

Afghanistan's Borderlands

*and the Politics of Center-periphery
Relations Before and After 2014:
A Case for Cautious Optimism*

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Abstract

This article explores the impact of Afghanistan's borderlands on the politics of center-periphery relations in Afghanistan during the security transition in 2014. The article discusses the developments in Afghanistan's borderland regions by examining the characteristics of its border areas with Pakistan and Iran, as well as with the Central Asian states and China. The article argues that there are grounds for cautious optimism concerning the capacity of Afghanistan's central government to strengthen its political authority over these areas in the aftermath of the security transition in 2014, if Afghanistan's borderlands are more closely integrated into the post-2001 process of state-building, and if Afghanistan's borders with all of its neighbors are adequately secured.

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Afghanistan is located at the heart of Asia, forming the critical crossroads between the North and the South as well as the East and the West of Asia.¹ This feature shapes not only the regional politics around the country, but also its domestic politics too. Afghanistan's regions, which are closely linked to the neighboring regions, participate in the political processes at Afghanistan's political center in Kabul very actively. In this respect, Afghanistan's borderland regions play a crucial role in the politics of its center-periphery relations. In these borderland regions, domestic and external forces shape not only Afghanistan's domestic politics of center-periphery relations, but also its relations with neighboring countries.²

This article seeks to explore the dynamics of the center-periphery politics in Afghanistan by focusing on the critical role of Afghanistan's borderlands in the center-periphery relations during the process of the security transition in 2014. The article examines the characteristics of Afghanistan's borderlands in terms of their socio-economic, political, and security dynamics. It also analyzes the roles of these borderlands in terms of their impact on Afghanistan's relations with its neighbors. Finally, the article

1 Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, "Central Asia and Afghanistan: Insulation on the Silk Road, Between Eurasia and the Heart of Asia", PRIO Papers on Afghanistan in a Neighbourhood Perspective, No. 3, Oslo: PRIO, 2012, pp. 6-21.

2 Steven Parham, Controlling Borderlands? New Perspectives on State Peripheries in Southern Central Asia and Northern Afghanistan, Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2010.

discusses the role of the political elite in Kabul in enhancing political integration before and after the security transition in 2014.

The main argument of this article is as follows: Afghanistan's central government could extend its political authority over the borderlands after the 2014 security transition by integrating the borderlands into the ongoing process of state-building, and containing the centrifugal influences of the neighboring states, especially Pakistan and Iran. The article maintains a cautious optimism concerning the capacity of the well-educated technocratic elites, many of whom were educated in the U.S. and Europe, to attract the loyalty of the borderlands to the political center in Kabul.

The article is structured as follows: it starts with an analysis of the historical background against which Afghanistan's center-periphery relations have developed over the centuries, leading up to 2001. Next, the paper will focus on Afghanistan's process of state-building and Kabul's approach to the development of center-periphery relations between 2001 and 2013. In this section, the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) will also be analyzed as the key element of Afghanistan's state-building process. Then, the paper will focus on the characteristics of the borderlands and the capacity of the central government in Kabul to project its political power and influence in these areas. In the penultimate

section, the article discusses the challenges facing the central authorities in Kabul in ensuring security and stability in the borderlands in the aftermath of the security transition in 2014. The article ends with the conclusions.

The Historical Background

Although Afghanistan has a long history as a viable political unit, it has never had a highly centralized government. Afghanistan's regions have enjoyed significant levels of autonomy, especially in socio-cultural matters.³ This is partly related to the fact that Afghanistan's population has been largely rural and tribal, and partly due to the failure of the central governments to penetrate into the regional and tribal life through integrative processes and modernizing reforms. In addition to the domestic dynamics of Afghanistan, the international rivalries in its neighborhood have not prevented the development of a suitable environment for the creation of a strong centralized government in Afghanistan.⁴

In fact, Afghanistan's center-periphery relations have developed over centuries, since the formation of tribal communities in Afghanistan and the settlement of various tribal communities from the neighboring regions around Afghanistan. Until the nine-

teenth century, the regional autonomy enjoyed by these tribal communities was uncontested by the central authorities, as the loyalty of the tribal leaders was considered sufficient for maintaining the status quo in Afghanistan.⁵

