THE AFGHAN ENDGAME: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SOVIET AND THE COALITION WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract. *As the final date of the Coalition military withdrawal from Afghanistan approaches, two interconnected questions become increasingly urgent. The first refers to the nature of post-2014 Western involvement in Afghanistan if, of course, the two sides actually agree to maintain any form of functional cooperation or partnership. The second fundamental question is considerably more complex, despite the fact that its answer depends heavily on the first question, namely: what will be the evolution of the current regime in Kabul following the impending military extraction? Afghanistan's incredible political history does, in fact, provide a similar precedent under the form of the 1989 Soviet withdrawal, though it would be superficial of us to analyze the NATO withdrawal as a part of a repeating historical pattern that began with the British retreat of 1842 and continues with its modern analogues. The regional and international context, the actors and, consequently, the results, differ, though the example of the Soviet withdrawal can be used to underline some of these differences and develop an in-depth understanding of the two events.*

Keywords: *military withdrawal, military operations, political indicators, state of insurgency, conflict.*

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There is very little value in adopting an analogical interpretation of the upcoming withdrawal, beyond simply perpetuating the less than accurate "Graveyard of the Empires" stereotype. On the other hand, comparing two parallel sets of clearly defined characteristics does provide the opportunity to enhance our understanding of both events. This particular phase of combat is especially complex due to long-term consequences produced by the actions of the actors. The comparison of the withdrawal phase of the war with a chess endgame is

not by any means accidental: the pieces have been exchanged during the middle game, the number of potential moves has boiled down to one or two winning variations and hundreds of losing ones, each move becoming a committal decision due to the extensive echoing of its effects for the rest of the game. In a similar fashion, the withdrawal phase of the Soviet and the Coalition intervention in Afghanistan is characterized by the gradual replacement of short-term tactical objectives with long-term strategic calculation.

The analysis will start with the very concrete (1) logistical and tactical challenges posed by the military operations and will continue with (2) the state of the official regime and (3) the state of the contesting faction(s).

The Military Operations

Although it has often been compared with the War in Vietnam, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was completely different from the American experience in South-East Asia. In Vietnam, the United States forces have conducted a high-intensity form of warfare that involved a multi-divisional approach to both strategic and tactical operations. At the apex of the war, American military presence reached approximately 550,000 soldiers while the Soviet forces in Afghanistan were never raised beyond 120,000. The size of the theatre of operations is also very relevant for the evaluation of the conflict; the United States army fought in a country that measured approximately 330,000 square kilometers while the relatively smaller 40th Army of the Soviet Union was canvassed over 650,000 square kilometers of arid deserts or mountainous regions, poorly connected by merely 19,000 kilometers or road, 75% of it being unreliable dirt road. In order to control this vast territory, the units of the 40th Soviet Army were dispersed among the 29 most important urban or industrial centers, making it very difficult to control the countryside, where the Mujahideen movement recruited new members, consolidated their influence and interfered with the communication between the country's economic centers. Coordinated offensives, troop re-arrangements, supply lines or, indeed, any form of movement were made very difficult for the Soviet units by very mobile, small and well adapted guerilla groups.

On the other side of the barricades, the Mujahideen fought a war based on the principle of economy of force. Throughout the war, the insurgency provided no clear targets for the enemy who, as we have seen in numerous post-Second World War conflicts, was better prepared for conventional warfare than for asymmetric warfare. The anti-governmental forces were organized into small, cohesive groups of 20 to 100 men, generally members of the same clan or tribe. They afforded to attack their enemy's positions when they displayed any tactical weakness and withdraw before their target had the chance to regroup.

Initially, the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces (LCOSF) consisted of approximately 55,000 military personnel: two motorized armored divisions, an airborne division, an air assault brigade and two additional motorized rifle regiments. There was a general

sense among the Soviet military leadership that the mere presence of the USSR forces within Afghan borders would limit much of the insurgency's willingness to fight, as it did in most of its Eastern European satellites, but this new environment, as well as the socio-cultural background, allowed active resistance on the part of the native population. (Grau, Gress, 2002, pp. 17-18). During the first part of the 80s, the Mujahideen movement became increasingly complex as it adjusted to the strategies and plans of the Soviets and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA).

During the first phase of the war, brute force was employed to expel the insurgency. By 1985, the Soviet military presence was raised to 150,000 in order to keep up with the growing security challenges raised by the Mujahideen factions, though, gradually, the main strategic goal became to prepare the Afghan army to assume the main military responsibilities while the LCOSF was to act exclusively as a source of logistical, technical and military support. Once Mikhail Gorbachev became Secretary General, a clear shift in the approach to the Afghan War took place, focusing more on the so called "Afghanization" of the conflict than on the direct attack on the opposing factions. Unfortunately for Moscow and the PDPA, the communication and trust between the LCOSF and the Afghan security forces were constantly disrupted by Mujahideen infiltration as well as a generalized tendency towards lack of discipline and effectiveness among the Afghan security forces. The coalition forces have failed in a similar fashion to forge a stable partnership with elements from within the Afghan society, though there are certain subtle differences. The relation between the PDPA and the USSR was one of asymmetric domination; without Soviet aid, the PDPA had no concrete authority or influence over their citizens, with the exception of a very small class of urban intellectuals and bureaucrats. On the other hand, Soviet representatives found it very hard to find any additional allies besides the PDPA membership. While there was a traditional rivalry between the Pasthun south and the multi-ethnic north, it was cast aside by the Mujahideen in order for them to fight the Soviet invaders and the government in Kabul more effectively. This does not mean that there were no frictions between the various Mujahideen factions, but they achieved a level of cooperation that allowed them to operate in concert during the first phases of the war. On the other hand, today, the United States has succeeded in establishing a very fruitful cooperation with certain ethnic minorities, especially the Tajiks and the Uzbeks of the former Northern Alliance areas. This association is, of course, based on a mutual interest to implement a pluralistic and democratic political system in Afghanistan. The Tajik, the Uzbek, the Turkmen and the Hazara minority groups, which together form approximately 60% of the country's population, are afraid of a potential resurge of Pashtun nationalism hidden under the religious coat of the Taliban movement. On the other hand, the cooperation between the United States and the government of Afghanistan has been rather ineffectual for exactly the same reason the unofficial partnership with ethnic minorities has proved so fruitful. Hamid Karzai, despite proving to be a level-headed politician throughout his career, working as a fund-raiser organizer in Pakistan during the anti-Soviet war

