Moshtarak or: By With and Through Building Afghan Partner Capacity for Sustainable Security

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Building Afghan Partner Capacity for Sustainable Security

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Research Question

Is the process of Building Partner Capacity a viable strategy to achieve security goals in the Afghan conflict?

Abstract

This thesis evaluates the viability of Building Partner Capacity (BPC) as a strategy to achieve the US objectives of preserving the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and denying safe-haven to transnational terrorists.

The development of the civil state and the enabling of security forces are two simultaneous and mutually supporting processes, each of which are necessary for the future of Afghanistan. This thesis hypothesizes that the process of Building Partner Capacity is the key to achieving the security dimension of this goal. Early success in the 2001 intervention was a direct product of working by, with and through Afghan forces. By contrast, the failures of the subsequent era stemmed from attempts to unilaterally achieve security, while under-supporting true partner capacity building. Although central to success, BPC has only recently been prioritized, beginning in the 2014 shift towards an advisory mission, and away from Counter-Insurgency led by international troops.

Final resolution of the conflict will require a diplomatic process between the Afghan government and insurgent forces. However, groups like the Taliban enjoy continued sustainment from Pakistan and ties of alliance with terror groups like al-Qaeda. At present, the Taliban believe total military victory to be possible and will not negotiate in good-faith. Before the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) are made sustainable, no compromise can ensure Afghanistan does not regress again into a safe-haven for transnational terrorists.

With the ideal operational footprint and consistent prioritization of resources, Afghan security capacity can be made sustainable. Already, forces like the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) have been built up into highly credible partners. Technically sophisticated assets like Afghan military aviation have also enjoyed steady growth while proving decisive on the battlefield. Problems in wider conventional units persist, but strategies like the newly formed Territorial Force represent a promising evolution for providing local holding forces.

If the US can politically sustain its partnership with the Afghan state, then BPC constitutes the most constructive form of pursuing the security-half of the nation-building whole. As it stands, BPC represents a progressive break in the models of the past, a lower-footprint means of sustaining engagement, and a tangible way of empowering the only actors capable of providing lasting security, the Afghans themselves.
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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ANA - Afghan National Army
ANATF - Afghan National Army Territorial Force
ANDSF - Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
ANP - Afghan National Police
ALP - Afghan Local Police
ASSF - Afghan Special Security Forces
BPC - Building Partner Capacity
COIN - Counter Insurgency
ISI - Inter-Services Intelligence
ISIS-K - Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham–Khorasan Province
MoD - Ministry of Defense
MoI - Ministry of Interior
PRT - Provincial Reconstruction Team
SFAB - Security Force Assistance Brigade
SOF - Special Operations Forces
US AID - United States Agency for International Development
UW - Unconventional Warfare
VSO - Village Stability Operations
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Preface

Above all else, this project is a call to view the Afghan people as ends and not only means. What is at stake in Afghanistan is a threat to international security, yet, more so than any other party, it is to the Afghan people that the greatest burden of this conflict has fallen. Although they struggle courageously, it is particularly unfortunate to note the ways in which hostile powers have weighed the scales against them. To succeed now, they must have support as well as solidarity, and while deserving of peace, they require nothing short of security. Nonetheless, Afghans are tenaciously resilient. The international community could want for no more worthy a partner. An Afghanistan that can sustainably protect itself will be a victory for all nations.
Introduction

Building Partner Capacity (BPC) is a process by which the United States uses its resources to develop the security forces of an ally. BPC takes a range of forms, but prominently includes a focus on training, advising, and equipping. At present, BPC is the core of the US military mission in Afghanistan, although this was not always the case. Much of the conflict previously centered on international troops fulfilling a unilateral security role which yielded little in the way of decisive progress. The shift to a BPC-centric mission in 2014 was intended to foster self-sufficient Afghan security forces and permanently transfer security responsibility to indigenous personnel. The success of this mission is now the linchpin of US-led efforts to achieve a favorable outcome in the conflict.

The US is not at war in Afghanistan in the traditional sense. The mission is far more diffuse. Present engagement began in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, where Taliban controlled Afghanistan was deemed a national security threat for its role in hosting international terror groups. As offensive military action alone would not address the root cause of the threat, the US and its international partners have taken on the mantle of nation builder. The objective is to stabilize a failed state and foster a relationship with a friendly government capable of denying the area to future adversaries. This is possible, but extraordinarily difficult. To make matter worse, a combination of insufficient cultural literacy and virulent myths of Afghanistan’s past continue to cloud discourse and generate policy that is ignorant of the very population it seeks to engage. A primary goal of this thesis is to confront such misunderstandings and disentangle progress slowed by the enormity of the task at hand, from that which results from quantifiably poor strategy.

Success is challenging in Afghanistan, not because it is inherently unchangeable, but instead because it has suffered close to half a century of continuous warfare. To effect reconstruction on the foundations of such a failed state would be difficult enough without the ongoing predations of neighboring Pakistan, which continues to shelter, fund, and equip the Taliban insurgency. Further complicating the process, the US and its allies have been
inconsistent in defining and pursuing their goals. When strategy has coalesced, it has frequently been mired in the path-of-most-resistance. By first imposing a model of centralized unitary governance, a perpetually fraught matter in Afghan history, the international community walked headlong into an environment of maximum political friction. The campaign of Counter-Insurgency (COIN) that followed aimed to pair complementary efforts towards reconstruction and security. However, its disproportionate focus on operations by international troops had several negative outcomes.

The ensuing casualties, sustained by international forces suppressing the insurgency, led to high fatigue in domestic political will. Simultaneously, by failing to maintain a low-footprint, the large presence of international troops unnecessarily alienated parts of the Afghan population that feared foreign domination. Throughout, the all-important objective of enabling Afghan forces was made a second order priority. Equally constraining were the influence of politically expeditious withdrawal timelines and ongoing election cycles, both of which did little to aid the patient implementation of long-term nation building. Instead, by applying a broad range of conflictory strategies, with frequent telegraphed withdrawals and sudden surging recommitments, the US has applied inconsistent and incohesive strategy to what was from its inception a grandiose challenge.

It is a central contention of this thesis that poor policy has partly originated from limited cultural literacy and a general misunderstanding of the scope of challenges facing Afghanistan. The modern conflict is predated by decades of violent instability. Examining a single decade-plus span of modern history is insufficient to generate sound policy or gauge progress towards stabilization. This thesis hopes to examine the viability of the current Building Partner Capacity (BPC) mission as well as holistically determine the origin of past strategic failures. This approach begins by first exploring Afghan political history and anthropology. Afghanistan’s history reveals numerous object lessons, including the success and failures of various governmental structures and foreign interventions. It further provides insight into long patterns of cultural dynamism and structural change that dispel misconceptions of supposed invariability.
Historical background contextualizes the origins of state collapse and destabilization that so complicate modern Afghanistan. Likewise illuminating, an examination of anthropology spotlights the fluidity of Afghan identity and the interrelations of its inhabitants. Such a survey underlines the Afghan capacity for interethnic cooperation as well as the key constituencies involved in the modern insurgency. Subsequently, the thesis explores the rarely considered ideological struggle between long standing indigenous traditions and the iconoclastic nature of the Taliban. Such a distinction illustrates the capacity for wide-scale opposition to the core of Taliban ideology. It likewise demonstrates that a gulf of opinion exists in regards to what constitutes Afghan culture and that the Taliban are in no way its exemplars.

Mutual support is a crucial prerequisite for successful BPC. This thesis examines the dynamics of partnership between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in order to assess its strengths and isolate its vulnerabilities. Critical questions are posed to assess legitimacy and the spectrum of interdependence at work in the relationship. Dependence can come in two forms, either legitimate, in a manner that commits stakeholders to the partnership, or perverse, where cooperation is only a mechanism for serving self-interest. Both are at work in Afghanistan. Improving their balance is complicated by the strength of indigenous patronage networks, insufficient exercise of conditionality, and a general lack of US policy consistency, all of which have promoted a climate of Afghan officials “hedging their bets”. Further considered are the variables of domestic priorities and political will as they constitute obstacles to the development and execution of the BPC mission.

