

Afghanistan in 2014:

*Prospects for Security and
the Political Transition*

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Abstract

The article examines the key transitions Afghanistan will experience in 2014, namely security and political transitions. In the scope of the changes in security structures, the paper underlines that NATO withdrawal generates concerns and fears among the local Afghan people about the return of the destructive instability, previously kept under control by NATO forces. Even those who are uncomfortable about the presence of foreign troops in their country are ambivalent about seeing the troops depart, fearing a return to civil war. The international community's plans for meeting Afghanistan's security needs in the post-2014 period focus only on building a larger army and police force; however the insurgent groups are still strong enough to challenge the central authority, and the central government might face a legitimacy crisis in the absence of an international presence, and as such the worries of the Afghan people hold true. On the political side, as the paper suggests, there is a concern about whether Hamid Karzai will actually leave office in 2014 and if he does, whether the election process will provide enough legitimacy for a new leader to govern effectively. This is because the history of Afghanistan suggests that the government in Kabul needs a stronger style of leadership and a more competent administrative structure than the one currently in place.

The article concludes by arguing that it is unfortunate that these two critical changes will occur in the same year, as each on its own generates uncertainties that will challenge the stability of the Afghan state. Together they create a risk so great that the government - at least in its current form- may not be able survive.

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2014 will see two major transitions in Afghanistan. The first and most widely discussed is the transfer of all security responsibility to the Afghan state, when the international military forces end their combat role and withdraw. The second is the presidential election, now scheduled for April, which will determine a replacement for President Hamid Karzai. Under the terms of the Afghan constitution, he cannot seek a third term. It is unfortunate that both these critical changes will occur in the same year, because each on its own creates uncertainties that will challenge the stability of the current Afghan state. Together, they create a risk so great that the government—at least in its current form—may not be able survive. On the security side, many Afghans fear a return of the destructive decade of isolation and civil war that was ended by the American intervention in 2001. On the political side, there is a concern about whether Karzai will actually leave office in 2014, and if he does, whether the election process will provide enough legitimacy for a new leader to govern effectively.

The security question is easier to address because Afghanistan has experienced three very similar transitions in the wake of previous withdrawals by foreign armies—by the British in 1842 and 1880, and by the Soviets in 1989. While a possible civil war or the break-up of the country cannot be ruled out, these earlier military transitions proved that stability could be maintained when the right mixture of

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specific internal and external conditions prevailed, even when governments faced violent opposition. The domestic political transition of supreme executive power through an election, by contrast, has no historical parallel. No Afghan ruler has ever ceded power voluntarily or departed as part of a peaceful process. Even worse, every Afghan ruler since 1901 (thirteen in all) has either been killed or driven from office and into exile by military force. If the 2014 election happens, and produces a new leader who can hold the country together, it will be very positive milestone.

Security in Transition

The Taliban insurgency against the Afghan government has been ongoing for many years. Despite the existence of a large government army and police force, some international observers as well as Afghans have predicted that the Taliban will immediately sweep into Kabul and take power when American and NATO forces withdraw. This is certainly the impression that the Taliban would like to give, if only to hold together their disparate factions. However, the same belief was widely held in

the winter of 1989 when the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan, and ultimately the political dynamics worked out quite differently. At that time, Pakistan convinced U.S. policy-makers to avoid engaging in serious negotiations with the Soviet Union on a peaceful transfer of power to an acceptable coalition government. It was taken as a given that the faction-ridden Kabul regime led by Najibullah could not possibly survive in the absence of Soviet troops and air support. Why negotiate when the Pakistani based *mujahideen* insurgents would surely take power within months of the Soviet pullout? However, when the *mujahideen* attempted to bring about this change by mounting a conventional military assault on the eastern city of Jalalabad in March, government troops won the battle decisively, and these optimistic expectations wilted. Far from bringing Najibullah's government down, the failed attack buoyed the confidence of his supporters and consolidated his regime. Quite the opposite: the number of *mujahideen* casualties was so high that local insurgent commanders ignored demands by their political leadership in Pakistan to organize new conventional attacks on regime defenses. Although the *mujahideen* insurgents expanded their control in the countryside, they never again seriously threatened Afghanistan's major cities. Indeed, a large number of insurgent leaders began to make their own settlements with the regime, often in return for economic aid and