and supporting the Northern Alliance during the Afghan Civil War, is forced to find an uncomfortable balance between the nationalist tendencies of his Pashtun supporters and the fears of the ethnic minorities and the Coalition forces in an attempt to maintain the strength of his government. This makes him a far less cooperative or predictable ally when compared to the members of the PDPA. The recent political developments have shown that the current president of Afghanistan is not willing to play the role of the docile native partner. By trying to take the initiative in negotiating with the Taliban, the government is attempting to avoid the occurrence of another Geneva Accord, were the Najibullah government did not have a real place at the negotiating table and the insurgency was not contacted at all.

The insurgency grew exponentially after the invasion, covering the agricultural regions while the regime in Kabul became increasingly isolated in urban bastions. Despite repeated attempts on the part of the government and the Soviet forces to gain footholds in the countryside, they simply lacked the necessary human resources. Very often, small, platoon-sized garrisons would be left behind in villages from which the Mujahideen were forced out only to return the moment the garrison was removed. In fact, one of the greatest advantages held by the insurgency was their ability to blend among the local population, mainly due to the fact that they were often part of the local population or had the support of local networks of influence. It was clear that the Soviet High Command and the Politburo were faced with very concrete problems that could not be solved through purely military or purely political means. In order for social stability to be re-established, the Mujahideen movement had to lose its emotional hold over the population. This is not unlike the current rationale of the Coalition forces. While the insurgency was able to fight a modern war due to external material aid, coming especially from Pakistan, they were tactically effective because of popular support. If this element could have been eliminated, then the anti-governmental groups would no longer be able to operate with the same mobility and would regenerate slower after a defeat. Great efforts were made to win over popular support, both on the part of the Afghan government, especially during the Karmal and the Najibullah eras, and on the part of the Soviet representatives. First of all, there was an attempt to "correct" the main point of disagreement between the Mujahideen movement and the government, namely the atheistic communist ideology, by making it more acceptable to the conservative majority. Paradoxically, the Soviet authorities have traditionally perceived the expansion of the Marxist-Leninist ideology in Afghanistan with greater conservatism than the Afghan communists themselves. Their belief was that a purely communist regime would not be sustainable in a country that was profoundly religious and had an extremely high illiteracy rate. That is why, during Mohammed's regime, USSR was content to allow a nationalistic leader stay in power while the Moscow-led PDPA would infiltrate the government and the state bureaucracy. Their inclination towards a cautious approach to the Afghan political situation was also shown by the fact that they prepared the more

moderate Parcham faction within the PDPA rather than the radical Khalq. Considerable efforts were made, with different degrees of intensity, to include part of the religious elite within the state apparatus, to soften agricultural and social reforms, to re-include theocratic elements in the Afghan political system and establish a functional power-sharing relationship with opposing political organizations.

The USSR was less successful in gaining popular support than the Coalition forces, though we are merely comparing two shades of failure. It was the ideological "baggage" of the USSR and the PDPA that made sincere adhesion to the government almost impossible from the part of a population that was and is deeply religious. The fact that the regime in Kabul and its backers in Moscow were perceived as "Godless" is perfectly complementary with the jihad narrative utilized. The fact that the United States promoted a political system that was somewhat akin with the traditional Pashtun way of governing was quite helpful for establishing a more solid relation with the native population, as well as the fact that the Coalition forces were very tolerant of the Afghan people's religious beliefs. If, in the case of the Soviet occupation, the war was very much about cultural survival, in the case of Western occupation, the narrative of the Taliban is less convincing when it uses cultural argument, though these continue to hold considerable weight in Southern Afghanistan. Ethnic undertones are being increasingly felt within the context of the current Afghan conflict, tendencies which were present during the Soviet occupation as well but did not openly manifest themselves until the retreat of the foreign troops in 1989.

The more recent experience of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the U.S.-led Coalition forces is quite similar. Again, an advanced conventional force invades a large country with difficult terrain, undeveloped infrastructure and a dispersed and divided population without being able to isolate and eliminate the armed opposition. Again, the insurgency creates footholds in the rural areas of the southern Pashtun area and attacks the governmental and international forces only when damage could be inflicted without any being sustained. While the basic elements are similar, there are important differences which have influenced the military effectiveness of the insurgency and the cost of maintaining a presence in the region. The Mujahideen and the Taliban are both technologically inferior to the Red Army and the Coalition forces, making a conventional conflict impossible for them, but the developmental distance between the actors differs considerably. The Mujahideen, for instance, were able to attack Soviet armored vehicles and helicopters due to the fact that they were armed and trained in the use of the FIM-43 Redeye and the FIM-92 Stinger, personal portable surface-to-air missile. The introduction of these weapons not only enhanced the Mujahideen's capacity to inflict considerable damage to the units of the 40th Soviet Army, but it also signaled a more direct involvement on the part of the United States in the conflict. The ability to damage armored vehicles and helicopters meant not only that the pro-governmental forces would have difficulties coping with the insurgency in sections of the battlefield where normally they should be completely dominant, like the

open field and the air, but also that the human and the material cost of the war would be far higher than if the technological gap between the opposing factions would have remained larger. Foreign support for the resistance was enormous and included states like the United States, the People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The United States alone funded the Mujahideen movement with approximately 3 billion dollars during the initial phase of the war, and Saudi Arabia constantly matched the American investment. In comparison to the Soviet Afghan experience, the Coalition forces have maintained a larger technological gap between themselves and the Taliban, partly due to a much smaller foreign support.

