented by the ASG. Section 6 placed the report in the real world by examining how the report came to be in the real world, the issues in that line of production and the possibilities of challenging what was problematized through this thesis.

In short, the recommendations made by the Afghanistan Study Group to solve the problem representation, that the political culture of the Afghan state and civil society need to be ‘westernized’, have been found in this study to be subsumed in the Western lens and in reproducing Orientalist conceptions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ from within a report intended to influence the future of U.S. peacebuilding policy in Afghanistan. These recommendations for peacebuilding do not produce peace. The Study Group points out the Taliban’s “extremist interpretation of Islamic law” (ASG 2021:38) additionally, that Islam was used to rationalize violence and impose dominant power and control over a population. Through the lack of examination over the extent to which they are governed by the western lens, the Afghanistan Study Group perpetuates a conception of peace and peacebuilding through which they ultimately promote cultural violence and create imminent direct and structural violence.

The interest that began this project was the question of what realities are constructed and what power relations are produced, when external actors implement the ‘building’ of peace? Therefore, this thesis does not claim that the constructions identified within it are the only realities nor the

only lenses through which to view this question and the ASG report. To borrow from Spivak (1999:267),

“This is not to describe ‘the way things really were’ or to privilege the narrative of history as imperialism as the best version of history. It is, rather, to continue the account of how one explanation and narrative of reality was established as the normative one”.

Poststructural policy analysis through the WPR is an exercise in locating and disrupting dominant discourses. One reality constructed in the context of the ASG report and the lived experience of those involved and affected by outcomes of these recommendations is a perpetuation of Orientalist dogma and the resistances to it that exist in the same paradigm of power.

It is now that I recall the first few lines of the introduction to this thesis which state, that it is more from carelessness about peace than from sadistic intentions that there is so much violence in the world. This ‘carelessness’ is more than just a lack of attention paid to peace, it can also be described as an ambivalence, through which its’ contradictory conception creates the very violence it should be the antithesis of. I believe that this carelessness, and not sadistic intention, is exhibited in the Study Group’s final report. And yet it is also the hubristic and normative consensus of the Western lens that causes such carelessness.

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