Since mid-nineteenth century, Afghanistan has witnessed several internationally - backed attempts at increasing the centralization of the political power at the expense of regional autonomy. The nineteenth century saw two such attempts at centralizing the central-periphery relations. Both of these attempts were supported by the British Empire, seeking to prevent the advances of the Russian Empire into the South Asia, out of defensive concerns. It was hoped that the British-backed central authorities in Afghanistan could prevent the relatively weak Afghan regions from collaborating with the Tsarist Russia. This rivalry is also known as the "Great Game".⁶

Nevertheless, these British-backed attempts at centralizing political power in Afghanistan were largely unsuccessful, due to strong resistance from local tribal leaders. Eventually, these attempts unexpectedly strengthened and united the Afghan tribal leaders against the British-backed centralizing Afghan rulers. Eventually, Af-

³ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

⁴ Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban*, New York: Da Capo Press, 2002.

⁵ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

⁶ Edward Ingram, "Great Britain's Great Game: An Introduction," *The International History Review*, Vol.2, No. 2, 1980, pp. 160-171.

ghanistan started to experience a considerable degree of stability in its center-periphery relations following the British-Russian agreement on ending the Great Game in 1907. Accordingly, Moscow accepted Afghanistan within the British zone of influence, and London stopped supporting the attempts at centralizing the political power at the hands by friendly political actors in Kabul.⁷

In the 20th century, the central authorities in Kabul have sought to develop more effective ways of modernizing the country, by trying to avoid backlashes from the regions in the aftermath of the Great Game. However, they have not come across any magical solution. Afghanistan's King Amanullah Khan sought to modernize the country without directly challenging the autonomy of the peripheral regions and tribal communities during his rule between 1919 and 1929. His modernization strategy was aimed at creating modern institutions and culture in Kabul, and spreading that culture to the rest of the country, by making them attractive to the traditional local communities in Afghanistan's peripheral regions. However, he faced fierce resistance from regional tribal leaders.⁸ During the inter-war years as well as the early years of the Cold War, Afghanistan was not a pop-

7 Evgeny Sergeev, *The Great Game, 1856–1907: Russo-British Relations in Central and East Asia*, Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.

8 Michael Barry, *A History of Modern Afghanistan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

During the inter-war years as well as the early years of the Cold War, Afghanistan was not a popular theatre for Great Power rivalries.

ular theatre for Great Power rivalries. Nevertheless, the Soviet expansionism during the 1970s and its Cold War rivalry with the United States undermined the political stability in Kabul, considerably reducing the remaining hopes for Afghan modernization.⁹

In fact, the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan came to power in Kabul following a coup d'état in 1978. The invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Red Army in 1979 initiated a new centrifugal trend in Afghanistan's center-periphery relations. Not surprisingly, Afghanistan's peripheral regions and their tribal leaders were united in the fight against the Soviet-backed central authorities in Kabul. This civil war among the warring factions of Afghanistan ended when Moscow admitted defeat in 1989, when the Soviet occupation forces started to withdraw. In line with the waning Soviet influence to his rule, Mohammed Najibullah's power also came to an end in 1992.¹⁰

In the absence of any clear international support for any of the lead-

9 Barnett R. Rubin, *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

10 Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*, London: Frank Cass, 1995.

The non-Pashtun ethnic groups in Afghanistan, such as the Hazaras, the Tajiks, the Uzbeks and the Turkmens, lost their grand coalition in the mid-1990s when Tajikistan's civil war started to have a divisive impact on the Tajiks in Afghanistan.

ers, regional actors in Afghanistan sought to re-establish the parameters of the new order in the country. In fact, Burhaneddin Rabbani emerged as the leading Mujahedeen leader who managed to win the support of various regional communities, mainly in the northern and western parts of Afghanistan. He also took advantage of the fact that the Mujahedeen leaders of Gulbeddin Hikmetyar and Sibghatullah Mojaddedi had failed to gain the support of a clear majority of the Pashtuns (Afghanistan's largest ethnic community, located mainly in the southern parts of Afghanistan). That divide played into the hands of Burhaneddin Rabbani.¹¹