Table. 1: Soviet Casualties in Afghanistan
(Grau, Gress, 2002, p. 44)

Year	Total Casualties	Officer Casualties
1979	150	15
1980	2.800	320
1981	2.400	300
1982	3.650	400
1983	2.800	300
1984	4.400	500
1985	3.500	380
1986	2.500	300
1987	2.300	280
1988	1.400	130
1989	100	15
Total	**26,000**	**2,990**

Table. 2: Coalition Casualties in Afghanistan
(Source: ICasualties.org, 2014)

Year	Coalition Casualties (including US)	United States Casualties
2001	12	12
2002	70	49
2003	58	48
2004	60	52
2005	131	99
2006	191	98
2007	232	117
2008	295	155
2009	521	317
2010	711	499
2011	566	418
2012	402	310
2013	160	127
2014	17	14
Total	**3,426**	**2,315**

There are clear parallels that can be drawn from the past Soviet experience and the ongoing war. In both cases, we have overwhelming conventional forces unable to defeat an enemy that attacks successfully without offering any targets, a regime that is militarily and economically dependent on foreign backers and unsuccessful campaigns to "win the hearts" of the local population. In both cases, Afghanistan resembles a Gordian knot; waning popular support fuels the insurgency which causes an increase in aggressive military intervention which, subsequently, adds to popular disgruntlement. There are, however, major differences between the end results of the two military campaigns. The difference between the two death tolls is representative of the complete disaster caused by the War in Afghanistan to the Soviet military and the relative nuisance it has been for the Coalition forces.

Despite numerous claims on the part of the critics of both campaigns, both the Soviet High Command and their American analogues were fully aware that there was/is no military solution to the conflict. Even so, simply recognizing that the foundation of the insurgency's effectiveness is social and cultural in nature is far from sufficient. Changing the socio-cultural landscape of a country that is so resistant to the penetration of modernity is an impossible task within any reasonable timeframe. Since the United States have been allocating financial support to Afghanistan, both in order to develop its military and police capabilities and to improve infrastructure and the standard of living, considerable changes have been registered. The GDP of Afghanistan increased from 6,622 million dollars in 2005 to 18,949 million dollars in 2011. The problem is that this reasonable economic development has been sustained with the help of enormous foreign investment, with approximately 100 billion dollars being spent by the United States alone on non-military projects in Afghanistan. This is more than Washington has paid for any other reconstruction project, including the Marshall Plan. The Soviet Union also invested a great deal of financial resources in the development of Afghan institutions, infrastructure and the training of its specialists. During the first 6 months following the 1979 coup d'état, approximately 14 billion dollars have been attributed to the Afghan government by the USSR and various other COMECON states. The difference is that during the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the financial aid never transposed into economic development, as in the case of the current war (Saikal, 2004, p. 190).

In conclusion, both wars have seen superior forces invading an economically underdeveloped, technologically backward and politically unstable state. In both cases, the dimension of the territory under occupation has disallowed effective control, which enabled the insurgency to increase its influence in the rural regions and apply continuous pressure on the governmental or foreign held urban strongholds. Going further, efforts have been made during both campaigns to win over the sympathy of the natives but, beyond limited and unreliable tribal alliances, no sustainable support has been

acquired. Despite all of this, the Coalition forces have been more effective in combating the Taliban than the Soviets have been in fighting the Mujahideen. This is mainly due to a less impressive international backing of the Taliban and to a greater gap in technological development between the ISAF and the insurgency. In both, the political situation was influenced by the military standings of the main factions, but it has not been the only factor. Without a social and political foundation, the structural changes performed by the non-Afghan actors would be dependent on constant military backing, which no external force is willing to provide.

The State of the Afghan Government

When assessing possible scenarios regarding the development of the situation in Afghanistan, the correct evaluation of governmental stability is essential, especially in relation with the contesting faction's strength. During the Afghan endgame, both the Soviet Politburo and the United States government had to ensure that the government in Kabul is able to sustain itself, preferably with as little external aid as possible. The "Afghanization" of the war is a theme present in both withdrawal plans and it is based on two very simple arguments: (1) the insurgency will outlast domestic support for the war and (2) the presence of foreign troops fuels the insurgency's ability to recruit new members. Under these circumstances, military withdrawal coupled with establishing a stable political system protected by a responsible executive is the ideal scenario. From a political point of view, the differences between the communist Afghan government and the current Afghan government are quite acute (Aidan, 2007).

