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Cautious Optimism:

Comparing the Final Days of the Communist Regime in Afghanistan with America's Drawdown

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The approaching withdrawal of international forces by the end of 2014 officially concludes the current mission of the United States in Afghanistan under the International Security Assistance Forces mandate. The U.S. plans to transition to a smaller remain-behind force tasked with assisting the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) in maintaining a secure environment. What will happen beyond that date is still yet to be determined, but legions of groups and media pundits are warning of a Taliban return and/or a renewal of the chaos that gripped Afghanistan during the civil war (1992-1996) and Taliban (1996-2001) eras. Such predictions are based on experiences following the withdrawal of the Soviet Union and the United States so called "abandonment" of the country when the threat of communist expansion was eliminated.[1] Here I will take a short, historically based examination of the era of Soviet departure from Afghanistan during February of 1989. Thereafter, I will briefly compare the condition of the Afghan government and overall stability in 1991 and 1992 to what the United States will be leaving behind when current operations cease on December 31, 2014. Based on core variables with a specific historical perspective of military, political, and economic development, I argue that GIROA is considerably better equipped today than the Afghan government was in 1992 to maintain central state authority.

GIROA is functioning and developing in an uneven but consistent manner. A successful polity is certainly not pre-ordained, but money and support committed by the international community provides Kabul latitude to expand influence and grow in three key areas. First, the professionalism of the security forces will develop. Consequently, the insurgency continues to face stronger, better-equipped, centrally loyal armed forces, which will gain considerable legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people as western forces withdraw. Second, Kabul's government is present in most of the 364

MES Notes

Upcoming Afghanistan Educational Symposium

On 15 July 2013 Middle East Studies at the Marine Corps University and Defense Intelligence Agency's Center for Language, Regional Expertise and Culture will co-host a one-day educational symposium "Afghanistan: Security, Politics, and Transition," at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling in Washington D.C.

More information is forthcoming and will be available at the MES website at <https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/SitePages/Middle%20East%20Studies.aspx>. POC for the event is Mr. Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu.

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districts in the country and Kabul has significant influence in the 34 provincial capitals. The current political system, although experiencing numerous challenges, is comparatively pluralistic and relatively absorbing of the various competing interests of the diverse nation. Third, the international community led by the United States is committed to providing needed funds while helping Kabul achieve increasing degrees of economic independence. From the perspective of military strength, political stability, and economic growth, conditions in Kabul today compared to the situation in 1992 when President Najibullah turned over the country to a United Nations led interim government are considerably more stable. For these reasons, despite the countless mistakes, a violent resistance and billions of wasted dollars, the established governmental system in Afghanistan will endure the current hardships and unevenly develop into a stable regional actor.

Background

The Geneva Accords, signed on April 14, 1988 paved the way for the Soviet departure from Afghanistan and a UN led process to a transitional government led by the Islamic resistance (Mujahedin) parties based in Pakistan. Soviet forces began departing in May of 1988 and on February 15, 1989; the final Soviet soldier left Afghan soil. Remaining was a military of questionable loyalty, thousands of militias fighting an established enemy with a legitimate cause, an unresolved divided and contested political climate, dwindling funds, and an uninterested international environment more focused on a crumbling Soviet Union than mitigating perceived local disputes in Afghanistan. Afghan President Najibullah continued to receive support from the Soviet Union as Pakistan and the U.S. colluded to create a unified polity from the seven Pakistan-based resistance groups to the communists. The Soviet aid enabled a functioning government that held out extensively longer than anyone predicted. The end of 1991 however, witnessed the enactment of a mutually agreed suspension of funds both from the Soviets to the Najibullah regime and from the United States to the resistance parties via the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence. Without economic incentives to purchase loyalty amongst the numerous armed groups, Kabul fell within months. In April of 1992 President Najibullah officially turned the country over to a UN sponsored interim government. He was never able to leave the country, trapped in the UN compound in Kabul. The competing factions could not come to agreement and the UN interim government crumbled nearly as quickly as it was created. So was the political environment prior to the civil war of 1992-1996.

Military Comparison

In early February of 1989 the Soviet Union left behind a large and relatively competent military capable of securing population centers and key lines of communication. Despite predictions of a quick disintegration of the security forces and the communist government, Najibullah's regime endured and defeated a major insurgent offensive in Jalalabad during March of 1989. The \$3-4 billion annual Soviet aid package proved sufficient enough to hold the military together. By 1990 however, foreign funding decreased by 40 percent and at the end of 1991, ceased completely.[2] Consequently the outcome of the 1991 Battle of Khost was different. Much of the army deserted and the Mujahedin scored a major battlefield victory. With the dwindling of funds, the loyalty of thousands of soldiers and officers disappeared, the majority of whom ultimately were absorbed into various ethnic groups competing around the country. With no centralized and paid security apparatus, lawlessness amongst the competing ethnic groups broke out, and the rural areas fell under the control of local warlords.