BPC can only be viable if the mission’s adversaries are understood, and its programmatic objectives are jointly defined with Afghan partners to meet the needs of the populace. This thesis explores the insurgency in detail beginning with a focus on the Taliban, accounting for their origin, the factors of poor governance that strengthen their cause, and the enabling role played by neighboring Pakistan. While certainly the most powerful militant actor, the Taliban are not the only insurgent actors in the conflict. The price of alienating
communities, particularly in rural Afghanistan, has yielded disgruntled locals hostile to the US and the Afghan central government alike. The deconstruction of the insurgency into its constituent elements illustrates the extreme difficulty of offensive containment, particularly by an international force. With the distinction between local insurgent and dedicated Taliban cadre better understood, it becomes clear that security will require partnership both at the local and national level.

With these factors established, this thesis analyzes the major models of US security policy in detail. The US enjoyed success in the early UW campaign, through prioritizing cooperation with the Northern Alliance. This was subsequently undercut by a lack of cohesive stabilization strategy, a failure to maintain joint-planning with Afghan partners, and absence of clearly defined objectives. In the following scramble towards nation building, the US employed a range of military strategies before shifting to BPC in 2014. COIN was not without novel strategies, like those that engaged rural populations through Village Stability Operations (VSO), but progress was continuously undercut by costly offensive actions that overemphasized the role of international troops while insufficiently supporting the development of Afghan forces.

The post-2014 shift to BPC was limited by a reduced operational mandate and resources, but nonetheless has proven to be the most structurally sound approach. Through examining the growth and performance of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), this thesis contends noted success in the development of key forces, such as Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) and Afghan military aviation. Problems remain within conventional police and military units where capacity building efforts have had asymmetric results. This has resulted in a noted danger of the ASSF taking on an outsized responsibility, as many Afghan conventional units lag behind. Beyond conventional BPC, novel efforts have been undertaken to win over local stakeholders in providing security. Programs like the Afghan Local Police (ALP) have had mixed results, but also demonstrate the potential for local forces to play a definitive role when properly implemented. More recent programs like the Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANATF), represent major evolutions in
addressing past problems, while capitalizing on the benefits of balancing national and local assets. Acknowledged and explored throughout are the numerous disrupters and constraints facing BPC progress, along with the policies enacted to counteract them.

Reaching a sustainable level of stability in Afghanistan is not an objective that can be achieved in months or years or election cycles. It is instead a commitment to decades of involvement. This timeframe is made politically feasible only through the effective balancing of the operation’s “footprint” and not misapplying the context of conventional warfare, which emphasizes speedy victory through overwhelming superiority. Because this process is not a war it cannot be fought as one. Rather, it necessitates a holistic long-term strategy, beginning with a robust focus on enabling local security forces. This strategy relies on complementary processes such as state building and BPC, to progress simultaneously and in a volatile environment.

In a state already engaged in conflict there will never be a convenient period in which an outside power may concentrate solely on either improving governance or security capability. Instead, friction in both must be accepted as the natural result of operating in such a fraught context. It is certain that obstacles related to corruption and poor governance negatively affect BPC, but the process to addressing them is gradual and far reaching. During this period BPC remains necessary to keep the state’s “head above water” in the sense that even security forces with mixed levels of competency are preferable to a complete absence of operational local actors. However theoretically superior they may be, international troops cannot replace or even truly substitute for the contributions of local forces. The actions of local actors are crucial because they drive home the host nation’s obligation to “own” the mission, put a local face to day-to-day operations, and most crucially form the basis for long-term security through independent action.
I. Afghanistan’s Overlooked Past: Object Lessons in Cultural Dynamism, Governance, and Identity

Afghan political history provides an ideal focusing lens to begin an assessment of contemporary security policy. The following summary of Afghan history addresses a range of key questions regarding the viability of BPC. Firstly, it elucidates that Afghanistan is capable of operating as a state that is viewed as legitimate by its inhabitants. Secondly, it reveals an extensive list of outside powers that have successfully cooperated with, altered, and even conquered Afghanistan. Brief analysis of these events provides insight into the strategies that have been most successful in Afghanistan, among which are consensus-based governance, the balancing of regional stakeholders, and the crucial support of rural security forces. Standing in harsh contrast, the interventions of the British Empire and Soviet Union are better recognized for the ways in which their strategy failed. Common factors to both include a simultaneous alienation of major stakeholders and rural populations, the incitement of religiously-rooted nationalism, and a complete failure to work with existing power structures. When considered in context, these more contemporary interventions constitute case studies in what not to do.

Further important to consider is the way in which centralization at the expense of power sharing has always been a destabilizing element in Afghan political history. Attempts at centralization have usually preceded major conflict and the 2001 Bonn Conference restructuring of Afghanistan was no different. By contrast efforts to foster autonomy and cooperate with local authority have been significantly more successful and remain a viable approach for modern security policy. Both as a subject-nation and an independent power, Afghanistan has developed a highly complex system of political balancing that incorporates all the major-subgroups of its inhabitants. According to faction, the Pashtuns have been traditional rulers and rebels of Afghanistan, however no single group has successfully governed without balance and buy-in from the full range of stakeholders. Finally, when viewed in its chronological sequence, the history of Afghanistan acts as a timeline of the conditions that brought about state failure. In such a form, Afghanistan’s instability can be
related to quantifiable geopolitical consequences, rather than a presumed quirk of cultural backwardness or invariability.

1. In Overview: Afghan History from Antiquity to the 21st Century

As a constituent component of the Indus Valley Civilization, areas of Afghanistan are known to have been populated among the foremost of early human civilizations. In this period between the 5th and 2nd millennia BCE the first of urban centers such as Mundigak, northwest of modern Kandahar, appeared with archeological evidence indicating a role as nodes in a network of wider trade.¹ In 2000 BCE a migration of Indo-Iranians mixed with the existing Bronze Age population. Somewhere amid this tumult it is believed the Medes, an Iranian sub-group, fought their way to a position of dominance.² Beginning a pattern that would long be self-perpetuating, the inhabitants of the region were frequently mobile, alternatively conquering land to put down roots or fleeing to the highest mountain peaks and remote hinterlands of the Hindu Kush.³ This laid the bedrock of an Afghanistan that is still a patchwork of ethno-linguistic and tribal affiliations, which often overlap considerably within spheres of habitation.⁴

The Afghanistan of early history was a composite of regions that flowed together for reasons of shared geography, the interaction of their inhabitants, and at times the imposition of a foreign actor attempting conquest. The first major attempt at such an imposition from an external political actor came with the expedition of Cyrus the Great at the head of the Achaemenid Persian Empire.⁵ Making at least two great marches Cyrus successfully laid claim to much of the region and constructed a series of urban settlements and border towns.⁶ Achaemenid control of Afghanistan was built on robust ties with its indigenous elite

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¹ Louis Dupree, Notes on Shortugai: An Harappan Site in Northern Afghanistan (Centre for the Study of the Civilization of Central Asia, Quaid-i-Azam University, 1981), 1-7.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Tanner, Afghanistan A Military History, 7-17.
⁶ Ibid.
and a major prioritization of Persian resources. An illustration of this focus was making the northern Afghan Satrap of Bactria an office exclusively held by the dynastic Achaemenid heir.7

Even in the face of the era’s foremost power, a confederation of tribes in open rebellion was an extremely potent counter-force. Cyrus the Great’s conquest would end with his death during a climactic battle at the Jaxartes (now Syr Darya), where a confederation of northern tribes assumed to be known as the Massagetae and prominently featuring the Scythians, finally halted Persian expansion. This conquest dually formed the basis for the first recorded incorporation of Afghanistan into a vast external empire and the origin of its reputed talent for tenaciously resisting invasion. Despite this capacity for resistance, the Achaemenid model would long endure in the region. The surviving records of territory inherited by Cyrus’s successors such as the rock carved “Behistun List” of Darius I illustrate wide areas of Afghanistan including Bactria (Balkh), Areia (Herat), and Arachosia (Kandahar) remained under Achaemenid control, where they would continue up to the subsequent collision with invading Pan-Hellenic forces under Alexander the Great.8

In 330 BCE, after subduing the bulk of the Persian Empire, Alexander launched a Central Asian campaign aimed at rooting out Achaemenid hold-outs and warlords who had begun a bloody war of defense with Afghanistan as their base. Initially Bessus, Satrap of Bactria, newly empowered after assassinating the disgraced Persian King Darius III, used his position to form a rump state out of Achaemenid holdings and successfully rallied a multitude of tribal forces to harry invading Macedonian forces.9 This confederation of Persian and local forces made extensive use of asymmetric tactics and Afghanistan’s rugged mountain terrain to affect their strategy of resistance. This period offers a prominent example of an externally installed political leader forming a new polity out of the region, with the added boon to legitimacy of opposing a foreign invader. It also illustrates an example of

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Tanner, Afghanistan A Military History 17-52.
Afghanistan's rough terrain and martially capable people engaging a “Western” military force which has further cemented it into the popular imagination of the modern world.