We should start by considering the way the two political systems came to power. Mohammed Daoud was toppled with the help of a small number of Khalq supporters within the Afghan military, and not due to any form of popular support for the PDPA's ideology. Beyond anything else, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan was a mainly bureaucratic organization that had limited support among the people. The main quality held by the Afghan communists was that they have been allowed, during Daoud's regime, to populate the main state institutions, including the army and the secret police. Beyond this and the support received from the USSR, there was nothing recommending this disorganized communist party as a unifying force for the eclectic Afghan macro-society. The current government, however, has been formed through an armed popular struggle followed by open constitutional negotiation. While initially, the idea of a democratic government that excluded the Taliban was mostly supported by the ethnic minorities of the Northern Alliance, the government of Hamid Karzai, functioning according to the Constitution of 2004, was clearly designed to appease the Pashtun majority. Instead of a parliamentary regime, which would have favored the smaller ethnic groups, the Constitution describes a presidential democracy based on conservative Islamic values. Hamid Karzai's election by the Loya Jirga as the president

of Afghanistan was the result of a correct political calculation. While the Northern Alliance did have the support of the Coalition forces, it was clear that a Pashtun leader was necessary in order to maintain the stability of the new regime. Most important political positions, with the exception of the presidency, were occupied by members of the Northern Alliance, including the strategically important Defense, Interior and Foreign Affairs Ministries. Despite this, a strong executive leader that was popularly voted clearly advantage the Pashtun ethnicity in the long-term, though it also gives the minority groups some capacity to influence political decision-making.

In any case, the current government is the product of trans-ethnic negotiation that, while not being always completely transparent or free, did create a hybrid-system that tries to accommodate most of the relevant Afghan political forces as well as the requirements of their external backers. The process through which the current government came into power also followed, to some degree, the tribal democratic tradition of Afghanistan, which prescribes that all new rulers must be validated by the leadership of the major tribes. In comparison to the Karzai government, the PDPA was completely removed from the country's political and ideological tradition. Furthermore, the internal divisions of the communist party go far deeper than those that of the Karzai government.

The PDPA has proven to be a self-cannibalistic organism, unable to organize except when faced with a common enemy, in which case a temporary and unstable alliance was usually forged. In the approximately one year since it has acquired complete control over Kabul, there have been three violent transfers of power within the organization's hierarchy. The internal divisions only exacerbated popular opposition to the regime. If the macro-society initially accepted the communist regime with the same lack of interest it accepted most leadership changes, once the regime started imposing aggressive reforms and supporting them through force, a growing sense of repulsion with Kabul became more and more apparent. The population was rejecting the communist regime due to the incompatibility between the two entities. Fikrat Tabaeev, the newly appointed Soviet ambassador to Afghanistan in December 1979, stated the following regarding the situation in the country: "There was a real danger of a counter-revolutionary coup under the banner of Islamic fundamentalists. They had accumulated great strength by then. On the contrary, Kabul had been weakened. The Army after Amin's purges and reprisals was decapitated. The clergy had been alienated. The peasants were against the regime. So were the tribes, who had suffered under Amin. There were just a handful of sycophants left around Amin who, like parrots, repeated after him various idiocies about 'building socialism' and 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'. The so called Kunar grouping of the insurgents created in the east was capable of capturing Kabul within 24 hours." (Snegirev, 2000, p. 224).

The communist government was so alienated from the people it had to govern that, before the Soviet military intervention, entire divisions from the Afghan army deserted and joined the insurgency. While corruption and infiltration are widespread among the present day Afghan security forces, there has never been an instance in which large military formations have joined the Taliban. The anti-communist revolt itself was comprised of an extremely diverse number of movements ranging from that of the Sunni Mujahideen and the Shiites of the Hazarajat and Kabul to the violent student movements. Never before has opposition to the government mobilized such diverse groups. Traditionally, the government has always been challenged by a specific interest group, either the ulema or a coalition of tribes excluded from power, but in the case of the anti-communist revolt, resistance seemed universal. Unusual associations were forged in an attempt to organize against the government. In Herat especially, one of the most important focal points of the revolt, we see a collaboration between Sunni and Shiite, urban inhabitants and rural inhabitants, Maoists and Mullahs, all directing their efforts against Kabul. In other regions, like the Hazarajat, the Shiite religious elite and the economically oppressed khans took the initiative and organized the anti-governmental movement, targeting state institutions and functionaries. The student movement, more or less restricted to Kabul, was divided into two groups, the pro-Islamic group and the secular Maoist group, yet despite ideological inconsistencies they also succeeded in collaborating against the new Parcham regime.

While the Parcham regime was somewhat more stable internally than the Khalq, they were just as incapable to acquire the loyalty of the general population. Karmal came to power by promising a general reconciliation and the destruction of the "torture machine" created by Amin and his colleagues, the establishing of democratic institutions and free elections, the legalization of political parties and the creation of a new constitution. Many of these reforms did not come to fruition, but some of the more controversial measures taken by the Khalq government were withdrawn, including women's rights, the land reform, and the tricolor flag was reinstated in place of the communist red flag. The actions of the regime were also encumbered by its uncertain legal framework, still based on Daoud's 1977 Constitution. In order to at least partially remedy this situation, the Parcham regime improvised a 10 point document meant to act as a provisional constitution, which in fact allowed the PDPA to exert almost discretionary power. Of course, the actual limit to the power projected from Kabul was restricted by the armed resistance conducted by the Mujahideen, so we may speak of only a relative totalitarianism. After the fall of the Khalqis, the moderates from within the PDPA were not inclined to abuse the power the legal chaos provided them. In many ways, Karmal's policies were the sign of an official recognition that the Marxist ideology was fundamentally incompatible with

the Afghan Islamic culture. The Najibullah regime, which succeeded Karmal with the aid of the Soviet authorities, continued its policy of ideological re-alignment in order to become closer to the conservative preferences of the majority of the population and to negotiate with the insurgency.