The non-Pashtun ethnic groups in Afghanistan, such as the Hazaras, the Tajiks, the Uzbeks and the Turkmens, lost their grand coalition in the mid-1990s when Tajikistan's civil war started to have a divisive impact on the Tajiks in Afghanistan. In the meantime, the Pashtuns started to unite around the Taliban, which was

¹¹ Sultan Akimbekov, "Conflict in Afghanistan: Conditions, Problems, and Prospects" in *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm?*, ed. Boris Rumer, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2002, p.75.

originally the political movement of the ultra-radical Islamic seminary school students. This movement was promoted by the Pakistani security services, initially among the Pashtuns, and gradually in the rest of Afghanistan. The founding leader of this ultra-radical group was Mohammad Umar, who replaced President Burhaneddin Rabbani by force in 1996.¹²

Afghanistan's center-periphery relations were radically changed when this Pakistani-backed Taliban movement had consolidated its position throughout Afghanistan, since the traditionally more influential northern local communities lost their power to the Pashtuns from the southern parts of Afghanistan, following the Taliban's capture of the central power in Kabul. In order to resist the expansion

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of the Taliban's power in the northern parts of Afghanistan, the Tajiks, the Uzbeks and the Turkmens established the "Northern Alliance", by gaining the external support of the Central Asian republics, Russia and Turkey.¹³

¹² Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan*, London: Pluto Press, 2001.

¹³ Roy Utman, *How We Missed the Story: Osama Bin Laden,*

The concerns of the “Northern Alliance” about the radicalization of the Taliban and the use of Afghanistan’s territory by international terrorist organizations for their terrorist activities inside and outside Afghanistan were also shared by the international community. One of these Afghanistan-based terrorist organizations, Al Qaida, threatened global security when its terrorists carried out horrendous attacks in the United States on September 11th 2001. This act alerted the international community to the nature of the Taliban regime and the need to rebuild the state with its center-periphery relations in Afghanistan.¹⁴

Process of State-Building and Kabul’s Approach to the Center-Periphery Relations between 2001 and 2013

The prevention of international terrorist groups and the Taliban from using the territory of Afghanistan formed the cornerstone of Afghanistan’s state-building strategy in the aftermath of 9/11 and the counter-terrorism operations of the U.S.-led coalition, which started shortly after 9/11.¹⁵ In a similar vein, Afghanistan’s center-periphery relations in the post-9/11 era have also been shaped by the attempts of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) at rebuilding

the Taliban and the Hijacking of Afghanistan, Washington D.C: USIP Press, 2008.

¹⁴ Rick Fawn, *From Ground Zero to the War in Afghanistan* in Mary Buckley and Rick Fawn, eds., *Global Responses to Terrorism: 9/11, Afghanistan and Beyond*, London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 11-24.

¹⁵ Stephen Biddle, “Ending the War in Afghanistan”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 5, 2013, pp. 49-58.

the state at the center in Kabul and expanding its authority to the peripheral areas through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs).

Initially, the priority of the international community in its state-building strategy in Afghanistan was the eradication of terrorists and the Taliban regime as their main sponsor. In this respect, the successful combat operations of the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom played a crucial role in preparing the ground for state-building process and the redefinition of Afghanistan’s center-periphery relations. In this context, the role of the ISAF was to assist the Afghan Interim Authority for ensuring the security of Kabul and its environs so that the international community could contribute to the Afghan state-building process in a secure environment.¹⁶

Gradually, the Afghan Interim Authority has succeeded in establishing the state structures of Afghanistan, training its personnel and supplying them with logistical support, thanks to the generous contributions of the international community. The election of Hamid Karzai as President of Afghanistan as well as the members of the Afghan Parliament enhanced the political legitimacy of the emerging political order in Afghanistan. The Afghan government and its ministries have created the institutional framework for the process of state-

¹⁶ Kenneth Katzman, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy”, *Congressional Research Service*, 17 August 2010.

building in Afghanistan. Among the central political institutions in Kabul, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) assumed a key role in cooperating with the ISAF and stabilizing the peripheral regions in Afghanistan.¹⁷