The resistance of Bessus was ultimately cut short after several years of bloody fighting. Rising to assume the mantle of defense was the Sogdian warlord Spitmanenes who led a widespread tribal rebellion that significantly threatened the Macedonian occupation before being likewise defeated in another year of bloody fighting. This trend of rising and falling warlords indicated that, even in the day of Alexander, offensive action alone was insufficient to secure Afghanistan.

After a campaign of noted difficulty Alexander, like Cyrus, successfully incorporated the region into his empire utilizing shrewd political maneuvers, intermarriage, and military success. Central to Hellenic success were engaging Afghan stakeholders and providing the basis for consensus based rule. Even former enemies became reconciled components of the new power and key guarantors of rural security. Afghanistan would remain in Hellenic hands after Alexander’s death and through the wars of the Diadochi as part of the Seleucid Empire until around 245 BCE when the enterprising Satrap of Bactria Diodotus I used the distraction of war against the Ptolemies to declare an independent Kingdom of Bactria. The resulting Greco-Hellenic state would prove to not only hold on to power for over a century, but successfully expand into the north-western Indian subcontinent. Here it would finally be subdued by the emergence of the Indo-Scythians in 10 CE. Once again this is evidence of new state structures being built up in the wake of conflict which were able to thrive in its aftermath.

The following period would see a pattern of nomadic invasions of northern peoples and the attempted reassertion of Persian dominion by the Parthian and Sassanid Empires successively. Born out of one such nomadic invasion, the immense Kushan Empire was formed with Afghanistan at its heart. The new power would reign for approximately two

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11. Ibid., 61-69.
centuries and speed the growth of Buddhism throughout the region.\textsuperscript{12} The Kushan Empire is remarkable as yet another ancient power that based and constructed itself out of what would most precisely conform to the modern boundaries of Afghanistan. As with all previous polities constructed in this region, whether Persian or Hellenic, such a power existed without absolute unitary control over all of its territory. Rule was enabled by diverse ranges of compromise and co-existence with quarrelsome rural and nomadic populations. During these periods security was possible through no small contribution of friendly indigenous military forces.\textsuperscript{13} Although divergent from an understanding of a more centralized empire, such powers were nonetheless prosperous and resilient.

The subsequent era gave birth to two equally grandiose shifts in the region’s history, starting with a process of Islamization throughout the 11th Century and ending with the establishment of the Ghaznavid Empire that signaled the beginning of Turkic rule. During this period, the rule of Mahmud of Ghazni seriously altered the prevailing dynamic of religious pluralism, challenging the region’s long association with Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism, and innumerable polytheistic pantheons.\textsuperscript{14} Although Islam was elevated to preeminence, echoes of previous traditions would continue to be incorporated and expressed in future Afghan religious practice.\textsuperscript{15} Even in this period of mass conversion the roots of the region as a crossroads of ideas and cultural dynamism were never extinguished. The era of Turkic dominion is also notable for successive Mongolian invasions beginning with the destruction wrought by Genghis Khan in 1219 CE.\textsuperscript{16}

A fusion of Turkic-Mongolian rulers would continue throughout the 13th century eventually being cemented by control under the Ilkhanate and Timurid Empires successively. In the 16th century Babur, the successor to the Timurids and future founder of the Mughal Empire, would wrest control of the region. Shortly after subduing Kabul, Babur would

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Barfield, Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History 45-46, 66.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 91-92.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 38-41.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
transform Afghanistan into a base of operations for extremely profitable expeditions into the Indian subcontinent, innovating a model of raiding and conquest that would become a hallmark of future Afghan rulers. The Mughals would retain their foothold on Afghanistan until challenges by their fellow Turkic-Mongolians in the Khanate of Bukhara as well as Safavid Persia led again to the piecemeal division of territory

The Turkic-Mongolian period was decisively ended in the early 18th century when Pashtun tribal confederations rose to independent prominence for the first time. This begins the period of Afghan history in which the major modern stakeholders begin to take form. In a grandiose military struggle the Pashtuns not only asserted themselves over their former Turkic overlords, but temporarily conquered even much of Persia proper. For the first time the periphery of Turko-Persia had awoken and defeated all varieties of its traditional subjugators. The initial military victory was carried out by the Ghilzai Pashtun tribes, but it would be consolidated and expanded by the more adaptable Durrani. This reversal of fortune would be the source of much future enmity between the two tribal confederations.

The result was the establishment of the Durrani dynasty of Pashtun rulers and the enduring importance of the Pashtun people within Afghanistan. So great was the paradigm shift enabled by Pashtun victory as to inspire many to regard the period as the classical founding of modern Afghanistan. Although distinctly Pashtun, the Afghan Empire, like all previous rulers of the region, was deeply influenced by its Persian, Turkic, and Indian predecessors, retaining strong internal cultural influences as well as external military conflicts.

As the Durrani-led Afghan Empire had risen from the Pashtuns, who predominantly ranged among the sparse rural areas, it was the prosperous margins of its conquered Indian, Persian, and Central Asian territory, as well as its non-pashtun Afghan cities, that required

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17 Barfield, Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History 75-76.
18 Ibid., 89-108.
19 In the interests of simplicity, Durrani confederate Zirak subgroups, including future Barakzai rulers, will be referred to as Durrani.
21 Ibid., 66.
the most defending. Additionally, challenges from rival Pashtuns tribes, including the marginalized Ghilzai, constituted another notable obstacle to stability. This rural urban split and the propensity for marginalized Pashtuns in particular to challenge central authority would become an enduring pattern for Afghanistan. Grasping this dilemma, Afghanistan’s ruler Ahmad Shah secured his Empire with a formidable security apparatus that combined a standing core with rural irregulars. Centralized control was possible due to adopting effective governmental models from the Turkic-Mongolians and Persians, while stability was a direct result of the state’s ability to project military force. Together this model proved capable of fending off foreign invaders and maintaining internal order. While workable under Ahmad Shah, problems arose from matters of succession. A quirk of adopting Turkic-Mongolian legal practices left the Pashtun Durrani no legal means of disinheriting heirs other than intentionally leaving them crippled or deposed through violent struggle. This vulnerability undermined the balance of security and centralization achieved under Ahmad Shah and seriously weakened the state.

The enemies of the Afghan Empire would not be limited to its neighbors and rival Pashtun claimants to the throne. Taking advantage of the internal instability that had gradually weakened Afghanistan, the British Empire entered the fray in the 1830s, lending its immense weight to the wide variety of assailing foes. Already themselves locked in the wider political and military confrontation for control of the region, the British sought to preempt a perceived Russian threat to the all-important Indian cornerstone of their empire. In two successive Anglo-Afghan Wars the British would occupy key Afghan territory, at great cost meddling with the ruling line of succession. This interference was of little aid to British objectives and ultimately cyclical, beginning by replacing Dost Mohammad Khan with his

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23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 102.
25 Ibid., 110-129.
26 Ibid.
predecessor Shah Shuja, before once again reinstalling Dost Mohammad amid the hurried 1842 British retreat from Kabul.