In comparison to the disappearance of funds in 1991, the current environment looks considerably different. The Security Partnership Agreement signed in May of 2012 commits the United States to Afghan stability and development well into the future. The international community has committed to funding the 352,000 members of the Afghan security forces at \$6 billion annually until 2018. The current Afghan National Army (ANA) consists of five corps located strategically around the country. These forces will continue to be funded, equipped and advised by the international community led by the United States. The Afghan army's performance has been admirable fighting against the

insurgency. Despite concerns regarding ethnic factionalism, the ANA has increasing representation at the highest levels from all ethnic groups. With the required funds provided and the strengthening security forces receiving sufficient arms, the Taliban face an extended battle against a professionalizing force scheduled to take the lead in all military operations throughout the country during the spring of 2013.[3]

Political Comparison

The political situation in Kabul in 1991/2 is unrecognizable compared to today. When President Najibullah announced his resignation from power in March of 1992, the UN scrambled to consolidate the various resistance parties into an organized system that could rule peacefully. The Peshawar Accords signed April 26 were bound to fail as the two primary Mujahedin parties of Jamiat-e Islami and Hizb-e Islami of Gulbudin Hekmatyar (HIG) never fully agreed on the power sharing agreement. By May, HIG forces were rocketing Kabul, and before the end of the summer of 1992, over 1800 civilians had been killed in the lawlessness that engulfed Kabul.[4] The communist government had initially been so exclusive and brutal that many tribes and potential members of the government were driven to the insurgency. Najibullah and the communists were incredibly unpopular in the countryside. Thus, the resistance enjoyed wide-spread support and legitimacy.

In contrast to the exclusive and brutal nature of the communist regime, the current Afghan political system enjoys substantially more participation. Twenty-one political parties are represented in the lower house of parliament, none of which are allowed to identify themselves based on ethnicity.[5] Many of the former “warlords” of the Mujahedin era currently work within the government in either elected or appointed positions. Although struggling and still a minority, civil-society groups made up of intellectuals and businessmen are gaining influence and a voice in politics. The Taliban maintain limited support and legitimacy and attract minimal sympathy for their resistance to the government.[6]

Economic Comparison

As the Soviet Union declined and eventually crumbled, international aid to the Afghan state ceased. The limited amount of revenue the government collected from customs and indirect taxes was quickly consumed by rampant corruption among the leadership ensuring meager sums trickled down to the Afghan people. In addition to fund shortages, basic commodities such as food and fuel were increasingly scarce, further limiting the ability of the central government to project any influence and the military to conduct operations. “In the end, the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul was not defeated in the field, rather it disintegrated when it became clear it was running out of resources.”[7]

The economic situation in Kabul today is greatly improved, but not yet fully stable. Ninety-five percent of the nations GDP is sourced from foreign aid, and GIIoA predicts that \$10 billion in annual aid will be required until 2025.[8] During the Tokyo Conference of July 2012, international economic support was promised through 2017. To transfer the aid-dependent economy to a licit independent one, the international community is placing high priority on curbing corruption and integrating Afghanistan into the regional economy with development and investment in the transportation, telecommunications and mining sectors holding priority. International donor aid combined with a growing economy, and development in key sectors at a minimum will provide sufficient revenue to keep the government working, the security forces loyal, and the bureaucracy intact.

Conclusion

Throughout history, creation of modern nation-states is a complex, uneven, and with few exceptions a violent undertaking. Afghanistan’s development will be no different. One thing for certain is Afghanistan will progress in its own way and in line with the traditional norms of acceptable behavior. These norms cannot be injected from outside social engineers, but must be organically accepted. Although each nation develops in its own way, certain structural aspects promote future

stability. A strong, centrally-loyal military, a broadly legitimate political system, and a source of revenue to provide financial opportunities all exist in Afghanistan and with the assistance of the international community, will strengthen vis-à-vis potentially spoiling actors.

This piece is admittedly limited and perhaps even a bit simplistic in scope and predictions. In no way does it intend to mask the incredible challenges yet to be confronted by the Afghan state, but aims to provide a sobering perspective on the doomsday scenarios being widely predicted. The underpinnings of a nation-state are established in Afghanistan. Political growth and development in Kabul and a strengthening military, in the context of an economically committed international community combine to provide the foundations for a reliable nation-state in a historically insecure region.

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Notes:

[1] Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 260-270. Although it can be debated, the term “abandoned” assumes that the United States provided aid to the Mujahedeen via the Pakistani government in order to assist the Afghan nation in the first place. In fact, U.S. policy was limited and clear. The U.S. aided and armed rebels via Pakistan in order to stop the spread of communism into Afghanistan. The Declaration of International Guarantees contained in the Geneva Accords clearly stipulates that the U.S. and the Soviet Union “Undertake to invariably refrain from any form of interference and intervention in the internal affairs of the Republic of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.” Such a stipulation was believed necessary to guarantee the Soviet Union would cut off arming and aid to the Najibullah government.

[2] Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan: 1978-1992* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 274.

[3] Kenneth Katzman, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security and U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service Report for Congress RL30588, April 9, 2013, 26-34.

[4] Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 272.

[5] Kenneth Katzman, “Afghanistan: Politics, Elections, and Government Performance,” Congressional Research Service Report for Congress RS21922, November 30, 2012, 5.

[6] Mohammad Osman Tariq et al., *Afghanistan in 2011: A Survey of the Afghan People* (The Asia Foundation, 2011), 48-52.

[7] Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan*, 237.

[8] Katzman, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security and U.S. Policy,” 58.