Unfortunately for the Afghan communist, none of these efforts produced any concrete results. Despite the new government's departure from the communist ideology in 1990, when Afghanistan became an Islamic Republic, the insurgency continued to activate with the same energy, having the military support of the United States and Saudi Arabia. Besides the Junbish self-defense unit, which was an Uzbek paramilitary organization led by Abdul Rashid Dostum, the greater part of the population remained in opposition to the "over-night" Islamic government. This meant that the government in Kabul continued to be highly dependent on Moscow for support against the Mujahideen since it was unable to form a strong internal network of influence. While material support was still granted to Kabul by the USSR, the process of Afghanization of the conflict was suddenly accelerated when the last Soviet troops withdrew from the country in February of 1989. Immediately after the governmental military was left to fend on its own, the Mujahideen shifted once more from asymmetric warfare to conventional warfare when they attacked the city of Jalalabad. The battle of Jalalabad was a humiliating defeat for the Mujahideen, which have lost their reputation of invincibility.

There are several important points to be made here. When the LCOSF had left Afghanistan, the Mujahideen had the human and material resources to organize an open confrontation with the governmental forces. At that point in time, the Hezbi-i Islami forces, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the main candidate for the post-communist rule of Afghanistan, were able to field approximately 10,000 men against the defense of the city of Jalalabad. Most military analysts have stated that the only reason the Hezbi-i Islami was defeated was that the governmental forces possessed a considerable Soviet arsenal, which included SCUD missiles. Today, it is highly improbable that the Taliban forces would be able organize such a convincing direct attack against the Karzai government. Also, the current government continues to have the support of the Northern ethnic minorities, not because of any real sympathy shared between them and the government, but rather because they realize that the Pasthun nationalist agenda of the Taliban is far more radical than that of the government in Kabul. In addition to this, throughout the years, the Karzai government has made consistent efforts to improve its standing with the Pasthun community, sometimes at the expense of its relations with the United States. Karzai has been very careful to dissociate himself from the Coalition forces by criticizing much of their conduct, especially when it comes to their interaction with civilians, in order to gain credibility as an independent leader.

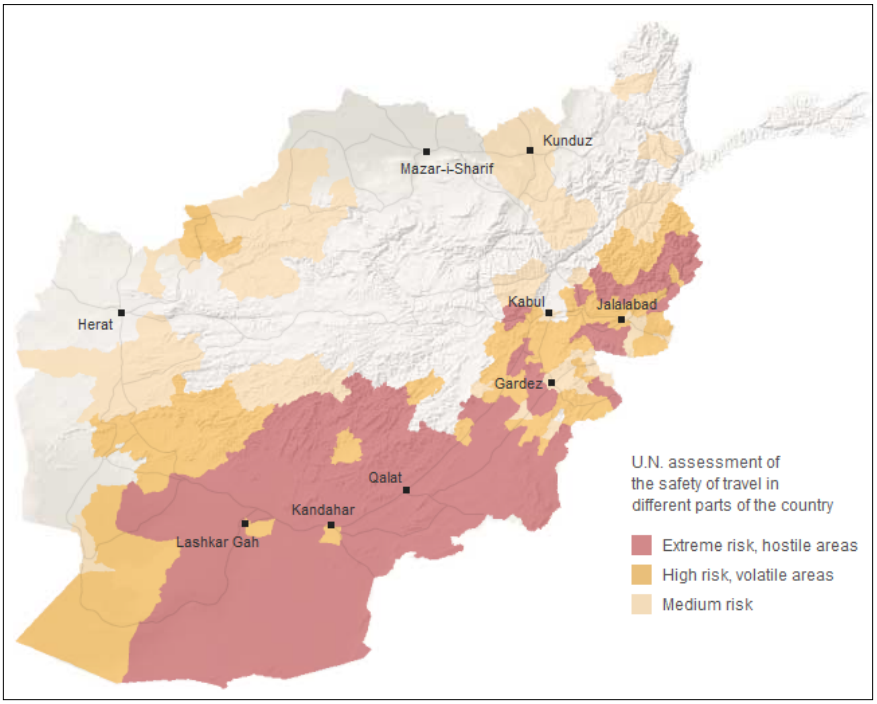

Fig. 1: Taliban activity in Afghanistan in 2010
(Source: http://www.nytimes.com)

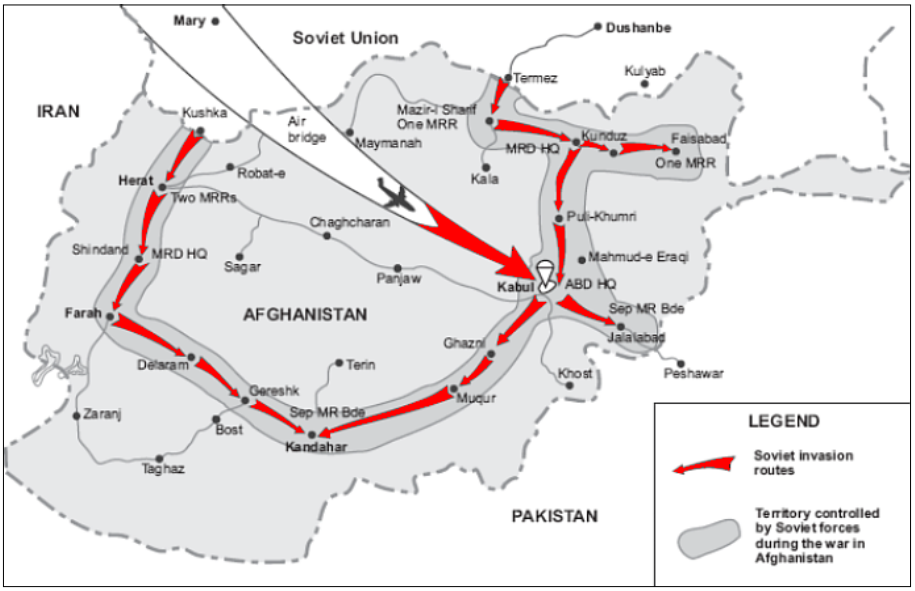

Fig. 2: Soviet control of Afghanistan (1979-1989)
(Source: http://www.cgsc.edu/)

Returning to an earlier point, the ideological and political basis of Karzai government is far more solid than that of the Najibullah government. Democracy, in a rudimentary form, has existed in Afghanistan since before the formation of the Durrani Empire in 1747. The Loya Jirga is one of the country's oldest political institutions, dating back, under a different form, to the time of the first Aryan tribes moving to the region. It was essentially a council of tribal leaders, religious figures and elders that discussed issues of importance to the nation and often voted on important matters. It is not hard to imagine how this political tradition can be quite easily transposed to a democratic system. Mohammad Najibullah was the definition of a communist insider; between 1980 and 1985, he led the KHAD, the most well paid and indoctrinated component of the Afghan state apparatus. Under these circumstances, his shift from communism to conservative Islam was not convincing at all and did little to improve his negotiation position with the Mujahideen.