Although the ISAF was originally established as a United Nations operation, it became a NATO mission in 2003. It was only after 2006 that NATO took responsibility for the security of all territories of Afghanistan. While ISAF has used its own civilian and military capabilities in combating the insurgents, it has also skillfully deployed a disarmament strategy towards the moderate elements of Taliban units if and when they rejected violence as a means to their ends. In these occasions, ISAF has preferred to use strategies for rehabilitating and reintegrating them into the Afghan society. This strategy has been effective, particularly in the borderland regions.¹⁸

This state-building strategy of Afghanistan required the regions to follow instructions issued from Kabul. This strategy is necessitated by security needs, particularly in Afghanistan's peripheral regions. Unlike Kabul, these regions have been more vulnerable to the terrorist attacks of

¹⁷ Thomas Johnson, "Afghanistan's Post-Taliban Transitions: The State of the State-building after War," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 25, No. 1–2, March–June 2006, pp. 1–26.

¹⁸ "International Security Assistance Force", Available online at <http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/placemat.pdf> (accessed on 5 November 2013)

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the various groups based mainly in the southern parts of Afghanistan and along its border with Pakistan. While the Afghan government under President Hamid Karzai has been largely accommodating to all ethnic communities and tolerant towards local traditions, it has been quite slow in strengthening regional governments and ensuring their autonomy, for understandable reasons.¹⁹

Both the international community and the Afghan political center in Kabul have considered the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) to be the most effective instrument for restructuring the peripheries and strengthening regional governments and local communities in response to the needs of the Afghan people living in these areas. PRTs enabled international donors to channel aid to the areas where the need is greatest. These PRTs have cooperated with the regional governments, civil society organizations, and local people in the areas of health, education, gender mainstreaming,

¹⁹ Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, "Building A Viable State in Afghanistan: A Delicate Balance", Available online at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/WBI/Resources/Afghanistan-All-Articles-Oc09.pdf> (Accessed on 15 November 2013)

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agriculture, transportation, communications and business development. The PRTs have functioned from the regional military bases of ISAF.²⁰

The Afghan security transition in 2014 is a crucial milestone in realizing the objectives of the state-building process in Afghanistan. By transferring security responsibility to the ANSF, The ISAF and the PRTs will cease to exist after 2014. After the successful completion of security transition in 2014, the central and regional governments will provide the services formerly provided by the ISAF and its PRTs.²¹ This is a considerable challenge for the central and regional governments in Afghanistan on an individual basis, as well as for the smooth functioning of the center-periphery relations, particularly in the borderlands of Afghanistan following the completion of the Afghan security transition in 2014.

20 Candace Karp, "Securing Afghanistan: A Step towards Successful State Building?", *Security Challenges*, Vol.1., No.1, 2005, pp. 15-20.

21 *Ibid.*

Characteristics of the Borderlands in Afghanistan

Compared to the centrally-located regions, the borderlands of Afghanistan occupy a crucial role in Afghanistan's center-periphery relations, since these regions do not only respond to the developments at the center but also to the developments at the other side of the inter-state boundaries. The way in which these borderlands develop is likely to have a significant impact on the success of the Afghan security transition in 2014. Therefore, it is essential to analyze the characteristics of these borderlands in detail.

Afghanistan's borderlands are not uniform. They can be grouped into three regions: the borderland with Pakistan in the South Eastern and the Southern parts of Afghanistan; the borderland with Iran in the western part of Afghanistan; and finally the borderland with the Central Asian states of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan as well as China in the Northern and the North-Eastern parts of the country. These neighboring countries have close ties with these borderlands of Afghanistan either in the form of interactions between the co-ethnics located at the both sides of the borderline or in the form of cross-border movements of people, goods and services. Nevertheless the influences of the neighboring countries in Afghanistan through the borderland areas do not always contribute to the security and stability of the country.

