

Push and Pull: How to Consolidate an Afghan State?

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The ongoing project to reconstruct Afghanistan after the US invasion that toppled the Taliban in October 2001 is only the most recent attempt in a long history of Afghan state-building attempts defined by a weak center's fight to impose itself on an unruly periphery.¹ An iterative process of both state expansion and retraction has characterized this



struggle as the center attempts to accumulate sources of capital and the means of coercion to rule at the expense of the rest. Traditional theories of Western state formation and more recent second-generation theories offer useful lenses to analyze the Afghan experience, though none capture its nuances completely. An examination of previous episodes since the 18th century illustrates both challenges and opportunities for influencing future Afghan state development, specifically the role of subnational actors as both spoilers and partners in the state-building process.

Key findings of this study include:

- *Extreme violence and coercion have been necessary ingredients for state consolidation across space and time.* The post-9/11 Afghan experience is not an aberration.
- *The Afghan state is not sustainable in its current form.* Reliance on external rents instead of internal revenue extraction historically handicapped Afghan rulers. This situation persists today, magnified by the scale of bureaucracy and popular expectations created during reconstruction.
- *Informal institutions, indirect rule, and armed subnational actors historically served as the bedrock of the Afghan state.* The push to rapidly create a liberal, constitutional democracy sidelined these traditional power structures. Deliberate accommodation of such structures is necessary to fill the gaps in formal state capacity to provide security and basic services.

¹ Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1.

▪ *The United States must shift from a state-centered policy approach to one that acknowledges the utility and legitimacy of less than ideal public-private power sharing arrangements.* Fiscal constraints, lack of political will, and a military no longer structured for prolonged stability operations requires reconsideration of how the US may achieve national security objectives in regions defined by the absence of centralized state Leviathans.

State Expansion

Ahmed Shah Durrani, leader of the Pashtun Durrani tribal confederation, established the first Afghan proto-state in 1747 by capitalizing on the weakness of the Moghul Indian and Safavid Persian empires. Shaped to administer its conquests, this “state apparatus” accumulated resources via fertile agricultural land in India and coercive power through soldiers provided by tribal levies.² This focus on capital and coercion is a key element found in European state formation as described by Charles Tilly - an iterative process by which the drive to wage war to acquire land necessitated optimization of capitalist output that could then be extracted for war-making. As the means of coercion became concentrated and institutions emerged to direct capital accumulation, this “organizational residue” became the birth of the European state.³ However, in contrast to Europe, this initial Afghan experience did not lead to sustained bargaining between elites and their subjects, but to the dissolution of the Durrani Empire into tribal warfare.⁴

Abdur Rahman Khan executed the next significant iteration of Afghan state formation following the Second Anglo-Afghan War in 1880. This state was born of an explicit arrangement between Rahman and Britain whereby “Afghanistan became a buffer state in which an indigenous ruler began to build an internally autonomous state with only external colonial support.”⁵ It was defined not only by the extreme violence necessary to attain Tilly’s concentration of coercive power, but also by Afghanistan’s status as a rentier state.

Rentierism, or the acquisition of income through the manipulation of favorable political and economic circumstances, may present obstacles to the formation of legitimate and institutionalized states. Rolf Schwartz describes how the availability of rents in the form of oil wealth allows the

² Barnett Rubin, “Lineages of the State in Afghanistan,” *Asian Survey* 28, no. 11 (1988): 1191-1192.

³ Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in *Bringing the State Back In*, eds. Peter B. Evans, Peter B. Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 181-183.

⁴ Rubin, “Lineages of the State in Afghanistan,” 1192.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1193.

Persian Gulf states to distribute welfare to their citizenry via patronage networks without requiring taxation or war-making. This “capital without coercion” model provides for a social contract that substitutes economic welfare for political rights.⁶ Abdur Rahman followed a path similar to that of Jordan during the Cold War in that he utilized “strategic rent” in the form of a British subsidy to “build up his army without developing the prerequisites of a capitalist economy.”⁷ This becomes a recurrent theme as future Afghan leaders rely on the United States and the Soviet Union to fund their state-building projects.