A brief comparison between the territory under the control of the current government (Fig. 1) and the territory under the control of the Najibullah government (Fig. 2) shows that the communist regime was relatively unsuccessful in gaining any reliable control over the countryside. The 40th Army focused on keeping the urban belt of the country, formed of Herat, Farah, Kandahar and Kabul, under their control while the Mujahideen had close to free range on the territory outside of the belt. Today, the government has a firm grip on the northern part of the country due to the support of the Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara and Turkmen minorities, though the Pasthun south remains dangerous. Even so, the immediate areas around the main southern urban centers remain under the direct control of the Coalition forces. Under these conditions, president Karzai's strategy of trying to adopt a more pro-Pashtun approach to policy by criticizing some of the actions of the Coalition forces could help gain him favor with the population of the southern regions. It is also important to note that the current government has consistently asked the Coalition to withdraw its military forces while Najibullah wanted to maintain Soviet occupation. It is highly doubtful that the governmental forces would be able to resist Taliban aggression without military material aid from the United States, but the Karzai government probably wishes that a combination of arsenal superiority, pro-Pashtun lobby in the South and the support of the northern ethnic minorities will be able to force the Taliban into some form of power-sharing.

This strategy takes the form of a dangerous gambit, a calculated risk that may initiate a process of stabilization or accelerate the fall of the government depending on several variables, including the trust of the ethnic minorities' leaders that Karzai or the future Afghan president will maintain a balance between the Pashtun and the non-Pashtun groups, the nature of Pakistan's future support for the Taliban and the reaction of the southern Pashtuns to the withdrawal. It is difficult to imagine how a deeply corrupted state bureaucracy incapable of providing effective social reform and served by an unreliable military can control all of these factors. Also, divisions between the parliament

and the government are likely to increase during the post-withdrawal period. The result of the 2014 presidential elections is also an important factor in the equation, since the new president will have to continue Karzai's policy. In any case, most indicators would show that the current government has greater chances to reach some form of social stability than the former communist government. This, of course, does not spare it of all of the issues of an underdeveloped state (Niedringhaus, 2011).

The State of the Insurgency

Until now, we have seen that costs of the two wars and the political stability of the local governments differ considerably, giving the United States a reasonable edge over the performance of the Soviet Union. The characteristics of the insurgency are also very different, posing different challenges for the pre-withdrawal negotiation process. In both cases, the Afghan governments have attempted to include certain components of the insurgency in a power-sharing system but, at least in the case of the Soviet war, it has failed. There are several factors which are relevant for the negotiation process, such as the effectiveness of the insurgency during the war, the credibility of the government, the ideological compatibility between the insurgency and the government and the nature of post-withdrawal external support, all relevant in establishing the negotiation position of the state relative to the insurgency. It is highly probable that the Karzai government has a better negotiating position than the Najibullah government, but this still does not guarantee that the Taliban will be willing to enter any form of political cooperation with the official government. Throughout their activity, they have proven to be very pragmatic and less than trustworthy, especially since any compromise with the government would mean the abandonment of the Taliban's ideological substance.

This was partially true for the Mujahideen as well, but in that case we saw that the group itself was more of a collection of religious-motivated, anti-governmental organizations rather than a unitary body as in the case of the Taliban. Very often, conflicts took place within the movement, especially between the Jamiyat-i Islami and the Hezbi-i Islami forces. In many cases, different Mujahideen groups would compete for foreign support as well as achieving ethnic objectives. There are two very important factors that must be taken in consideration when analyzing the motivating components of both the Mujahideen and the Taliban: (1) the religious frame of the conflict and (2) the ethnic affiliation of the different factions.

The relevance of the concept of *jihad* in the Afghan culture becomes especially apparent when taking into account the general lack of political or ideological knowledge dissipated among most of the population. While political struggle is regarded with a certain degree of indifference, at least when specific tribal or ethnic interests aren't at play, jihad gains a completely different dimension within the popular imaginary. It is not seen as a Machiavellian competition for power and influence, but as the moral duty to