This is particularly true of the destabilizing impacts of Pakistan and to a lesser extent Iran.²²

Afghanistan's borderlands with Pakistan include Nuristan, Kunar, Laghman, Nangarhar, Paktia, Khost, Paktika, Zabul, Kandahar and Helmand, which are located in the South Eastern and the Southern parts of Afghanistan, with its major cities of Jalalabad and Kandahar. These borderlands are inhabited mainly by the following ethnic groups: Pashtuns, Nuristani and Baluchistani people. These borderlands are characterized by high levels of insecurity due to their close ethnic and social ties to the Taliban bases located in the Waziristan region of Pakistan. The controversial relations of Pakistani security services with the insurgents in these borderlands make the security situation even worse. In addition to Al-Qaida, Taliban, Haqqani Network and Lashkar-e Tayyiba are the main terrorist networks based in these borderlands. These areas are located on the Southern Distribution Network linking Afghanistan and the transportation ports in Pakistan. Opium production is very high in the Helmand and Kandahar regions. In these regions the literacy rate is also significantly lower than Afghanistan's average.²³ Since

22 Smruti S. Pattanaik, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbourhood: In Search of a Stable Future*, New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA)/ Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), 2013.

23 "Strategic Geography" in Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman, eds., *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*, London: IISS, 2011, pp.1-XX.

Pakistan is the neighboring country to these borderlands, cross-border relations have been characterized by insecurity and drug trafficking. This is reflected in Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan, which suffers from a lack of mutual trust and difficulties in border management.²⁴ This makes the security situation very unstable.

Afghanistan's borderlands with Iran covers Nimruz, Farah and Herat, which are located in the western part of Afghanistan, with Herat as the major urban center. The population is composed mainly of the following ethnic groups: Aimaks, Tajiks and Pashtuns. These borderlands are generally stable with the exception of Herat, which has occasionally been targeted by the Taliban terrorists. Its transportation infrastructure is underdeveloped. The only parts of the Afghan Ring Road which are still waiting to be constructed are located in the northern parts of these borderlands. Farah is the main opium cultivation center in these borderlands. The literacy rate is almost same as Afghanistan's average.²⁵ Iran is the neighboring country to these borderlands. Although Iran has been occasionally accused by the Afghan authorities of supporting violence in urban areas such as Herat and Kabul, Afghanistan and Iran have achieved pragmatic cooperation over border management

24 Moeed Yusuf, *Decoding Pakistan's 'Strategic Shift' in Afghanistan*, Stockholm: SIPRI, 2013

25 "Strategic Geography" in Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman, eds., *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*, London: IISS, 2011, pp.1-XX.

Although Iran has been occasionally accused by the Afghan authorities of supporting violence in urban areas such as Herat and Kabul, Afghanistan and Iran have achieved pragmatic cooperation over border management issues as well as the fight against drug trafficking.

issues as well as the fight against drug trafficking. These pragmatic bilateral relations and Iran's role in cross-border trade and economies of these borderlands reinforce the expectation that Iran could potentially play a more constructive role in the future.²⁶

Afghanistan's borderlands with the Central Asian states of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan as well as China include Badghis, Faryab, Jawzjan, Balkh, Kunduz, Takhar and Badakhshan, which are located in the Northern and the North-Eastern parts of Afghanistan, with Mazar-e Sherif and Kunduz as major urban centers. The main ethnic groups of these borderlands include Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens and Kyrgyz people. Although these borderlands are the most stable of all Afghan regions, there have been terrorist attacks by the Taliban and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in Faryab, Balkh and Kunduz regions. These borderlands are

²⁶ Bruce Koepke, *Iran's Policy on Afghanistan: The Evolution of Strategic Pragmatism*, Stockholm: SIPRI, 2013.

located on the Northern Distribution Network linking Afghanistan and the transportation ports in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia and the Baltics. The main center of opium production in this region is Badakhshan. The literacy rate and the schooling levels in these borderlands are slightly higher than Afghanistan's average.²⁷ Since the Central Asian states of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan as well as China are the neighboring country to these borderlands, the levels of cooperation between Afghanistan and the neighboring countries are very satisfactory for Kabul. Afghanistan seems to be interested in expanding the scope of the existing cross-border cooperation with these states to include non-security issues, such as trade and energy.²⁸

Overall, Afghanistan's borderlands display diverse characteristics with few commonalities in terms of the sources and levels of security problems, characteristics and policies of the neighboring countries and socio-economic development levels. This diversity and the specific issues of center-periphery relations make the stabilization and development of these borderlands very important. Therefore, it is crucial for Kabul to integrate its borderlands more closely with its ongoing state-building pro-

²⁷ "Strategic Geography" in Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman, eds., *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*, London: IISS, 2011, pp. 1-XX.