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weapons, which the regime was still receiving in bulk from the Soviet Union. Najibullah continued to rule over Afghanistan until April 1992, falling only after the flow of military and economic aid that was bedrock of his political stability ceased, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

The security situation today bears strong resemblance to that of 1989. Pakistan and the Taliban both appear to be convinced that the current faction-ridden Kabul government cannot survive an American and NATO withdrawal. They see no need to negotiate a political settlement if control of Afghanistan can be won on the battlefield after international troops depart. As demonstrated above, however, this assumption completely ignores the lesson of 1989, which revealed the capacity of a Kabul government to survive as long as it continued to receive military and economic aid from an international patron. This was true not only for Najibullah's regime (which was far more unpopular than the current Afghan government), but for the British-backed Afghan governments of the 19th century. Foreign boots on the ground have always proved less decisive (and even counterproductive) than inflows of foreign

aid that governments in Kabul could use to reinforce their power against poorly resourced insurgents. In addition, while insurgencies have been effective at getting foreign troops to leave Afghanistan by wearing out the patience of the governments that sent them, their leaders have found it much more difficult oust existing governments after they left. There were two main reasons for this. First, insurgents who effectively mobilized local factions in support of fighting against outsiders began to disintegrate in the absence of that common enemy. Second, successes in irregular warfare did not lay the necessary basis for the conventional military capacity needed to topple a government. Similarly, few Afghan insurgent faction leaders proved able to transform themselves into legitimate contenders for national leadership, making it hard to establish a new government.

Exceptions to this pattern (which Pakistan and the Taliban appear to assume is the norm) appeared only when Afghan rulers could not engage the support of powerful international patrons. The Taliban's 1995 seizure of Kabul for Mullah Omar was a replay of Habibullah Kalakani's 1929 ouster of the reforming King Amanullah. Both Omar and Habibullah successfully led reactionary factions against weak national governments that lacked access to the international resources and a powerful foreign patron. While the British had earlier undermined Amanullah's

government by denying it money and weapons, their refusal even to recognize Kalakani's government led to his downfall after only nine months. He was replaced by Nadir Shah, who did receive British backing, and founded a dynasty that would rule a peaceful Afghanistan for the next fifty years. Mullah Omar found the absence of international diplomatic recognition and low volumes of economic aid to be no bar to beating his weaker civil war rivals, but he was undone when in the wake of 9/11 attacks on the United States, these very same factions obtained American military and economic support. In less than ten weeks they drove the Taliban from power and hammered out an agreement in Bonn, Germany to make Hamid Karzai the leader of Afghanistan. The Karzai administration was the beneficiary of both military and economic aid far higher than what the domestic economy could generate.

History suggests that the Taliban's expectations of taking Kabul by force and returning to rule over Afghanistan are unlikely to be realized as long as the international community chooses to support the existing Afghan government through weapons and economic aid. And while the Soviets withdrew their entire military force, including advisers and air support for Afghan troops, American plans for a draw down appear less drastic. Ongoing negotiations between the Afghan government and the United States appear likely to produce an agreement that will leave some inter-

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national forces in place. This would allow the continuation of logistical support and training of Afghan government troops. Even a residual international force would make it very difficult for the Taliban to mount an effective conventional attack on the Afghan state—particularly if the U.S. chose to employ air power against it.