correct a moral sin. Thusly, the Mujahideen saw themselves mainly as agents of divine will rather than political actors, a view that was shared by most of the population. An entire cult revolved around the insurgency with all the trappings of martyr adoration, a ritual that was deeply integrated in the religious tradition of the country since "in pre-war Afghanistan, martyrs were not distinguished from other holy men whose tombs were the objects of visitation" (Dorronsoro, 2005, p. 107). The stories of their endeavors against the infidels remain preserved in the collective memory of the Afghan people. Even to this day, stories of the bravery of the Mujahideen that have fought the British in the XIXth century are still being told. The ulema, constituted as a disciplined network of interests capable of coordinating complex actions over large distances, became the natural spiritual leadership of the Mujahideen movement. The strong bond between the *alem*, the religious teacher, and the mentor who assigned him his *ijaza*, his license to teach, goes beyond factional loyalties. They are master and apprentice, one shaping the other's core system of belief. A similar relationship is formed between the alem and the *taliban*, the student of the madrasa. This net of interconnected loyalties put into the service of a unique religious dogma makes the ulema an especially efficient political actor. Even in those regions where members of the ulema have not assumed the role of commanders of the Mujahideen, they have continued to play an essential role in the anti-governmental struggle because of the influence they had wielded over the rural population. The religious service very often contained elements of propaganda directed against what was perceived to be a "Godless" and illegitimate regime, the aim being to mobilize those that were undecided in favor of the uprising. In fact, all of these organizational capabilities have already been proven by the ulema in their coordination of the violent actions against the state in the 1929 rebellion. The jihad has two main functions: either to drive out the infidels that have occupied the Muslim country or to topple a government that does not respect the laws of Islam. In the case of the PDPA, we see a coupling of these two objectives due to the fact that the Marxist ideology was completely foreign to the Afghan culture and the party was also clearly supported by the Soviet Union.

The breakdown of state structures at the end of the 70s unavoidably produced the emergence of new structures of power directed by a new elite. The main criteria that determine the selection of the leadership of the Mujahideen is generally the number of combatants one can mobilize and direct in battle. The class of the commanders was generally comprised of two categories of men: those that possessed religious authority and those that possessed secular authority. The first category, which was more dominant in Ghazni, the north of Helmand, in the Hazarajat and in Badghis, was comprised of members of the ulema, of mullahs, pirs and sadat. The pirs had a structural control mechanism very similar to that of the ulema. They were considered by the Sufi community to be not only spiritual leaders, but holy men whose function is to reveal the message and teachings of the Divine to those willing to learn; in other words, they were

perceived as intermediaries between Allah and the faithful. Again we see powerful ties between the pir and his murids, his spiritual students, which makes these religious communities such effective organizations.

The secular group was generally formed of the class of the khans, which were the tribal aristocracy, and the university trained intellectuals. The influence of the khans depends mainly on their financial power rather than from the residual authority tribal customs offer them. They base their influence on the circle of clients from among the community, who depend on them with their material welfare, among the beneficiaries being religious figures also. Because of the economic changes of the XXth century, but also because of concerted efforts from the part of the Afghan state, the tribes have lost, as we have seen, a considerable part of their political prominence. While at the level of its capacity to define collective identity, the tribe remains an essential element, its aristocratic hierarchy has lost much of its traditional authority. The communist regime viewed them as their main class enemies, condemning many of them to unjust imprisonment. Part of the ulema also had a nuanced approach to these modern feudal lords, sometimes accusing them of exploiting the peasants. Yet, despite the loss of their customary status, the khans retain their role as leaders of the community through their acquired wealth. The Afghan intellectuals, on the other hand, generally gained their position as leaders due to their capacity to read and write; qualities rarely found among the Afghan people. Of course, besides their literacy, the intellectual commanders of the Mujahideen also had influential connection either to a political movement or to a powerful clan without which they could have never asserted themselves. (Stenersen, 2010).

The way these battle groups organized varied from region to region and from commander to commander. The tendency was for two types of organizational models to become prevalent: (1) the partisan organization, in which the leadership was formed of the commander's immediate family, clan members or colleagues and in which the group rarely interfered in the lives of the citizens under their power, and (2) the shadow-state organizations, which imitated the functions of the state on the territories under their control. In the case of the partisan organizations, the situation is quite clear; the members are interested in accomplishing purely military objectives, any judicial or social problems that might appear among those that are under their authority are directed towards the local mullah or alem. The relation between the members of partisan organizations is informal, a minimal distinction being made between the leaders and the followers.

The case of the shadow-state organization is especially interesting for the ethnic character of the intra-insurgency conflicts. Because these organizations were geographically defined, at least to some degree, they started adopting a behavior that is similar to that of states. They became attached to their territorial possessions, became proficient in mobilizing the local populations and formally imposed a set of rules in order

to regulate social conduct. The fact that these organizations existed throughout the Soviet war and the Civil War that followed it only contributed to the pre-existing tensions between the northern minorities and the southern Pashtuns. The appearance of the Taliban on the Afghan scene came as a response to the lawlessness which dominated the post-communist Afghanistan. The Peshawar Accord was a failure because of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's unwillingness to share power with the northern Mujahideen or Ahmad Shah Massoud. Due to the overwhelming support he received from government of Pakistan and the United States, Hekmatyar and the Hezbi-i Islami forces believed that they could govern without the rest of the partisans and unite Afghanistan by force instead of doing so through negotiation. This triggered several years of brutal internal war which was in fact the continuation of the latent inter-ethnic conflict that was simply postponed by the anti-communist struggle. Once the uniting principle of the Mujahideen was removed, the movement regressed to the tribal chaos characteristic of the early XIX century Afghan society.

In fact, the initial appeal of the Taliban ideology consisted in its attempt to address the main societal issues faced by Afghanistan at that time: the deep chaos and lawlessness that reigned within its borders after the fall of the Najibullah regime in 1992 and the almost complete lack of social and cultural unity. After the almost complete breakdown of central authority, the local warlords, no longer motivated by a religious cause, took direct control of land, property and people. This very often led to severe human rights abuses which prepared the way for the Taliban to start growing as an organization that is distinct in its conduct and objectives from other military groups. They made themselves known not only through acts of violent justice, like the assassination of abusive warlords or helping the unfortunate, but also through the medium of the madrassa, the religious school. The core of the Taliban's raison d'être was in fact the reintroduction of order in a space that lacked it completely and it was this factor in particular made them popular among the Pashtun population and not necessarily their religious doctrine. The basis of this ideology is an unusual mixture between a violent and deeply anti-modern brand of Sunni fundamentalism and the Pashtunwali, which is a set of normative rules or a code of honor that governs the behavior of the Pashtun tribes. The Taliban credo was a departure from the more moderate, more inclusive Islamism promoted by the Mujahideen and the Northern Alliance in the sense that it promoted a type of prohibitive culture that some say surpassed the actual text of the Qur'an. The message of the Taliban was received enthusiastically, first in the Kandahar area, the cradle of Pashtun culture, and then throughout the southern region of Afghanistan. Part of the reason was that the their political project was a return to the original state of moral perfection represented by the Prophet and his generation, a return that would not be individual and voluntary, but imposed by the state upon the collective. This was particularly appealing due to general lack of social order and due to the fact that the Taliban organization had very little ties with the Mujahideen movement, which has lost much of its credibility.