With a strong military financed by Britain, Abdur Rahman oversaw the development of some of the common elements of infrastructural power associated with a Weberian state: coercive taxation, conscription, and rudimentary bureaucracy.⁸ According to Barnett Rubin, Rahman’s claim of Islamic sovereignty was enforced by a consolidation of the state that focused on defeating challengers from his royal clan, subjugating populations hostile to his authority, and imposing a bureaucratic administrative system on a segmented tribal society.⁹

Rahman’s actions provoked significant resistance from the periphery including ten major rebellions, a pattern that would characterize future attempts at Afghan state consolidation.¹⁰ Arrests, executions, and the imposition of heavy taxes on landowners caused the rival Ghilzay tribal confederation to revolt in 1886.¹¹ A similar uprising occurred in 1891 when the Hazaras rebelled against an attempt by the state to confiscate their weapons, prompting Rahman to crush them with measures bordering on ethnic cleansing: forced resettlement, enslavement, property seizure, and forced conversion from Shi’a to Sunni Islam.¹²

King Amanullah Khan’s reign from 1919-1929 attempted a swift and extensive consolidation of power that ultimately resulted in state retraction as the periphery revolted against his intrusive policies. Considered a modernizer in the vein of Turkey’s Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Iran’s Reza Shah,¹³ Amanullah implemented policies “key to the transition from absolutism

⁶ Rolf Schwarz, “Does War Make State? Rentierism and the Formation of States in the Middle East,” *European Political Science Review* 3, no. 3 (November 2011): 419, 434.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 429; Rubin, “Lineages of the State in Afghanistan,” 1193.

⁸ Michael Mann, “The Autonomous Power of the State: its Origins, Mechanisms and Results,” in *States, War and Capitalism: Studies in Political Sociology*, ed. Michael Mann (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1988), 12-13.

⁹ Rubin, “Lineages of the State in Afghanistan,” 1194.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1194.

¹¹ M. Hassan Kakar, *A Political and Diplomatic History of Afghanistan, 1863-1901* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 90-91.

¹² *Ibid.*, 131-138.

¹³ Thomas J. Barfield, “Weak Links on a Rusty Chain,” in *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan: Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. M. N. Shahrani and Robert L. Canfield (Berkeley: University of California Berkeley Press, 1984), 176.

to the nation-state.”¹⁴ These included diplomatic relations with the outside world, a cash-based taxation system, establishment of the *afghani* currency, privatization of land, infrastructure expansion, the introduction of consumer industries, the first constitution, and social reforms that sidelined traditional Pashtun and Islamic institutions.¹⁵

This period of state development resonates strongly with Tilly’s emphasis on revenue extraction. Following Afghanistan’s independence in 1919 and the subsequent loss of the British subsidy, Amanullah was forced to strengthen the state’s extractive capacity to fund his expansive policies. This took the form of heavy taxation on both the rural and urban populations. However, while Tilly’s “extraction-coercion cycle”¹⁶ eventually resulted in a stable social contract, Amanullah’s efforts drew backlash from the most important actors in Afghan society: the religious establishment, tribal leadership, and the urban elite.¹⁷ Attempts to restructure the army based on a Turkish model that emphasized centralized conscription and non-cash compensation weakened the military, the only institution capable of enforcing his policies.¹⁸ After large-scale tribal revolts began in 1928, Amanullah was forced to rescind most of his reforms, but these efforts failed to prevent the collapse of the army and resulted in his subsequent flight to India.¹⁹

State Retraction

Nadir Shah and the Musahiban dynasty (1929-1978) absorbed the lessons of Amanullah’s administration and followed the formula: “no reforms, modernizations, or political actions were to be taken if they would destabilize the government.”²⁰ While state institutions actually continued to expand during this period, it was accomplished by creating a gap between the central government and Afghan society. This strategy focused on rebuilding and reorganizing the army, reducing Kabul’s dependence on the rural economy, and gradual implementation of social and economic reforms.²¹ The creation of a “state-dominated export enclave centered in Kabul”²² precluded the need for the state to either confront the traditionally powerful *khans* or marshal them

¹⁴ Rubin, “Lineages of the State in Afghanistan,” 1196.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1196-1198.

¹⁶ Miguel Centeno, “Blood and Debt: War and Taxation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America,” *American Journal of Sociology* 102, no. 6 (May 1997): 1566.

¹⁷ Vartan Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 270-271.

¹⁸ Rubin, “Lineages of the State in Afghanistan,” 1198.

¹⁹ Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan*, 263-266.

²⁰ Barfield, “Weak Links on a Rusty Chain,” 176.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

²² Rubin, “Lineages of the State in Afghanistan,” 1200.

for war, and instead relegated them to symbolic roles with local autonomy under a strategy of “encapsulation.”²³

This enclave state saw the reemergence of rentierism as the defining characteristic of the Afghan state, relying on revenues generated by foreign trade taxation, foreign aid, and natural gas sales.²⁴ After 1956, aid competition between the US and the Soviet Union accounted for 80% of the expenditures necessary to fund the major components of Prime Minister Daoud’s state building project: a modern army, economic infrastructure, modern education, and a national transportation and communication network.²⁵ While successfully strengthening the state by isolating it from conservative opposition, this strategy of creating distance between the urban elite and the traditional rural population exposed the state to attacks by the growing left-wing urban class.²⁶