The large British and East India Company presence inspired uprisings in every corner of the country. Although the quality of British troops allowed them to survive individual engagements their very presence was destabilizing. British defeat was hastened by their inexpert attempts to rapidly reorder the structure and mechanism of government which alienated erstwhile supporters of Shah Shuja. For Dost Mohammad and his faction, heavy rhetorical use of Jihad as an animating factor for resistance left a lasting impression of its future utility for all Afghans, including his enemies.\(^\text{27}\) Ironically, the victorious Dost Mohammad was ultimately the beneficiary of the same British attempts at military reformation that had so undermined their own presence.\(^\text{28}\) Echoing the practice of Ahmad Shah, Dost Mohammad used his revitalized professional forces as the cornerstone of rule and once again the matter of security became central to Afghan stability.\(^\text{29}\)

The Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878-1880 was defined by many of the same dynamics of its predecessor. The new Afghan leader, Sher Ali, continued a process of reform that demonstrated a growing Afghan consciousness of the capabilities of neighboring states under European influence. With the balance of power between the ruling dynasty and the rural countryside still in question, Sher Ali built on the legacy of his predecessor by reforming state structure and consolidating a professional military.\(^\text{30}\) The British, evermore contemptuous of Afghan political traditions, once again incited mass tribal rebellions, this time by dispensing with Afghan proxies and attempting to rule directly.\(^\text{31}\)

Many Afghan notables would arise to channel the latest uprising to their personal benefit, but the most successful by far was Abdur Rahman. A former governor and able warrior, Abdur Rahman would go on to defeat Sher Ali’s heirs and solidify his own

\(^{27}\) Ibid.  
\(^{28}\) Ibid.  
\(^{29}\) Ibid.  
\(^{30}\) Ibid., 131-160.  
\(^{31}\) Ibid.
leadership. After winning his civil war and diplomatically placating the British, Abdur Rahman set on a prolonged campaign to consolidate power and reverse the autonomy of tribal and provincial forces in favor of the strongest and most autocratic government ever established by a Durrani leader.\textsuperscript{32} As with the lightning reformation attempts of his predecessors, the state would function under his leadership, but progressively weaken under successive leaders who were hamstrung by opposition from the oppressed and the supplanted.

On the eve of 1919 two increasingly cohesive and equally dangerous domestic forces began to mobilize in Afghanistan. These took the form of nationalists, who were shocked by their ruler’s unwillingness to exact political concessions from the British during the First World War, and religious conservatives, who were outraged that the long-hated British were now occupying Muslim holy lands in the wake of the Ottoman Empire’s defeat.\textsuperscript{33} The result of this unanswered discontent was the murder of one emir, Habibullah, and the brash action of his successor Amanullah. The young emir successfully seized hold of the now centralized government and national army, thus staving off a claim to the throne by his uncle. He then embarked on a risky gambit of escalation with the British in a so called “war of independence”.\textsuperscript{34} While the British were able to lean on their own military superiority, the tenacity of attacks by irregulars, coupled with dangerously low morale within British ranks made for relatively brief fighting. The resulting treaty forced the Afghan government to accept the Durand line, but reaffirmed Afghanistan's official borders and returned its sovereignty in foreign affairs. The Durand line would remain a fraught issue for Pashtuns up to the present day, many of whom question its legitimacy. As a practical matter it exists as an extremely porous demarcation between tribal units split on either side of the official border.

The early 20th century continued along the cycle of modernization and resulting tension with the rural populace. An expansive civil code of law came into effect and the

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 178-182.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
growth of central authority once again rankled those at the periphery. Long existing internal squabbling for the throne was increasingly complicated by an emerging and politically conscious middle class. A new civil war ended the leadership of Amanullah and resulted in the unprecedented, but equally short, nine month reign of a Tajik usurper. The status quo quickly reasserted as Kabul’s elites conspired to bring about a return of Pashtun leadership. This action demonstrates the degree to which the traditional delegation of power among stakeholders was cemented in Afghan political consciousness.

King Nadir Shah took power in 1929 and, although he was assassinated in 1933, his family would secure exclusive power for the next fifty five years. This period was noted for its political stability and peace, attracting no shortage of foreign academics and tourists eager to explore beyond what had, for the West, so long seemed an unreachable frontier. Under the new King Zahir Shah and Prime Minister Daud Khan, who was a both cousin and a political rival, reform and modernization would continue. These efforts would come at a more measured pace, nonetheless substantive for their focus on areas as diverse as universal conscription and the rights of women. In 1973 the balance was threatened by a rapid, but bloodless coup undertaken by Daud who proclaimed Afghanistan a republic and himself its president. Two things worked in Daud’s favor. Firstly, he remained linked by blood to the previous rulers, and secondly he was politically prudent in his reforms. This balance afforded him initial approval of both the rural population and the urban elite. In office, President Daud sought to shore up Afghanistan’s diplomatic position as the ongoing Cold War once again brought conflicting interests from great powers.

However, all was not well as the growing dissatisfaction of elements in the middle class found new vent in the expression of communist ideology. These factions, well placed in the bureaucracy and military, formed cliques that soon became convinced of the need for

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35 Ibid., 165-172.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
radical action.\textsuperscript{38} Attempts at suppression of the far-left parties proved largely counter-productive and Daud’s reign ended in the spectacularly bloody Saur Coup of 1979.\textsuperscript{39} The newly empowered Marxist People’s Democratic Party (PDPA) of Afghanistan began a sweeping policy of land redistribution, religious suppression, mass detention, and execution of political rivals.\textsuperscript{40} The incensed rural populace wasted little time in rising up and the resulting chaos was so intense as to inspire the Soviet Union to militarily intervene.

After cleaning house within the PDPA, the Soviets began their own repressive campaign of counter insurgency alongside their new proxy government. The Soviets proved unsympathetic to the way land redistribution and militant anti-theism had left the rural populace starving and outraged. From a military standpoint, Soviet strategy was weighed now by an inflexible reliance on heavy armor and artillery. Air mobility and helicopter gunships proved better alternatives, but when introduced were far from enough to rescue poor strategy. Unsuited to stabilization, the Soviets doubled down with overwhelming and indiscriminate use of military force, including the deliberate targeting of the civilian populace.\textsuperscript{41} Large scale population displacement followed with refugee camps springing up throughout the region. This marked the beginning of a lost generation that was either born in the squalor of such camps or amid the ongoing conflict raging in the country.

Sensing an opportunity to humiliate and disadvantage their adversary, the United States and its allies began a covert campaign to support Afghan opposition forces. These forces were known broadly as Mujahideen, but operationally broken up amongst numerous factions. Enlisted in this effort was the now independent state of Pakistan. From its creation to the present day, the foreign-policy of Pakistan has been dominated by its conflict against


\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{40} Barfield, \textit{Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History}, 165-172.

India. Enabled by the US-Soviet confrontation, Pakistan and its intelligence arm, the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), saw an avenue to cultivate proxies in Afghanistan.

In an attempt to secure the region against Indian influence, the ISI wasted little time in extending support to the most ruthless of religious radicals like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e-Islami. The growing class of Afghan jihadi took their lead from a strain of militant revisionist ideology permeating through the Arabian Gulf and taught to refugee children in Pakistani madrasas. Further stiffened by foreign volunteers, Afghan jihadis soon became an omnipresent facet of war against the Soviets. While the CIA nominally favored more moderate factions, like those under the charismatic Tajik Ahmad Shah Massoud, it did little to halt the support of radicals. As material aid increased, the Mujahideen were transformed into a highly effective guerrilla force and Soviet casualties mounted.

Unable to secure territory and reeling from the losses incurred, the Soviets finally withdrew in 1989. PDPA President Najibullah clung to power until the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union shattered his party. The communist-era Afghan security forces, having never been prepared for independent action, disintegrated along largely ethnic lines. The new civil war between warlords and Mujahideen factions further depleted the already scarred nation of both its populace and infrastructure. The 1992 Peshawar Accords, attended by a plurality of militant factions, generated an anemic government known as the Islamic State of Afghanistan, but it was wholly unprepared to bring an end to the fighting, let alone rebuild the country. The desperation and displacement of aggrieved rural Pashtuns proved a fertile soil for the growth of the emerging Taliban movement.

With the enigmatic Pashtun, Mullah Omar as their leader, the Taliban dedicated themselves to a reactionary theocratic ideology and quickly set about exploiting the power vacuum. Sensing an opportunity, Pakistan covertly shifted their support to the Taliban,

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 221.
lending them a crucial boon to their finances, logistics, and competency.\textsuperscript{45} Proving
themselves martially capable and with no shortages of recruits or foreign volunteers, the
Taliban swept over the country. In short order the various Mujahideen warlords began to flee
back to their traditional spheres of control, where some continued an ongoing, albeit limited
resistance.\textsuperscript{46} In 1996 the Taliban captured Kabul and by 1999 they had taken nearly the
entirety of the country.

With Pakistani support, the military success of the Taliban was as much a result of
their own strength, as it was the utter weakness and disunity of their enemies. In the areas
they occupied the Taliban imposed a total theocratic reordering of Afghanistan, readily
targeting cultural as well as human targets on an enormous scale.\textsuperscript{47} A reign of mass killings
and other punitive measures of highly public violence were used to suppress the populace.
Although unrecognized by the core of the international community, the Taliban were largely
left to rule their newly declared Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as a personal fiefdom.