Initially, most Taliban members were students in the madrassa, the religious schools, and did not participate in the anti-communist war, making easier for them to project themselves as different.

Mullah Omar, the founder of the Taliban movement, reportedly was a non-talkative Islamic teacher who was known to have fought against the communist regime with the Mujahideen until 1989. Very little is known about the leader of the Taliban, the image that has been presented by most media outlets being in fact false. Born in a family of landless peasants, in the relatively small Hotak tribe, Omar did not rise within the Afghan society through the use of the normal tribal networks, but by ascending up the religious hierarchy. The rise of a member of the ulema to the position of leader of a military faction was, as we have seen, not uncommon. Still, Omar is part of a slightly different category of clerics which the British called "mad mullahs", during their occupation of Afghanistan; these men did not consider themselves merely servants of God, but rather His direct instruments, claiming to have access to one form or another of Divine revelation. His modest background made him more independent from the traditional structures of authority, a quality which later became an important advantage since he could more easily navigate through tribal politics from the posture of "holy man" rather than tribal aristocrat. The Taliban were formed in the first part of 1994 and initially consisted of around 30 poorly armed members, most of them students or teachers of the madrassa. They rapidly gained popularity and support among the people of the Kandahar province in the context of the deeply chaotic environment ensued from 1992 onwards. After the almost complete breakdown of central authority, the local warlords took control and imposed their will through armed force. This very often lead to severe human rights abuses which the Taliban then used to fashion themselves as distinct from other military groups.

The second very important component of the Taliban ideology is, as in the case of the Hezbi-i Islami and several other Mujahideen groups, the predominance of the Pashtun ethnic group within the organization. While the main message of the Taliban is one of solidarity behind a fundamentalist and revivalist interpretation of the Qur'an, there is also an underlying ethnic motivation behind the movement. The Taliban is not purely a religious movement; it is also a reflection of the Pashtun ethnic group's general wish to secure their dominance over Kabul and the rest of the country. The great majority of its members and supporters are Pashtun and they have generally been more successful in maintaining their influence over Pashtun majority areas. The main difference between the Taliban and certain warlords that have also used the Pashtun hegemonic ambition in to recruit members is that the Taliban reject traditional tribal authority. Mullah Omar, not being part of the tribal nobility, has presented himself as a promoter of centralization under the banner of religious authority as opposed to the centrifugal tendency of the many tribes and clans of Afghanistan.

In conclusion, there are two facets to the Taliban credo: on one hand is their fundamentalist religious belief system whose main aim is to recreate the perceived purity of the Prophet and his followers and on the other is the objective of Pashtun control over governmental structures. This is why most ethnic minorities, despite being receptive to the religious message, are unwilling to trust the Taliban and will, most likely, remain loyal to the government in Kabul as long as it will oppose the re-instatement of the Taliban power. Paradoxically, their ideological cohesion and uncompromising political views greatly reduces their ability to disrupt the state, since they rely solely on the support of the Pashtun nation and have made enemies of the other ethnic groups. The organizational and ideological discipline that enabled them to take power at the beginning of the 90s now increases the influence of the government. However, the relative internal cohesion of the Taliban will make it very difficult for the government in Kabul to find an opportunity for sincere cooperation, at least as long as Mullah Omar remains the undisputed leader. While some divisions have been identified within their ranks, it is highly improbable that they will surface before or during the withdrawal, when the insurgency will suddenly have the opportunity to strike against a poorly motivated army with some chances of success.

Conclusion

If we take into account the main political indicators, it would seem that the current Afghan government will have a greater chance of surviving the withdrawal of its foreign supporters than the former. This is due to the reduced military effectiveness and the relatively smaller financial support received by the insurgency, the greater popular support the government receives from the population, especially the northern regions, and the greater compatibility the democratic system of governance has with the Afghan socio-cultural ecosystem.

Even so, the challenges facing the current and future governments of Afghanistan are enormous. During the inter-regnum period between 1992 and 2001, the multitude of factions fighting for control of country have contributed to the destruction of the Afghan economy, of the state institutions, of the rule of law and of millions of lives. Disunity, fear and chaos are the main characteristics of the national political environment today, as the Coalition forces, the most important element of cohesion, are preparing to withdraw. The inefficient security forces that must replace the ISAF troops do not seem, as of this point, well prepared for the task at hand, despite vast investments being made in their training and equipment. Social solidarity can hardly exist without some sense of a collective identity that can bind a group of individuals together, despite class, ethnic and religious differences. The challenges of the new government are in fact an accumulation of all past efforts; the Afghan state must be reformed from top to bottom and it will need more time than the 12 years the Coalition forces have resided within the country's borders. The principles of democracy have, until now, produced modest

effects for the Afghan people, the reason most likely being their difficult application in such a vast country with such little infrastructure and little respect for the rule of law. It is still to be seen if reaching a point of stability within the next few years is achievable.

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