State Resurgence and Fragmentation

The pro-Soviet People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized control in April 1978 following the assassination of Daoud. Implementing the most radical reforms to date, the PDPA’s Marxist-Leninist project to catapult Afghanistan directly from a feudal society to one where “the exploitation of man by his fellow man will be unknown,”²⁷ was based on agrarian reform, a campaign against illiteracy, and marriage reform. Agrarian reform attempted to eliminate the mortgage system and redistribute land to peasants, drawing rejection both on Islamic ideological grounds and the deleterious effects of its implementation.²⁸ Elimination of illiteracy was deemed essential to “enlighten” people to the benefits of communism, but the mixing of the sexes and humiliation of elders during implementation drew violent opposition. Outlawing dowry didn’t provoke as strong a reaction as the other measures since the *sharia*-based monetary provision to the woman (*mahr*) was continued.²⁹

The PDPA’s goal was to “cause the ‘old’ Afghanistan to disappear, by dissolving the social structures and uprooting them from the memory of a whole people.”³⁰ Similar to the summary

²³ Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*. Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 62.

²⁴ Rubin, “Lineages of the State in Afghanistan,” 1201.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1203-1204.

²⁶ Barfield, “Weak Links on a Rusty Chain,” 178-179.

²⁷ Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 86-89.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 93-95.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

trials and executions employed in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution,³¹ this could only be accomplished by brutal repression and the elimination of clergy and traditional leadership.³²

Dependence on Soviet support to implement these measures solidified the Afghan rentier state.³³ Barnett Rubin classifies the period from 1978 to 1991 as one of “rentier-state wrecking,” in which various foreign powers including the United States, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the Soviet Union “pursued their goals by funding antagonistic organizations, of which the state was only the best armed.”³⁴ Over the course of the war, traditional Afghan authority figures such as village elders, *khans*, and *mullahs* were supplanted by *mujahedeen* commanders linked to non-traditional institutions such as Islamist parties and foreign countries.³⁵

The sponsor-proxy relationships established during the war allowed the resistance leaders to accumulate enough revenue and coercive power to serve as “would-be state builders” at the regional level.³⁶ Ahmed Shah Masood, emir of the Supervisory Council of the North (SNC), is an example of this phenomenon. Funneling assistance from Pakistan and Western aid organizations into infrastructural development, the SNC became the “de facto political, economic, and geographical base for the northeast,”³⁷ while similar groups based on ethnic and tribal identities seized control of their own regions. Men like Masood recognized the juridical Afghan state but ignored the empirical state embodied in Kabul.

The Taliban emerged in 1994 out of the *mujahedeen* infighting with an agenda to “restore peace, disarm the population, enforce Sharia law, and defend the integrity and Islamic character of Afghanistan.”³⁸ They fell into the pattern exhibited by previous regimes, relying on rents in the form of Pakistani military aid and revenue from opium cultivation and illegal smuggling,³⁹ while pursuing ambitious social reform based on strict Islamic interpretations at odds with Afghanistan’s Sufi and Hanafi traditions.⁴⁰ Holding significant “despotic power,” or the mandate to engage

³¹ Rosemary H. T. O’Kane, “Post-revolutionary State Building in Ethiopia, Iran and Nicaragua: Lessons from Terror,” *Political Studies* 48 (2000): 974-976.

³² Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 95-97.

³³ Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: a History of Struggle and Survival* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 190-191.

³⁴ Barnett Rubin, “Political Elites in Afghanistan: Rentier State Building, Rentier State Wrecking,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24, no. 1 (February 1992): 96.

³⁵ Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: a History of Struggle and Survival*, 208.

³⁶ Rubin, “Political Elites in Afghanistan: Rentier State Building, Rentier State Wrecking,” 95.

³⁷ Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, 259.

³⁸ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 22.

³⁹ Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 172; 177-178.

⁴⁰ Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 83-84.

society and impose decisions,⁴¹ the Taliban attempted to accrue infrastructural power, but a deficit in human capital, internal leadership schisms, lack of international legitimacy, and finally the US invasion interrupted the potential for state consolidation.⁴²

Informal Institutions, Indirect Rule, and the Historical Afghan State

The most significant theme underpinning Afghan state-building efforts is what Joel Migdal calls a condition of “dispersed domination,” or “the state in society,” in which neither the state nor any other social force is able to achieve domination.⁴³ In Afghanistan, “the state, let alone any regime from time to time controlling its instrumentalities, is not the only repository of traditional authority or focus of traditional loyalties.”⁴⁴ According to Thomas Barfield, a dual power structure traditionally existed that was comprised of tribal or village structures, and the local government represented by figures such as the *arbab*. This sub-provincial interface between the informal structures and the government agent was the “weakest link in the government chain of command.”⁴⁵ These can be considered *substitutive informal institutions* that combine “ineffective formal institutions and compatible outcomes,” achieving “what formal institutions were designed, but failed, to achieve.”⁴⁶