However, this did not necessarily entail cohesive governance, as the leadership of the
Taliban demonstrated little desire to fill the power vacuum and make the shift in roll to a
political organization.\textsuperscript{48} Even beyond their conflict with warlord holdouts, the Taliban did not
have exclusive control over Afghanistan. Among other transnational terror networks, al-
Qaeda co-existed and operated within the country. This presence was the central
justification for the intervention of the United States and their NATO allies in the wake of the
September 11th attacks.\textsuperscript{49} The consequences of this phase in the conflict form the basis of
this thesis’ later chapters.

The process of devising sound contemporary security policy in Afghanistan faces a
range of preliminary questions. Are there viable local actors for partnership with an outside

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{45} Barfield, Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History, 256.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ansary, Games without Rules: The Often-Interrupted History of Afghanistan, 231-235, 23; Barfield, Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History, 265.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Barfield, Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History, 256.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Khalilullah Safi, Thomas Ruttig, Understanding Hurdles to Afghan Peace Talks: Are the Taleban a political party? (Afghan Analysts Network, 2018), https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/understanding-hurdles-to-afghan-peace-talks-are-the-taleban-a-political-party/.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Barfield, Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History, 265.
\end{itemize}
power? Further, can such actors cooperate beyond their local context and with the wider nation? In both cases history furnishes us with a range of affirmative examples. For centuries the Persians, Hellenics, and Turkic-Mongolians all created robust local partnerships while satisfactorily balancing major stakeholders. As an independent nation, the Durrani rulers of Afghanistan continued to derive their legitimacy from power sharing and interethnic cooperation. Security was a pressing issue and one that saw considerable friction between attempts at centralization and the prerogatives of local elites. The exclusion of local stakeholders and the overemphasis on centralized urban areas were consistent root causes of upheaval.

The same held true for both the British and Soviet interventions. In the case of the British an unsustainably rapid push towards centralization of power led to the age-old pitfall of many Durrani rulers. No amount of conventional military superiority or victory through offensive action can survive the alienation of the greater populous. After paper-thin Anglo-Afghan partnerships were exhausted, the British dispensed with cooperation entirely and attempted to import the tactics of imperial subjugation used in the British Raj, including attempted direct rule by the East India Company. The blundering of the British Empire laid the groundwork for perfecting the Afghan brand of religious-nationalism used in conflict with an invader. For their part, the Soviet intervention repeated the same grievous alienation of the wider populous. Backing the failed PDPA-led communist restructuring of Afghanistan, the Soviets devastated the rural economy and ran headlong into conflict with religious institutions. In an attempt to contain the increasingly radicalized insurgency that followed, the Soviets resorted to indiscriminate violence. Such deliberate targeting of civilians, alongside general collateral damage, was an unsustainable and self-defeating method of conducting Counter-Insurgency.

The consequences of this phase in the conflict have raged to the present day and are chiefly responsible for the unraveling of the Afghan state. With this timeline of destabilization established, it then becomes clear that modern attempts at reconstruction must be grounded in an expectation of a multi-decade endeavor. If properly supported, the modern policy of
BPC has the potential to meet this durational commitment and address the enduring roots of conflict. BPC has the noted strength of being built on the basis of partnership and the enabling of local actors. This gives it the best chance of mitigating indigenous resentment for a foreign military presence by prioritizing the actions of Afghans and operating with a lower footprint. On one hand, enhancing the security capability of the central government is central to its legitimacy. On the other, a major peril for successful BPC is the continued balancing of stakeholders and a widespread reluctance towards centralization. For this reason it is evident that within Afghanistan, BPC will necessitate approaches that engage the active participation of all communities including those that value autonomy over all else.

2. The Role of Religion in Afghanistan

For the BPC mission to succeed, it must take into account the cultural tenets of the partner nation. This is true both in the interests of preserving cooperation and as a practical means of separating partners from insurgents. Afghanistan is a nation for which religion is of great cultural importance. It is both evoked by the central government in its founding as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and its foremost adversary the Taliban. While the motivations of individual Afghans, including insurgents, can vary enormously, it is necessary to illustrate the vast ideological gulf that exists between the religion espoused by the core of the Taliban and the wider continuum of Afghan religious practice.

Religion is an all-encompassing aspect of Afghan society where it is responsible for coding notions of identity, standards of conduct, and relationships both internal and external. The Afghan conception of everything from family structure to negotiating a fair price in a rural town market is legitimized through the lens of Islam. However, Afghan religious practice is not necessarily a component of “capital I” Islam in the wider world. Instead, religion in Afghanistan is seamlessly integrated into folk practices and mysticism where Islam may be said to be absorbed into the greater Afghan identity. 50

Examples of unique practices can include the use of magical tokens, amulets, and charms. They can also cover the belief in miracle inducing holy sites that may be sought out for physical sanctuary, difficulty in conceiving a child, or even grievous physical injury.⁵¹ Further, the recognition of the role played by spirits is a common belief that may be observed even in the most outwardly conservative and “fundamentalist” rural village environment.⁵² Despite their divergence from the letter of Islamic teaching or practice elsewhere in the world, these customs are entirely normalized. Therefore, what constitutes “good Islamic” behavior is very much the product of internal Afghan cultural norms that have developed with the ages.

Conversely, the Taliban draw their interpretation of Islam from a fundamentalist reading of the Deobandi school, which is itself foreign to Afghanistan.⁵³ Additional influence comes from a plurality of Taliban adherents to Wahhabism which is likewise a foreign import from the Arabian Gulf.⁵⁴ That is not to say that all militants fighting under the Taliban banner subscribe to these the sects. Local militants with more traditional beliefs certainly participate, but their actions are generally an extension of local political struggle rather than strictly ideological opposition to the central government. The existence of such fighters should not distract from the Taliban’s ideological basis in a fundamentalist reading of Deobandi Islam that both shaped the structure of their rule over the country and continues to provide access to foreign networks of support.⁵⁵ The roots of Taliban affiliation with these sects of Islam lie in the past where, during the Soviet-Afghan conflict, many Pashtun refugees were displaced.

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⁵¹ Ibid.
⁵² Ibid.
⁵⁴ Ibid.
to Pakistan.\textsuperscript{56} In such dire conditions, waiting madrasas funded by political movements made their impact as one of the only Pakistani institutions open to refugee children.\textsuperscript{57}

This influence imbued the Taliban’s founders with a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam directly at odds with the status quo of previous Afghan religious norms. As such, from their inception the Taliban have been principally focused with the total cultural rewriting of Afghanistan in favor of their own iconoclastic normative preferences. This goes beyond the particulars of enforcing religious theory to include the attempted prohibition or suppression of numerous practices otherwise common to Afghanistan. Afghanistan has long had a vibrant culture of music and visual art.\textsuperscript{58} Modern conveniences like television, radio, and access to the internet are widely utilized and to be seen even in austere rural communities, with mobile phone penetration estimated at 80\% of the population.\textsuperscript{59} Tobacco is nearly omnipresent. Despite their prevalence, all of these practices have been targets of Taliban iconoclastic suppression\textsuperscript{60}

Perhaps most aggressively, the Taliban have sought to bring to bear their brand of theocratic totalitarianism against Afghan women. Contrary to popular understanding, the roles of women have often varied widely, denoting a range of normative conventions rather than a single consensus.\textsuperscript{61} Depending on the time period and community, Afghan women have become members of parliament, educated professionals, religious scholars, and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{56} Ansary, Games without Rules: The Often-Interrupted History of Afghanistan, 226; Barfield, Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History, 39-42, 261.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
members of elite military units.\textsuperscript{62} Even in the rural countryside Afghan tribal matriarchs have taken up the mantle of war leaders defending their regions from Taliban attack.\textsuperscript{63}

This is not to say all aspects of the Taliban are inherently foreign. Rather that while they are adept at tapping into the nationalistic xenophobia and piety of rural populations, their culminating ideology is tied, like so many fundamentalist movements, to a historical “golden age” that has never existed. The resulting disparity between the Taliban’s vision of Islamic utopia and the asymmetric reality of Afghanistan leaves them in a state of perpetual conflict. Whether expressed through their destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas or their violent coercive control over Afghans within their sphere of influence, the Taliban are dedicated to the wholesale rewriting of Afghanistan’s past and its future.