²⁸ See Oktay F. Tanrisever, ed., *Afghanistan and Central Asia: NATO's Role in Regional Security since 9/11*, Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2013.

cess. In this context, it is also essential to discuss the key challenges for the center-periphery relations in the aftermath of the Afghan security transition in 2014.

Challenges for the Center-Periphery Relations in the Aftermath of the Afghan Security Transition in 2014

The Afghan security transition in 2014 is likely to pose significant challenges to the smooth functioning of the center-periphery relations after the ANSF assumes the main responsibility for the security of Afghanistan and the PRTs are transferred to the regional Afghan authorities. Besides, as demonstrated above, the security situation continues to pose a serious problem for the Afghan authorities, especially in the borderlands with Pakistan and to a lesser extent with Iran, despite the enhanced capabilities of ANSF.²⁹ Challenges for the center-periphery relations in the aftermath of the Afghan security transition in 2014 include: firstly, the need to integrate Afghanistan's borderlands into the post-2001 process of state-building more closely through a bottom-up strategy; secondly, the loyalty of regional administrators in the borderlands; thirdly, the financial sustainability of Afghanistan's central and regional administrations; fourth, the need to enhance the military capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF); and finally, the

²⁹ Ben Barry, "The ANSF and the Insurgency" in Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman, eds., *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*, London: IISS, 2011, pp.121-139.

The first major challenge for the center-periphery relations in post-2014 Afghanistan seems to be the need to integrate Afghanistan's borderlands into the central government's process of state-building in the post-2001 period more closely through a bottom-up strategy of political integration, rather than a top-down strategy.

management and security of Afghanistan's borders with all of its neighbors.

The first major challenge for the center-periphery relations in post-2014 Afghanistan seems to be the need to integrate Afghanistan's borderlands into the central government's process of state-building in the post-2001 period more closely through a bottom-up strategy of political integration, rather than a top-down strategy.³⁰ Although this is a very difficult and challenging task, Kabul as the political center could benefit from its successful implementation, as it will consolidate the post-2001 state-building process in the borderlands and in all the peripheral regions in a sustainable manner. In particular, the bottom-up strategy has the advantage of making the central and regional political

³⁰ M. Nazif Shahrani, *Afghanistan's Alternatives for Peace, Governance and Development: Transforming Subjects to Citizens & Rulers to Civil Servants*, Waterloo, Ontario: The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), 2009.

It could be very dangerous if the warlords or former Mujahedeen leaders took control of the regional staff and the capabilities of the ANSF in order to promote their own self-interests.

institutions created by the post-2001 state-building process more effective and responsive to the needs of local communities.³¹ To this purpose, Kabul needs to decentralize socio-political power—but not military power—and share the socio-economic and political power with the loyal political actors in the borderlands in order to accommodate moderate tribal leaders in the provinces without strengthening the position of the radical segments of Taliban.³²

The second most important challenge is the need to gain the loyalty of regional administrators in the borderlands. It is crucial to empower the bureaucrats and politicians, who are affiliated primarily with the Afghan government both in Kabul and the borderland regions. It could be very dangerous if the warlords or former Mujahedeen leaders took control of the regional staff and the capabilities of the ANSF in order to promote their own self-interests. An equally dangerous scenario relates to the possibility that the Afghan warlords and former

31 Lucy Morgan Edwards, "State-Building in Afghanistan: A Case Showing the Limits?", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 92 No. 880, December 2010, pp. 967-991.

32 Amin Tarzi, "Recalibrating the Afghan Reconciliation Program", *Prism*, 2011, Vol.1, No.1, pp.67-78.

Mujahedeen develop closer ties with the neighboring countries, above all Pakistan and Iran. This could considerably weaken the central power and create a risk of territorial fragmentation into fiefdoms and potentially independent smaller states.³³ Although this is a very unlikely scenario, it could definitely multiply the security risks for the entire region around Afghanistan. In this sense, the upcoming elections in Afghanistan will be decisive in redefining the composition of the central and regional elites in Afghanistan.³⁴

Until the Afghan government achieves its financial sustainability, it is likely to ask for external financial assistance from major donor countries.