Closely related is the phenomenon of “indirect rule” that Tilly observed in the process of European state formation: reliance on “local magnates” that “collaborated with the government without becoming officials.”⁴⁷ This practice has deep roots in Afghan state formation: Abdur Rahman purchased southern Ghilzay tribal support in his campaign to take Kandahar;⁴⁸ the Musahibans allowed *khans* and the *ulema* autonomy in their local affairs while providing them institutional roles in the government;⁴⁹ Najibullah incorporated *mujahedeen* commanders into his national reconciliation efforts, providing them “complete freedom in running affairs in their

⁴¹ Mann, “The Autonomous Power of the State: its Origins, Mechanisms and Results,” 113.

⁴² Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, 172-179.

⁴³ Joel S. Migdal, “The State in Society: an Approach to Struggles for Domination,” in *State Power and Social Forces – Domination and Transformation in the Third World*, eds. Joel S. Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 9.

⁴⁴ William Maley, “Political Legitimation in Contemporary Afghanistan,” *Asian Survey* 27, no. 6 (June 1987): 708.

⁴⁵ Barfield, “Weak Links on a Rusty Chain, 170-171; 175.

⁴⁶ Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky, “Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 4 (December 2004): 729.

⁴⁷ Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” 174.

⁴⁸ Kakar, *A Political and Diplomatic History of Afghanistan, 1863-1901*, 58.

⁴⁹ Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, 62;

localities in exchange for a vague promise not to fight against the regime in Kabul.”⁵⁰ Even the Taliban were not immune to this practice, as they dispensed cash and aid to turn rival commanders against their opposition.⁵¹ Though not going as far as becoming partners in a democratic process, as occurred in Colombia with non-state armed actors such as the Auto Defensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC),⁵² the combination of patronage and subnational authoritarianism has been a key element in pacifying the Afghan periphery.

Modernization and the Maximalist State

On September 11, 2001, two hijacked commercial airliners crashed into the World Trade Center towers in New York City, and another struck the Pentagon, the symbol of US military dominance. Al-Qaeda finally succeeded in wounding the far enemy propping up the despised apostate regimes representative of the Middle Eastern political order.⁵³ In response, only a handful of US special operations and Central Intelligence Agency personnel routed the Taliban and drove al-Qaeda from Afghanistan. This unprecedented marriage of American airpower and partnership with the indigenous opposition on the ground succeeded in disrupting the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations,⁵⁴ a national interest that persists to this day. Despite this initial limited military objective, Operation Enduring Freedom soon expanded under the auspices of the Bonn Agreement of December 2001. In place of simply denying al-Qaeda a sanctuary from which to launch additional attacks against the US homeland, the Bonn Agreement scripted the creation of liberal, constitutional democracy founded on the principles of “Islam, democracy, pluralism and social justice.”⁵⁵

While eschewing the Marxist ideological violence inherent in the methodology pursued by the PDPA in the late 1970’s, this new formula nevertheless aligned with what Marina Ottaway calls a “maximalist” approach to state building in its Leninist attempt to engineer a new political

⁵⁰ Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: a History of Struggle and Survival*, 205.

⁵¹ Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, 174.

⁵² Daren Acemoglu, James A. Robinson, and Rafael J. Santos, “The Monopoly of Violence: Evidence from Colombia,” *Journal of the European Economic Association* (January 2013): 41.

⁵³ Osama bin Laden, “Al Qaeda’s Second Fatwa,” *PBS*, February 23, 1998, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military-jan-june98-fatwa_1998/.

⁵⁴ George W. Bush, “Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush: 2001-2008,” *White House*, 75, http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf.

⁵⁵ Astri Suhrke, “Reconstruction as Modernization: the ‘Post-Conflict’ Project in Afghanistan,” *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 7 (2007): 1298.

system and a society to underpin it.⁵⁶ This “democratic reconstruction model” was often at odds with the primary US objective in Afghanistan: denying terrorist safe havens. Astri Suhrke, assessing the efforts of previous Afghan modernizers, noted three implications for would-be state-builders in the post-9/11 era: “*don’t overload the modernist agenda; don’t exclude potential rebels from the political arena; if militant opposition develops, don’t let foreign forces lead the war.*”⁵⁷ The international community violated each of these. A fourth imperative should also have been considered: *don’t rely on external sponsors to fund a rentier state at the expense of developing sustainable indigenous economic capacity.*