A major intersection of religious practice and politics is the practice of evoking Jihad as a mobilizing force to eject a foreign occupying power. For Afghanistan, religious justification for warfare is a principle with centuries of weight behind it. Although it continues to be a justification for many insurgents, its manifestation through Taliban ideology is a major departure from its historical basis. For the Taliban, Jihad is not just a means of repulsing an invader, but a wider campaign waged against all that is deemed sinful or un-Islamic, to include the Afghan state and everyday practices of its citizens. In this sense the Jihad of the Taliban is the path to asserting total theocratic control over society. Even among the many historical Pashtun rulers and warlords who evoked Jihad in their struggles against invaders, religion was subservient to secular control from the state.\textsuperscript{64} Religious courts and their functionaries could be overruled by the Durrani monarchy. In past instances, the function of

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{64} Vice, \textit{Afghanistan After Us} ( VICE on HBO, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXFkXaTJKE.
\end{itemize}
Islam in warfare was fundamentally a nationalist ideology rather than a revolutionary tool. This marks out the interpretation of the Taliban as a major break with historical tradition.

As with so many cyclical features of Afghanistan, religion is prominent because it has endured great upheaval, and it has endured great upheaval because it was always, in some form, so prominent. The resilience of Islam as an independent and prevailing force in society also necessitates nuance in analysis of its relation to statecraft and governance. In the appraisal of lifelong devotees to Afghan scholarship such as Thomas Barfield the very label of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is noteworthy because it is descriptive rather than prescriptive. For the overwhelming bulk of Afghans the qualifier of “Islamic” is taken for granted as an obvious symbol of legitimacy rather than a declaration of overarching ideological agenda.

Islam in Afghanistan might be better understood by accepting that it functions in a unique manner, outside of the binary parallel between secularism and theocracy. Beginning with Afghan Islamization and best exemplified by its Durrani rulers, religion has been a tool wielded by and subservient to a secular state. Additionally, in Afghanistan the role of Islam in politics does not fit in easily with the wider dynamic of international political Islam. This is because Islam itself is so overwhelming prevalent and widely diffused within Afghan society. Firebrand extremists, forged in the furnace of perpetual warfare and funded by foreign powers, may seek to impose their own view of Islam on Afghanistan, but the overarching necessity of Islam itself is for all intents and purposes a settled matter.

Success in asymmetric conflict is contingent on having viable partners and an adversary that can be isolated from the wider populace. Islam is central to the Afghan identity. It would be inaccurate to suggest the Taliban represent an unassailable adversary for their religious grounding while the national government is an innately secular and therefore an illegitimate entity, tainted by its cooperation with foreign powers. This understanding fails to take into account a range of factors. While Islam is central to Afghan

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65 Ibid.
66 Ansary, Games without Rules: The Often-Interrupted History of Afghanistan, 225.
identity its precise definition is culturally unique. It is built on widespread folk practices and has been historically compatible and subservient to Afghanistan’s national rulers. The Taliban by contrast represent an iconoclastic interpretation of Islam that has sought to destroy and reorder a vast range of Afghan cultural practices.

While the Taliban may make use of characteristic insurgent strategies in mixing, recruiting, and coercing the wider populace, their ultimate ideological agenda is built on totalitarian-theocratic religious precepts that arise from outside and in opposition to the greater Afghan cultural continuum. Whatever political savviness the Taliban demonstrate in public-relations, the ideology first conceived by illiterate male refugees attending Pakistani madras is at the core of their movement. Understanding the distinction between Taliban ideology and the wider normative underpinning of Afghan religion is crucial to proving the capacity to confront the former while respecting the later. This does not assure victory, for the past conquests of the Taliban can surely attest to the threat they pose. However, so long as the Taliban movement is defined by fundamentalist ideology rooted in external interpretations of Islam, there will always remain a wedge to exploit and policy aimed at their containment or elimination is viable.

3. Group Identity and Belonging

BPC is faced with a range of factors that complicate partnership. Taken alone, state-to-state interactions cannot account for the wide variety of cultural and ethnic distinctions that influence, and in some cases separate Afghanistan’s population. Such divisions present obstacles to partnership, but can be mitigated with analysis and understanding of their role and disposition. Afghanistan is characterized by complex networks of group identity that are defined by ethnicity, geography, language, and tribal affiliation. During times of peace these multitude of identities have been successfully incorporated into a greater polity, but their balancing is a matter of supreme difficulty.
No visual representation or map of ethnic borders is sufficiently instructive to convey the identity of a particular region’s inhabitants. Equally confounding is the way in which the identity of an individual Afghan may be informed simultaneously or mutual exclusively with a range of elements. An individual Afghan may privilege one element of their identity over another and their perception of self may be highly situational or otherwise dependent on the role of the interlocutor. For this reason no single element of identity should be considered as solely indicative in considering a population. Some groups may express greater solidarity with neighbors from a different group as opposed to co-ethnics located elsewhere in the nation. Intermarriage, bilingualism, and cohabitation all play a role in blending population borders. Identity and belonging are not just debated by academics, but also hotly contested within the groups themselves. A dependence on oral histories and a long prevalence for local feuding does little to elucidate the already murky scorecard of group of affiliation. As such, Afghanistan's major constituencies should be analyzed, but never reduced to the sole indicator of affiliation or ideology.

Understanding tribal and ethnic affiliation yields opportunity and peril for policy makers in equal measure. If respected and engaged, such groups have provided ideal partners due to their deep seated influence. When ignored, or worse yet, aggrieved, they become easy tools for the adversary to exploit. The largest and most influential groups in order of population are the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen and Aimaqs. Smaller, but locally significant groups include the Nuristanis and Baluch among many others. Afghanistan is host to both tribal and non-tribal ethnic groups which forms a useful distinction in disentangling its inhabitants. These groups may live in more close-knit rural environments or comparatively cosmopolitan urban environments. Tribes are defined either by their alleged descent from a common ancestor, a trait most keenly demonstrated by the

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68 Ibid., 38-42.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 22-31.
Pashtuns, or by the presumptive linking of clans with uncertain lineage as a single group, as seen with the Uzbek, Turkmen, Hazaras, Kirghiz and Aimaqs.\footnote{Ibid.}

Tribes are supremely influential social-political groups whose long defined role in Afghan society has only increased in light of the erosion of state authority in modern conflicts. Linguistic differences exist throughout ethnic groups, but may be considered a defining feature of groups like the Tajiks, who are Persian speaking and largely urban dwelling. Although mostly Sunni, religious classification is useful in understanding the marginalization and persecution of the largely Shia Hazara. In times of great upheaval, ethnic groups have formed the basis for larger political and military bodies, as was the case in the struggle between Afghanistan's many warlords in the wake of Soviet withdrawal. Inter-ethnic organizations and cooperation are evidenced throughout Afghan history and no single group has held on to power for very long without significant overtures to multiple sub-populations.

This capacity allows for the existence of a culturally legitimate state, but the destabilizing aspect of decades of modern warfare should not be underestimated for its disruptive effects. That is not to say that the tribal or clan affiliation is an insurmountable obstacle to creating centralized governmental institutions, to include security forces. The success of these efforts will ultimately be contingent on their remaining inclusive. For the rural periphery, where the resilient structure of the tribe or clan has been a means of survival, BPC efforts must be adapted. While more complex than simply standing up standardized army or police units, many rural communities demand a more nuanced approach to security partnership. When properly implemented, BPC can be adapted to meet the dual demands of the wider national government and rural community. Achieving this balance must be considered a central facet of any security policy’s viability.
II. The Viability of US-Afghan Partnership: Legitimacy, Dependence, and the Question of Shared Objectives

The success of the BPC mission, like any security policy, is dependent on the strength of the Afghan-American partnership. At present, the relationship faces an array of obstacles and disruptors, to include the unsettled domestic legitimacy of the Afghan government, the existence of genuine as well as ingenuine motivations for cooperation, and the long shadow cast by each nation’s waning political will. It is only through precisely accounting for each of these dimensions that the unique dynamics at work in the partnership may be understood and ultimately improved. What becomes immediately clear through such scrutiny is the manifest asymmetry between the two nations. This holds true both in respect to their relative power as well as their normative preferences. Such differences do not preclude the potential for productive partnership, but they do highlight the need for American policy makers to understand that Afghanistan exists in a divergent political context which in turn demands a unique approach to cooperation.