The third important challenge is the financial sustainability of Afghanistan's central and regional administrations, which requires solid tax revenues for the state budget. Unfortunately, Afghanistan's ability to collect taxes is very limited due to the fact that its economy is not based on industrial or agricultural production, aside from the opium cultivation. Although the opium cultivation is a lucrative business for the criminal net-

33 Antonio Giustozzi, "War and Peace Economies of Afghanistan's Strongmen", *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2007, pp 75-89.

34 Kevin Sieff, "Ahead of Afghan Elections, Warlords and Bureaucrats Prepare Campaigns", *The Washington Post*, 6 October 2013

works, it does not constitute a reliable tax base for the Afghan government for its central and regional expenditures. Until the Afghan government achieves its financial sustainability, it is likely to ask for external financial assistance from major donor countries. However, the ongoing global financial crisis makes this even more unlikely, due to the need for financial resources for the economic recovery of the donor countries themselves.³⁵

The fourth challenge is the need to enhance the military capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in maintaining the strength of the political center vis-à-vis all regional rivals in the security dimension and in ensuring the security of the borderlands. It seems that the ANSF will continue to need more training and military equipment in order to cope with the security challenges in the Afghanistan's borderlands with Pakistan. Although NATO is expected to provide more training to ANSF as part of its planned follow-on mission in Afghanistan ("Resolute Support"), NATO does not seem to be prepared to equip the ANSF with such sophisticated weapons systems, due to the risk that they may be captured by the terrorists or warlords in future. This makes the challenge even more complex.³⁶

³⁵ Nekia Lane, *Economics of Self-Sustainability: The Future of Afghanistan's Economy*, Kabul: The Civil-Military Fusion Centre (CMFC), August 2013

³⁶ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Uncertain Role of the ANSF in Transition: Establishing Real World Criteria and Metrics*, Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies

Last but not least is the challenge of the management and security of Afghanistan's borders with all of its neighbors, particularly Pakistan and Iran. This is a very important challenge for Kabul, since it requires the cooperation of very reluctant neighbors. In this respect, Kabul could request the members of international community to encourage these "reluctant neighbors" to contribute to Afghanistan's security more constructively. Afghanistan's neighbors could even think about creating a regional cooperation organization, with the inclusion of major global powers such as the United States and the European Union after the successful realization of the Afghan security transition in 2014.³⁷

Conclusion

To conclude, the developments in the borderlands of Afghanistan are likely to play a decisive role in the politics of center-periphery relations in the aftermath of the Afghan security transition. Compared with the central regions, these Afghan borderlands could also have a greater impact on both Afghanistan's domestic politics in Kabul and also on Afghanistan's relations with neighboring countries.

Among Afghanistan's borderlands, the borderlands with Pakistan are likely to remain the most vulnerable

(CSIS), 2013.

³⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Securing, Stabilizing and Developing Pakistan's Border Area with Afghanistan*, Washington DC: GAO, 2009.

in terms of security. These borderlands have already been destabilized by Pakistan-based terrorist and insurgency groups. This trend seems unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. However, the process of democratization in Pakistan and the increasing influence of business elites could limit the destabilizing activities of the Pakistan-based groups.

Unlike the borderlands with Pakistan, the borderlands with Iran have a considerable potential to develop into stable zones of economic development in the foreseeable future if the ongoing dialogue between the United States and Iran yields tangible results for promoting pragmatic cooperation. Iran has its own self-interest in curtailing the growth of Taliban-type radical movements along its own borders.

Among the borderlands of Afghanistan, the borderlands with the Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as well as China have the most realistic prospects for becoming secure and stable zones of socio-economic development with opportunities for cross-border cooperation in the foreseeable future. In fact, trade between Afghanistan and the energy-rich Central Asian economies could also flourish in the near future too. This could contribute to the socio-economic development of not only these borderlands, but also the rest of Afghanistan.

All in all, Kabul as the political center of Afghanistan faces the challenge of accommodating its borderlands by strengthening its influence in these peripheral areas, as well as weakening the centripetal influences of the neighboring states, above all Pakistan and Iran, in Afghanistan's borderlands. Despite these challenges, there is a strong basis for a cautious optimism concerning the capacity of Afghanistan's new bureaucratic elites to attract the loyalty of the borderlands to the political center in Kabul.