This formula appears sound in theory: build a strong, centralized Afghan state in order to achieve the requisite indigenous security capability to deny al-Qaeda a safe-haven. It aligns with state-centered analyses focused on the infrastructural capacity required to penetrate territory and impose a state’s decisions,⁵⁸ counterinsurgency approaches that emphasize the role of “providing security” and “ruling justly,”⁵⁹ and the general body of “post-conflict” reconstruction literature “derived from the Western experiences of liberal political development and economic growth.”⁶⁰ However, this model assumes that such a state is *desired* by not only a plurality of the indigenous population, but also by those who hold a market share in private coercive capacity. It also assumes the *feasibility* of creating this state in practice, and its *sustainability* in the long run without indefinite international support. David Chandler notes that neo-Wilsonian democracy exportation leaves little room for the autonomy or self-determination of those whom democracy is being brought.”⁶¹ In reality, a sober assessment of Afghanistan’s past indicates that a “suboptimal outcome” is more reasonable than hoping for the emergence of a democratic, liberal Afghan state equipped to achieve a monopoly of violence within its juridical borders.⁶²

A Better Model? The Role of Subnational Violence and Governance

So if this model is too costly and unrealistic to be implemented, how should one proceed to

⁵⁶ Marina Ottaway, “Promoting Democracy after Conflict: The Difficult Choices,” *International Studies Perspectives* 4 (2003): 315.

⁵⁷ Suhrke, “Reconstruction as Modernization: the ‘Post-Conflict’ Project in Afghanistan,” 1298.

⁵⁸ Jeff Goodwin, “The State-Centered Perspective on Revolutions: Strengths and Limitations,” in *Chewing Sand: A Process for Understanding Counter Insurgency Operations, 2nd Edition*, ed. James Spies (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2008), 16.

⁵⁹ Jim Baker, “Systems Thinking and Counterinsurgencies,” *Parameters* (Winter 2006-07): 42-43.

⁶⁰ Suhrke, “Reconstruction as Modernization: the ‘Post-Conflict’ Project in Afghanistan,” 1292.

⁶¹ David Chandler, “Back to the future? The limits of neo-Wilsonian ideals of exporting democracy,” *Review of International Studies* 32 (2006): 483.

⁶² Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*, 3.

address weak, fragile, or failed states that may serve as safe havens and breeding grounds for international terrorism?⁶³ Ottaway recommends scaling back the maximalist approach and first considering what could be the minimally acceptable political system that could develop in a given country based on its internal power distribution and the degree of sustainable external support available.⁶⁴ Others reject the concept of fragile or failed states altogether, and instead think in terms of “hybrid political orders.” According to this approach, the absence of a consolidated Weberian state does not imply Hobbesian anarchy, but rather suggests incorporation of kin-based and other traditional networks, as well as organizations such as warlords and their militias, in order to fill the gap in a state’s ability to provide security and other basic services.⁶⁵

“Warlord” is a loaded term that invites immediate controversy. Some view warlords as “parasitic creatures of the state” that defy “genuine state sovereignty.”⁶⁶ However, US special operations forces rode to victory against the Taliban on the backs of horses and indigenous resistance organizations led by such *jang salar* (warlords), specifically the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (popularly known as the Northern Alliance) that formed after the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996. Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostum is the iconic *jang salar*, a permanent fixture of Afghan politics beginning with his utility to Najibullah’s Communist government in the 1980s to pacify the Afghan Uzbek north.⁶⁷ Serving as a critical partner to the special operations “horse soldiers”⁶⁸ during the 2001 invasion, Dostum continued to augment state capacity through his political party, the *Junbesh-e Milli-ye Islami-ye Afghanistan* (National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan), his service as Deputy Defense Minister, and most recently as the Vice President of Afghanistan since 2014.

What to make of this phenomenon? Antonio Giustozzi, documenting Dostum and other prominent *jang salar* such as Ismail Khan and Ahmad Shah Massoud, emphasizes warlordism as a “dynamic process, susceptible to develop into a more sophisticated type of polity as well as to

⁶³ Angel Rabasa et al., *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007), 1-2.

⁶⁴ Ottaway, “Promoting Democracy after Conflict: The Difficult Choices,” 321.

⁶⁵ Volker Boege, Anne Brown, Kevin Clements, and Anna Nolan, “On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States: What is Failing – States in the Global South or Research and Politics in the West?” *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation Dialogue Series* 8 (2009): 20-23.

⁶⁶ Kimberly Marten, *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 3.

⁶⁷ Brian Glyn Williams, “Dostum: Afghanistan’s Embattled Warlord,” *The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* 6, no. 8 (April 17, 2008), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4861&no_cache=1#.Vs8u8UVOnIU.