1. State Legitimacy and Corruption

For any facet of the Afghan state to endure it must be viewed as legitimate by its own population. The origin of many present woes lie with the Bonn Agreement of 2001, where the United States and its allies backed the creation of a centralized unitary Afghan state.\(^72\) The resulting arrangement prioritized central authority in matters of governance at the ministerial level, the appointment of provincial governors, and the disposition of the security forces. This had led to much enmity between Kabul and provincial stakeholders, who often feel their place in the traditional balance of power as being overshadowed.\(^73\) With a restructuring of the Afghan constitution an unlikely premise, it becomes necessary for security policy makers to address this gap by reorienting capacity building efforts to include a localized dimension.


\(^{73}\) Ibid.
For their part, both the Karzai and Ghani administrations have demonstrated their willingness to participate in such programs even in the case that they cede a degree of power and resources away from the central government. This nominal flexibility speaks well for the potential of future cooperation.

Nonetheless, for whatever success certain aspects of security localization have had, past failures to ensure competence and good conduct have left behind a decidedly mixed legacy. In a positive demonstration of leadership, the Ghani administration has sought to address both the shortcoming of past programs and the pressing need for security localization through the establishment of a new Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANATF). While not yet conclusive, the effort has a strong structural balance. By basing the force in areas with local support and recruiting motivated members of the community, the ANATF is likely to be seen as legitimate by residents and make good use of their desire to defend their homes. When coupled with the support of a leadership cadre drawn from outside the province, and thus theoretically less susceptible to warlordism, the force also has an inbuilt balancing mechanism to avoid the failures of past programs. The case of the ANATF indicates an ideal way in which the BPC mission could support well-conceived Afghan policy and prioritize localization in the maintenance of legitimacy.

A prominent structural complication for the Afghan state has been the adoption of a democratic model. In a nation with a long memory, democracy is new and unproven. However, that is not to say democracy is incompatible with the prerogatives of the Afghan

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77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.
populace. Indeed, as rural populations exercise their right to vote, even in the face of violent Taliban reprisals, it is clear that many Afghans have a strong desire to participate in the political process.\footnote{Qaane, \textit{The 2018 Election Observed (7) in Daikundi}; Mujib Mashal, Fahim Abed, Fatima Faizi, \textit{Afghanistan Votes for Parliament Under Shadow of Taliban Violence} (The New York Times, 2018), https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/20/world/asia/afghanistan-election-vote.html.} Concerted attempts by the Taliban to violently suppress voting only denote its greater significance. The true strength of any insurgency is its support among the wider populace. Therefore, the Taliban’s actions in so brazenly menacing Afghan civilians reveal the group’s perception of political participation as a major threat to their own legitimacy. Given Afghanistan’s history of representative bodies such as the tribal jirga and the importance of consensus based power sharing, even in the era of the monarchy, there is an apt cultural basis for political engagement that may extend to democratic processes. It follows then, that if there is any silver lining for security policy amid the problematic introduction of modern democracy to Afghanistan, it is that Afghan citizens are actively seeking to play a role in their nation’s political future, and all to the detriment of the insurgency.

The greatest problems affecting Afghan democracy are not so much matters of theoretical acceptance as they are poor implementation of elections and negative performance of elected representatives. In Afghanistan all democratic processes endure the simultaneous burden of arduous state development and ongoing armed conflict.\footnote{Zakarya Hassani, Valerie Plesch, \textit{Afghans express doubts in democracy, fair elections ahead of parliamentary vote} (The Washington Post 2018), https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/sep/13/afghanistan-parliamentary-election-threatened-secu/} Increases in security capacity certainly ease the implementation of elections and foster positive perceptions of the central government. However, such progress requires an equally vigorous investiture in supporting anti-corruption measures and the development of the civil state. The success of elections are thus a highly visible intersection of the way in which civil and security developmental efforts intersect.
Despite this precarious balance, elections continue to be held and the courage of Afghan poll workers, organizers, and voters should not be understated.\textsuperscript{81} Unfortunately, problems persist throughout the democratic process giving rise to an environment of rampant corruption and inefficiency where malign or otherwise incompetent politicians are regularly empowered.\textsuperscript{82} As a result, elections have been stymied by fraud and relationships between politicians and their constituents are commonly exasperated.\textsuperscript{83} This breakdown in confidence is as much a danger to Afghanistan as any action undertaken by the insurgency.

Corruption is at the heart of much of this poor performance, as many elites have entered government solely to enrich themselves at the cost of the wider nation. Despite the enormity of funds allocated to Afghanistan, nearly every aspect of US aid and internal Afghan resources faces a gauntlet of graft and diversion.\textsuperscript{84} Within this glaring deficiency there exists a less intuitive, but highly important relationship. Not all forms of what could otherwise be deemed corruption are considered a culturally inappropriate phenomenon. Within Afghanistan there exists a form of what could be understood as “legitimate” or at least normalized corruption. With deep historical parallels in the traditional payments made for the cooperation of provincial elites, patronage networks are an old tradition, and one that is fiercely guarded by its beneficiaries.\textsuperscript{85} This presents a unique obstacle for international partnership. It must be understood that certain forms of corruption are not signs of programmatic failure, but rather the assertion of well-developed indigenous interests.

This is not to say that all corruption is legitimate. When taken to excess or otherwise threatening the wider community, corruption is seen as a delegitimizing force.\textsuperscript{86} However, for BPC to succeed in Afghanistan a degree of patronage must be accepted as a political reality. Seeking a rapid end to all patronage is just as likely to hamstring the state through

\textsuperscript{81} Mashal, Afghanistan Votes for Parliament Under Shadow of Taliban Violence.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{83} Qaane, The 2018 Election Observed (7) in Daikundi.
\textsuperscript{86} Clark, Graft and Remilitarisation.
sowing conflict as it is to improve governance. That is not say the US does not have more constructive means of checking its influence. In cases where patronage or outright corruption acutely threaten successful development, conditionality must be maintained as a coercive lever. Far too often corruption and inefficiency spiral out of control in Afghanistan, while the US fails to conditionally withhold resources. By adapting normative expectations of what constitutes corruption, the US will be better able to operate within the long prevailing political dynamic of Afghanistan, but this does not require it to abdicate responsibility in allocating funds. In all cases, prioritizing conditionality is a make-or-break factor for the ultimate viability of BPC.87

The ambiguity of corruption in Afghanistan directly influences the difficulty in delineating between constructive and obstructive partners. In broad terms, the US-Afghan partnership is host to two forms of cooperation. Genuine cooperation exists among civil servants, politicians, and members of the security forces who actively seek to better their nation at enormous risk to their own welfare and that of their families. Innumerable Afghans in uniform face such threats to themselves and their loved ones on a daily basis and it is to them that the burden of security ultimately falls too.88 These sacrifices must never be ignored. Conversely, there exists a practice of perverse existential dependence among those partners, even among high offices of government, who participate in bad faith and primarily to extract as much personal benefit as possible. In many cases this desire is born out of a perception of inevitable withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, which causes partners to “hedge bets” in their participation. The risk of cooperation with Americans and opposition to the Taliban is already dire. If Afghans come to mistrust the seriousness of the US in partnership, then governmental office becomes more attractive to white-collar criminals then to patriots. While anti-corruption measures, conditionality, and the vetting of partners can play a role in mitigating the persistence of such relationships, a complimentary

effort must be invested in the US signaling its clear intentions to sustain partnership and assuage fears of abandonment. It also bears pointing out that, when facing corruption, the Afghan government is not the only weak link. If the United States wishes to see Afghanistan, a developing state enduring an armed conflict, seriously curb corruption, then the US must make an equal effort to reign in the irresponsible spending and graft of its many government contractors. With the benefit of comparatively robust institutions, such measures should be more immediately actionable and no less important to the sustainability of the mission.