None of this precludes the possibility of a collapse of the central government due to its own internal weaknesses or because the Karzai government attempts to broker an unacceptable peace deal with the Taliban that alienates the non-Pashtun parts of the country. Should a civil war break out in the wake of any such collapse, however, the Taliban's success against other regional militias - as they enjoyed in the 1990s - is unlikely to be repeated. During the 1990s, Pakistani support alone was sufficient to enable the Taliban defeat their rivals, but in any new war the odds would change. The former Northern Alliance factions would find it much easier to gain international support that would dwarf what

Pakistan could offer. Moreover, Afghan history has displayed a striking pattern of deal-making in civil war situations. Regional or ethnic factions prefer to seek political settlements with one another rather than engage in prolonged fighting. For this stability scenario to be feasible, however, historical experience also suggests that the government in Kabul needs a stronger style of leadership and a more competent administrative structure than the one currently in place. It is not clear that process of electoral politics is sufficiently well equipped to manage this transition.

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Politics at Play

If insurgent groups have historically been unable to displace established Kabul governments, it is also true that no Afghan ruler brought to power by a foreign army has ever succeeded in keeping his job once that force withdrew. However, such leaders only rarely fell victim to their domestic opponents; instead they were replaced by their frustrated foreign sponsors once they lost confidence in their nominee's ability to maintain stability. On the other hand, those Afghan leaders put into power by withdrawing foreign armies succeeded admirably in consolidating power.

They became some of Afghanistan's most effective and respected leaders, while their predecessors were caricatured as traitors or foreign puppets. In one sense this is a paradox, since both sets of rulers obtained their positions through agreements made with the same foreign governments that had invaded Afghanistan. In another sense, it was not paradoxical at all: foreign forces entering Afghanistan had one set of expectations for the leaders they wished to support, while foreign forces leaving Afghanistan had a decidedly different set of expectations, and made their decisions accordingly. In essence they preferred weak personalities who would not interfere when they entered Afghanistan, and preferred strong personalities who could act on their own when they left.

The classic case of a failed ruler imposed on Afghanistan by outsiders was Shah Shuja, who the British restored to the throne during the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42) by ousting his rival, Amir Dost Muhammad. While Shuja was accepted as a legitimate king, his autocratic and erratic style of administration soon alienated both his British backers and the Afghan people. After surviving the destruction of the British Kabul garrison in the winter of 1842, Shuja was assassinated when he left the safety of his heavily fortified palace, and the British agreed to restore Dost Mohammad to the throne. He reigned for the next twenty years—eventually signing a treaty with the British

that brought him arms and money—and unified all of Afghanistan under his rule before dying peacefully. This pattern was repeated in 1880 during the Second Anglo-Afghan War when the British dumped the ruler they had first appointed, and replaced him with Amir Abdur Rahman. Later known as the “Iron Amir,” Abdur Rahman used British arms and subsidies to create the strongest government the Afghans had ever experienced by his death in 1901. The Soviet Union employed the same strategy a century later. After first installing the feckless Babrak Karmal as ruler when they invaded Afghanistan in 1979, they dumped him for the stronger Najibullah after Mikhail Gorbachev began negotiations to withdraw Soviet troops in 1985. As noted earlier, Najibullah successfully maintained himself in power after Soviet troops departed and his regime collapsed only in 1992, when the dissolution of the Soviet Union ended his supply of money, food and weapons.

Although Hamid Karzai initially proved a far more popular choice than his predecessors—and one who won domestic approval through a series of consultative assemblies and elections—he has displayed characteristics similar to other structurally weak Afghan rulers who came to power with the aid of foreign forces. On a personal level, his leadership is indecisive and he has avoided making hard decisions unless forced by necessity. He has been easily influenced by those around him and responded

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poorly to criticism, dismissing ministers who appeared too independent. While the constitution gave him strong executive powers, he refused to take steps to curb the massive corruption and mismanagement that was undermining the Afghan state and its legitimacy. His genuinely popular victory in the first Afghan presidential election of 2004 was overshadowed by the massive fraud that accompanied his reelection in 2009. Because his government was protected by international forces, Karzai saw little need to compromise politically, share authority or face unpleasant realities even when it would have been in his own best interests in the long term. Moreover, he had a habit of burnishing his nationalist credentials by periodically attacking the very alliance that protected his government. This only irritated his international backers without improving his reputation among the Afghan people.