⁶⁸ Doug Stanton, *Horse Soldiers: The Extraordinary Story of a Band of US Soldiers Who Rode to Victory in Afghanistan* (New York: Scribner, 2009).

culminate in outright collapse.”⁶⁹ Kimberly Marten, however, maintains that proponents of incorporating warlords offer a false dichotomy between a well-functioning liberal Weberian state and chaos and elevate warlords as the default solution to address the problem of weak states instead of as the option that should be avoided.⁷⁰ Her argument is supported by the accounts of how rapacious warlords in Kandahar facilitated Mullah Omar’s initial mobilization of the Taliban in 1994,⁷¹ and various surveys conducted since 9/11 illustrating the desire of some Afghans to ban warlords from government service and bring notorious warlord criminals to justice.⁷²

However, the *practical* management of center-periphery relations is a critical component of establishing order in a system composed of multiple power brokers. Dipali Mukhopadhyay offers a more nuanced “warlord as bureaucrat” model that rejects the notion that warlords should always be framed as “spoilers,” and instead perceives them as “constructive participants” in modern state formation under certain conditions.⁷³ She makes the case that Hamid Karzai was successful at playing the “politics of survival” that provided Kabul enough influence to hold the current Afghan state together. Through the president’s prerogative to dictate provincial gubernatorial appointments, such as Atta Mohammad Noor of Balkh, he was able to maintain factional and ethnic balances of power between Kabul and the provinces.⁷⁴ This concept parallels the reliance on “local magnates” characteristic of the indirect rule that Charles Tilly observed in the process of European state formation,⁷⁵ and which occurred during the reigns of Abdur Rahman, the Musahibans, and Najibullah as discussed above.

Using local fighters and warlords is nothing new for the United States. Military *Unconventional Warfare* doctrine specifies how the US operates through or with indigenous organizations to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow hostile powers,⁷⁶ a variant of which Special Forces executed against the Taliban during the initial invasion in 2001. The US has also consistently

⁶⁹ Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 9.

⁷⁰ Marten, *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States*, 18-19.

⁷¹ Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 25.

⁷² Human Rights Watch, “‘Today We Shall All Die’ Afghanistan’s Strongmen and the Legacy of Impunity,” *Human Rights Watch*, March 3, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/03/03/today-we-shall-all-die/afghanistans-strongmen-and-legacy-impunity>; Aryn Baker, “Ahmed Shah Massoud: A Decade After His Murder, Would Afghanistan Be Different Were He Alive?” *Time*, September 9, 2011, <http://world.time.com/2011/09/09/ahmed-shah-massoud-a-decade-after-his-murder-would-afghanistan-be-different-were-he-alive/>.

⁷³ Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*, 4-5.

⁷⁴ Dipali Mukhopadhyay, “Provincial Governors in Afghan Politics,” *United States Institute of Peace Special Report* (2016): 3; 10-11.

⁷⁵ Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” 174.

⁷⁶ US Army, *Unconventional Warfare*, ATP 3-05.1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), 1-1.

supported effective local strongmen during counterinsurgency operations, such as Lt. Gen. Abdul Raziq, Kandahar's Chief of Police who, like Rashid Dostum,⁷⁷ maintains serious allegations of human rights abuses against him.⁷⁸

Just as Hamid Karzai came to realize the necessity of working through both formal and informal institutions, the US finally abandoned its strictly top-down approach and began to integrate a bottom-up campaign in 2010 known as Village Stability Operations (VSO) to augment state capacity and defeat the Taliban insurgency.⁷⁹ This was an attempt to enable local security, governance, and development through traditional mechanisms such as the *shura* and *jirga* deliberative bodies, and the *arbakai* (“guardian”) community defense forces which served as the historical basis for the Afghan Local Police (ALP) program. In theory, as each village became secure, it would then link to the provincial government through the district center, completing the chain from Kabul to the periphery. This capitalized on the observation that most rural Afghans were more likely to fight for their own villages and communities than for a far-off government in Kabul,⁸⁰ a sentiment also prevalent during the Vietnam War.⁸¹

In practice this could provide a mechanism to disaggregate the greater notion of “Afghanistan” into local concerns, and in addressing those, supplement the capacity of the titular state in Kabul. This was similar to the approach pursued by Mao Zedong during the Chinese Revolution in his quest to create a communist China.⁸² Evidence suggests that the ALP program was successful in providing security and setting conditions for governance and development linked to Kabul during its short lifespan.⁸³ However, it also became associated with some of the negative aspects of warlordism emphasized by scholars such as Kimberly Marten: predation, theft,

⁷⁷ Williams, “Dostum: Afghanistan’s Embattled Warlord.”

⁷⁸ Matthieu Aikins, “Our Man in Kandahar,” *The Atlantic*, November, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/11/our-man-in-kandahar/308653/>.

