

5. Policy Options for Canada

2. Background

Three **central aspects of Afghan history** were highlighted at the outset of the Roundtable:

4. Afghanistan has always been a buffer zone between major power zones.
5. Afghanistan could be characterised as a mountain monarchy for most of its history (1919-1973). The mountainous character of the land contributes to a tension between would-be centralisers in Kabul and those who prefer a more decentralised mode of governance in the rest of the country. This tension is further exacerbated by an ethnically diverse population.¹
6. Afghanistan has been a target of competition among surrounding (and more remote) states throughout its history. Invaders should heed the bitter lessons learned by the British at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century and the Russians in the late 70's and 80's.

The current situation in Afghanistan was described as having three key characteristics:

1. System immobilisation: There is a consistent history of thwarted reform-oriented leaders. (The reform movements have encountered strong opposition throughout Afghanistan's history.)²
2. There are political and intellectual tensions between Kabul and the rest of the country – a so called “Kabul and out” phenomenon.³
3. Afghanistan has been suffering from an “un-benign” neglect. The country has been abandoned by the superpowers at the end of the Cold War bombed, mined, and generally reduced to rubble. In other words, the attempts to integrate Afghanistan into one or the other world systems have resulted in a devastated and a collapsed state. The power vacuum left behind after the withdrawal of the superpowers was filled by individuals who legitimated their power from the barrel of their guns (trained to a large degree by either the government of the Soviet Union or the U.S.A.).

A point was made that it is necessary to consider the possible governance scenarios for Afghanistan in a regional context. (Among other reasons, Pakistan played a significant role in the

¹ The political (and ethnic) equilibrium maintained under the monarchy was destabilised in 1973 when King Zahir Shah was removed from power and Afghanistan was proclaimed a republic. No stable government was able to replace the monarchy.

² A point was made that in some instances, reformist monarchs went too far in their zeal to Westernize the country and offended the general Afghan population.

³ Kabul, a centre of mostly left-leaning or Marxist intellectuals and political parties, is isolated from the views of the rest of the country. Ethnic communities are also divided on urban-rural lines.