Whatever his weaknesses, however, President Karzai's ability to keep his government intact for ten years has been no mean feat. But he has done so in a political environment where foreign aid was unlimited and international forces protected his government from insurgents. Had this continued there is little reason to believe that he could not have ruled indefinitely, or used the security shield to name a successor of his own choice without having to reform the structure of his government. However, after Karzai's flawed reelection to the presidency in 2009, the willingness of his government's international backers to maintain this open-ended military and financial commitment waned. While no one in the international community wanted to see the Taliban return, the option of continued unlimited assistance for Afghanistan grew increasingly difficult to sell to domestic electorates in the European Union, Canada and the United States, prompting a 2014 deadline for the withdrawal of combat troops. While this plan was not unwelcome to the many Afghans who had grown increasingly unhappy about the presence of foreign forces in their country, even they were ambivalent about seeing the troops depart, fearing a return to civil war.

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dressed half of the security situation, the defects of which the Taliban have long exploited. In any event, few Afghans (friends or foes) believe Karzai is the kind of leader who can manage the risks of this new transition stage successfully. While the British and the Soviets did not hesitate to sack one leader and install another better prepared to run Afghanistan on his own, the democratic system put in place by the international community now appears to forestall that option. But not entirely: the 2004 Constitution limits an Afghan president to two terms and Karzai's second will expire in 2014, coinciding with the transfer of security to the Afghan government from international forces. Afghans are therefore asking themselves if the United States and its allies will encourage the use of this democratic avenue to press for a change in leadership of the Kabul government to coincide with their troop withdrawals. Karzai himself has many times proclaimed that he will respect the constitution and will not seek an ex-

ension of his term. Still, because no Afghan ruler has ever relinquished power voluntarily, Kabul remains rife with speculation that Karzai intends to stay on regardless of the constitutional prohibition. Even if he fully intends to step down, he will undoubtedly come under pressure from his allies to stay on "for the good of the country" since they benefit so much from the current system. This option may be even more appealing if Karzai comes to believe a political rival may succeed him. Because the Afghan constitution has created such a highly centralized government with a presidency (who resembles a monarch more than a public servant) any change of leadership promises to destroy the fragile structure of political alliances and patronage Karzai has built up over the past decade. And yet if Afghanistan is to survive as a unified and stable state, it desperately needs a strong leader who recognizes the necessity of change and has the capacity to produce it. Such a leader must also be perceived as legitimate leader in the eyes of the Afghan people, and able to secure the confidence of the international community, whose willingness to finance the Afghan state underpins its stability—a difficult combination to achieve in the best of circumstances.

For this reason, the upcoming presidential elections present both promise and peril. If Karzai attempts to annul them by ignoring the constitution and holding a *loya jirga* to confirm him in a third term, he would

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lose the international support that he needs to maintain his regime and the legitimacy of such an action (whatever its rationale) is unlikely to be accepted domestically. But even if the election proceeds, any winner who cannot meet the dual criteria of domestic and international legitimacy will find his ability to govern fatally compromised. This presents a dilemma for all the stakeholders, Afghan and international alike. Those potential candidates (mostly technocrats) who are held in high esteem by the international community, but have weak or non-existent domestic political support, may find it difficult to achieve an electoral mandate. Those potential candidates (mostly old *mujahideen* faction leaders) who have strong, though often narrow, domestic political support have past histories of violence, perceived ethnic biases or reactionary political perspectives that would make them unacceptable to the nations paying the government's bills. A third electoral possibility—of Karzai anointing a successor in a backroom deal and rigging the balloting to confirm him—might create an even worse situation, by producing a leader whose government would lack credibility in the

eyes of both Afghans and foreigners. Thus, rather than focus on the electoral process itself, greater attention should be paid to the type of leader it is likely to produce, and the consequences of that choice.