⁷⁹ Headquarters, Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – Afghanistan, *Village Stability Operations and Afghan Local Police: Bottom-up Counterinsurgency* (Bagram Airbase: April 2011), http://stabilityinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/CJSOTF-A_VSO_ALP_Handbook01APR11-FINAL.pdf.

⁸⁰ Author’s personal experience conducting Village Stability Operations in Kandahar in 2012.

⁸¹ Austin Long, *On “Other War” – Lessons from Five Decades of RAND Counterinsurgency Research* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2006), 31-32.

⁸² Michael Taylor, “Rationality and Revolutionary Collective Action,” in *Chewing Sand: A Process for Understanding Counter Insurgency Operations, 2nd Edition*, ed. James Spies (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2008), 51.

⁸³ Mark Moyar, *Village Stability Operations and the Afghan Local Police* (MacDill AFB: Joint Special Operations University, October 2014), 77.

intimidation, and human rights abuses.⁸⁴ The VSO program offered the best opportunity to integrate subnational informal institutions with central state structures in Kabul. However, it was implemented late after almost a decade of war and top-down reconstruction efforts, and its transition to Afghan Ministry of Interior control in 2013 coincided with the rapid withdrawal of international military support. Its long-term effects remain to be seen, but even as Kabul considers expanding the ALP further to stave off the escalating insurgency,⁸⁵ integration, quality, and sustainability challenges⁸⁶ will likely undercut success, as experienced with previous US-led local defense programs such as the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) in Vietnam.⁸⁷

A Way Forward – Stability by Other Means

This paper attempted to unpack the complex history of Afghan state formation in order to distill lessons applicable to today’s operating environment. One thread persists throughout this examination: the pervasive violence associated with the process must be seen as a byproduct of a weak center in Kabul attempting to dominate the periphery. Kabul has attempted to push its will on the periphery while pulling resources, often from external patrons, necessary to achieve the rudimentary capacity to coerce and govern. Informal institutions, indirect rule, and armed subnational actors historically served as the bedrock of the Afghan state in this process; some rulers exploited these power structures while others attempted to eliminate them. This has resulted in a violent cycle of state expansion and retraction, with the United States entangled only in the most recent iteration.

This study is admittedly incomplete. It is biased by a realist approach focused on manipulating power structures available to achieve stability. It neglects ideational factors associated with constructivist schools of thought, such as Afghan nationalism, the influence of Islam and ethnicity, the dynamic process of popular expectation shifts generated by the initial defeat of the Taliban and subsequent promises by the international community, as well as the framing of Kabul’s negative actions that may contribute to its demise. It avoids questions of

⁸⁴ Human Rights Watch, “‘Just Don’t Call it a Militia’ Impunity, Militias, and the ‘Afghan Local Police,’” *Human Rights Watch*, September 12, 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/09/12/just-dont-call-it-militia/impunity-militias-and-afghan-local-police>.

⁸⁵ Mujib Mashal, “Afghan Plan to Expand Militia Raises Abuse Concerns,” *New York Times*, October 16, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/17/world/asia/afghan-local-police-taliban.html?_r=0.

⁸⁶ Moyar, *Village Stability Operations and the Afghan Local Police*, 67-68.

⁸⁷ Austin Long et al., *Locals Rule: Historical Lessons for Creating Local Defense Forces for Afghanistan and Beyond* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2012), 76.

morality, universal values, and the preferences of external actors such as Pakistan that view the outcome of Afghan state consolidation through the lens of *their national interests*, which often do not align with US preferences. It also does not give proper justice to the Afghan security forces and civilians who have made the ultimate sacrifice to realize their vision of a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan for their families.⁸⁸

However, the hard reality is that the Afghan state is not sustainable in its current form. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the US has spent \$113.1 billion funding Afghanistan's reconstruction since 2002 with minimal improvements in safety or economic growth.⁸⁹ In 2005, tax revenues only covered 8% of the national budget,⁹⁰ and despite some economic growth and revenue from duties on trade, Kabul has never been able to extract more than 10% of its required expenditures.⁹¹ The remainder has come from foreign aid. As the international community continues to withdraw military and financial support, alternative solutions must be considered to cope with both the pervasive Taliban insurgency⁹² and the rise of more extreme elements such as the Islamic State,⁹³ as well as to fulfill the minimal acceptable expectations of central state capacity in today's world.

In states characterized by the inability of a weak center to assert itself on the periphery, coopting subnational strongmen to serve as governing partners may represent a mutually advantageous situation whereby the strongman leverages his own assets to maintain order on behalf of the center while obtaining support to consolidate his power at the local level.⁹⁴ The question is: will subnational strongmen be constructive, destructive, or both, in the emergent political order? This has implications not only for Afghanistan, but also for conflicts in Libya,

⁸⁸ Author's observation of Afghan National Security Forces in 2005 and 2012, including members of the Afghan National Army, Commandos, Special Forces, Uniform Police, Local Police, and National Directorate of Security.

⁸⁹ Lucy Westcott, "Billions of Dollars Haven't Improved Safety or the Economy in Afghanistan," *Newsweek*, January 29, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/afghanistan-sigar-military-report-420624>.

⁹⁰ Suhrke, "Reconstruction as Modernization: the 'Post-Conflict' Project in Afghanistan," 1301.

⁹¹ Siddieq Noorzoy, "Afghanistan's Wartime Economy (2001-2014). The Devastating Impacts of IMF-World Bank Reforms," *Global Research*, July 24, 2014, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/afghanistans-wartime-economy-2001-2014-the-devastating-impacts-of-imf-world-bank-reforms/5393141>.

⁹² Thomas Jocelyn, "Taliban announces withdrawal from center of Kunduz city," *Long War Journal*, October 13, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/10/taliban-announces-withdrawal-from-center-of-kunduz-city.php>; Bill Roggio, "Afghan Army abandons another district in Helmand," *Long War Journal*, February 21, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/02/afghan-army-abandons-another-district-in-helmand.php>.

⁹³ AFP, "Afghan president vows to 'bury' Islamic State franchise," *Times of India*, January 25, 2016, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/Afghan-president-vows-to-bury-Islamic-State-franchise/articleshow/50719118.cms>.

⁹⁴ Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*, 3.

Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and throughout Africa that pose threats to US national interests but lack sufficiently centralized Leviathans⁹⁵ to work with and through.

This *stability by other means* approach is not without risks and complications. Information asymmetries will likely plague US attempts to capitalize on this model. Subnational actors are by nature self-interested utility maximizers, uniquely postured to manipulate naïve external sponsors seeking quick-fixes for complex national security dilemmas in order to achieve solutions to *their local concerns*.⁹⁶ This approach may short-circuit economic development and the delivery of public goods in areas where state consolidation *may have been possible* without irregular intervention.⁹⁷ This places a premium on accurate intelligence, regional knowledge, and linguistic and cultural acumen. It also requires a reappraisal of legal constructs such as the Leahy Laws. First introduced in 1997, these laws restrict US involvement with security forces abroad associated with human rights violations.⁹⁸ It restricts partnerships with not only the most potentially effective subnational actors postured to support US national security objectives, but it also prevents US forces from influencing the very actors that arguably need human rights training the most.

Conclusion

The United States confronts a strategic capability gap: global instability below the threshold of conventional war increasingly threatens US national interests, but lack of political will and mounting fiscal constraints are coupled with a future military force deliberately structured to avoid dealing with the challenges it creates.⁹⁹ “Building partnership capacity” to counter terrorism¹⁰⁰ within the traditional Foreign Internal Defense construct¹⁰¹ may be viable in more developed states, but to truly devise “low-cost, small-footprint”¹⁰² solutions in regions defined by the absence of violence-monopolizing Leviathans requires the United States to shift from a state-centered

⁹⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁹⁶ Author’s personal experience conducting Village Stability Operations in Kandahar, Afghanistan in 2012.

⁹⁷ Robert Mandel, *Global Security Upheaval: Armed Nonstate Groups Usurping State Stability Functions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 184.

⁹⁸ Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “Reps. Mac Thornberry, Adam Smith Lead House Push For More Foreign Military Training; Leahy Amendment Targeted,” *Breaking Defense*, March 6, 2013, <http://breakingdefense.com/2013/03/thornberry-smith-lead-bipartisan-house-push-for-more-foreign-mi/>.

⁹⁹ Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review 2014* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), vii.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ US Army, *Foreign Internal Defense*, ATP 3-05.2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2015).

¹⁰² Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 3.

policy approach to one that acknowledges the utility and legitimacy of less-than (Weberian) ideal public-private power sharing arrangements.¹⁰³

The United States is at a critical juncture. It must evolve its national security approaches or be left flat-footed in a hyper-globalized world where the influence and agility of non-state actors increasingly count more than traditional measures of a state's weight.¹⁰⁴ The US military already engages subnational armed actors as a practical matter to solve complex problems in combat zones, but this is often executed with tunnel vision focused on limited security objectives. Failure more significantly resides at the policy level. Refusal to deliberately plan for and integrate such efforts into the overarching *political* solution in hopes of attaining Western ideals degrades the effective and efficient application of limited resources to achieve national security objectives.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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¹⁰³ Mandel, *Global Security Upheaval: Armed Nonstate Groups Usurping State Stability Functions*, 203.

¹⁰⁴ National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), xiv.