2. The Next Step for Partnership

Fundamentally, both the cultivation of engaged partnership and viability of sustainment are directly contingent on the variable of political will. By any measure, the BPC process faces a pronounced obstacle in the form of domestic political fatigue in the US. In the United States, the future of BPC must reckon with the conceptual difficulty in communicating to the American public, the mounting failures of previous strategy, and the general toll of what now amounts to over 17 years of commitment. In light of these factors, there is little enthusiasm among the American public for continued engagement in Afghanistan.89

In respect to the US side of the equation, the depleted state of domestic will could be considered to be the single greatest constraining force. Counterintuitively, a lack of popular enthusiasm is not necessarily an unworkable hindrance to continuing BPC. Similar long-term BPC missions conducted by the US and its allies continue throughout the globe to include the Balkans, a range of East Asian Partners, and much of South and Central America. Prevalent examples range from Columbia to Kosovo and Georgia to the Philippines. Each partnership exemplifies the distinguished pedigree of the United States in long engagement partner capacity building efforts. In particular, the lack of focus on Afghanistan throughout consecutive presidential campaigns and the strong prioritization towards domestic politics

89 Baxter Oliphant, After 17 years of war in Afghanistan, more say U.S. has failed than succeeded in achieving its goals, (Pew Research Center, 2018), http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/05/after-17-years-of-war-in-afghanistan-more-say-u-s-has-failed-than-succeeded-in-achieving-its-goals/.
indicate that US-Afghan partnership can be palatable so long as it avoids further rankling the American public.\textsuperscript{90} If the challenge to American political will was less a matter of duration and more a product of high casualties in repeated surges and internationally led offensives, then the framework of BPC may offer an ideal alternative. This will only be possible by emphasizing risk mitigation through a low operational footprint and constituent prioritization on enabling local actors rather than reverting to former patterns of unilateral offensive operations.

For the Afghan side of the equation, the question of political will is far more difficult to address. Nominally, the future of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is contingent on victory in its present conflict. The cost of so many years of fighting have left major pluralities of Afghans disaffected and supportive of a negotiated end to hostilities, but these proposed negotiations face several threats to their feasibility. From the start, the Taliban have little reason to consider political compromise as necessary when they perceive military success to be within reach. This is in many ways evidenced by Taliban refusal to negotiate with the Afghan government, opting instead to deal with the United States alone.\textsuperscript{91} In this dynamic, negotiation amounts to little more than a narrow face-saving agreement for withdrawal of international troops between the US and Taliban leaders in the Quetta Shura. The existence of such an exclusionary arrangement is a major contributor to Afghan demoralization and indicative of the rationale that leads some Afghans into disingenuous cooperation for short-term benefit.

A lesser considered and perhaps far more immediate threat to the success of talks is further a plurality of the Afghan population that consider peace negotiations as an unacceptable threat to their own survival. Such constituencies include both organized and unorganized groups either bound by political sensibilities or, in the case of persecuted


\textsuperscript{91} Ryan Crocker, I was ambassador to Afghanistan. This deal is a surrender (The Washington Post, 2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-was-ambassador-to-afghanistan-this-deal-is-a-surrender/2019/01/29/8700ed68-2409-11e9-ad53-824486280311_story.html?utm_term=.83345a04f196.
minorities like the Hazara, a pressing sense of existential danger. Among those most loudly in opposition are many influential former leaders of the Northern Alliance. In 2011 Ahmad Zia Massoud, the younger brother of the slain Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, along with Uzbeck strongman Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Hazara leader Muhammad Mohaqiq announced the creation of the National Front of Afghanistan. The organization billed itself as the successor to the Northern Alliance and boasted both a military and political wing made up of ethnic and ideological groups ardently opposed to any negotiations with the Taliban.

Similar organizations have likewise sprung up to include, former Northern Alliance leader and National Directorate of Security head Amrullah Saleh’s Basej-e Milli. While substantive in their own right such organizations only represent those anti-Taliban factions seeking to incorporate as political parties or otherwise act with official legitimacy. It would be fair to assess they are indicative of an even wider ideological investment of Afghanistan’s most vulnerable anti-Taliban factions. For reasons of religion or ideology these aforementioned groups view negotiations as perilous and the Taliban as an innately untrustworthy actor.

At the moment, current Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has signaled his willingness to engage in peace talks and achieved partial reconciliation with opponents to include Abdullah Abdullah. Now serving in the murkily defined office of Chief Executive, Abdullah lends much of his political weight to the numbers of anti-Taliban politicians who have flocked

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to his National Coalition for Afghanistan. Despite the poor likelihood for successful talks, an official willingness to engage in diplomacy is a necessary means of preserving the state’s legitimacy for those Afghans urging negotiation. Publicly, the United States has voiced its support for President Ghani’s continued attempts at negotiation and is presumed to be pursuing back channel as well as overt diplomacy with the militants. Nonetheless, the Taliban have rejected the possibility of true negotiated compromise between all parties and rapidly returned to hostilities following any limited cease fire.

Ever the pragmatist, President Ghani has continued to build up his nation’s security capacity, including the planned expansion of its special operations forces (SOF). This indicates the continued resolve of the central government to militarily challenge the Taliban and other anti-government forces by strengthening the units of the ANDSF with the greatest offensive capability. While SOF have proved to be the most effective members of the ANDSF, their expansion does little to remedy the lackluster nature of conventional security forces, and may in fact dilute their efficiency. To be truly successful such measures must be balanced with the development of localized security like the new Territorial Force, in order to compliment an offensive capability with a sustainable rural holding force.

With the Taliban remaining convinced of the possibility of military victory and fail to make genuine diplomatic overtures, the peace process is at present incapable of bringing an end to the conflict. Thus, if the US desires to fulfill its national security priorities in Afghanistan it must continue to support the Afghan government and the ANDSF. The current

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99 Ibid.
The presidential administration of Afghanistan has made prudent steps towards shoring up state legitimacy and the divided political will of the nation. Through pragmatically seeking solutions to localized security and balancing a willingness for diplomatic engagement with the strengthening of potent special operations forces, the Afghan government has indicated a constructive basis for continued partnership. Domestic US considerations add certain stipulations for continued operations to include a need for a low-footprint, but are far from unworkable. Ultimately, questions of legitimacy are not easily solved through the pursuit of any single policy and will require long-term internationally supported state building efforts. In the interim, the basis for constructive partnership in BPC is evident and will do much to strengthen the relationship between Afghan citizens and their government.

III. The Disposition of the Insurgency: Separating Reconcilable and Irreconcilable Adversaries

To effectively execute BPC in Afghanistan, the insurgency, which comprised of numerous groups, must be deconstructed into its major components and archetypes. Analyzing the insurgency in this fashion allows for BPC to be structured deliberately to face the range of active threats and the localized nature of the conflict. Each of these groups pose a danger to the existential security of the central government, and by extension the long-term national security interests of the United States. This adversarial landscape includes criminal cartels, local strongmen, and transnational terrorists. However, the single most significant threat is that of the greater Taliban-dominated insurgency. While the end goal of the US-Afghan partnership may be inflicting military defeat or forcing an opponent to the negotiating table, there exists no-one-size-fits-all strategy. Indeed, offensive force alone is incapable of defeating an asymmetric threat and when improperly applied may only alienate the populace and strengthen the insurgency. Nonetheless, the orientation of some militants makes confrontation an inevitably.
1. Insurgent Archetypes

There are two major varieties of insurgent in Afghanistan. The majority of fighters are in fact disgruntled or opportunistic locals, who may be reconciled and convinced to cease fighting. Conversely, a minority of hard core ideologues form the backbone of dedicated insurgent groups, and a more mobile force capable of fighting across the entirety of the country. Owing to their dedication to the cause and the status of their involvement, the prospect of reconciliation is unlikely. Instead, the threat posed by such die-hards requires a security based countermeasure. The local insurgent is by definition an extension of the community and is therefore the most difficult adversary to counter. His motivation for taking up arms may stem from ideological sympathy to the insurgency, particularly in light of appeals to religious conviction and xenophobic nationalism. In some cases the decision to join the fight can originate in more opportunistic calculations. Aiding the insurgency can yield material benefits including salaries that can be lifesaving in an otherwise poverty stricken nation. By the US Department of Defense's own dire calculus, Taliban salaries often range higher than those of the Afghan security forces themselves.100

Historically, Afghan communities have proven to be extremely flexible in their affiliation.101 Throughout the era of Persian domination, dynastic disputes among the Durrani, and even Mujahideen-era conflict, Afghan armed factions have fluidly transitioned from positions of rebellion to reconciliation, as survival demands. This is not to say that Afghan factions do not retain unique goals and interests, but rather that they demonstrate an acumen for outlasting potentially disastrous conflict. In this fashion, a community's ability to

“back the winning side” could be considered an evolutionary adaptation geared towards ensuring its continued survival. While the greater insurgency has the capacity to actively seek out local support, the catalyst for local resistance often lies foremost with the failures of the Afghan state and the international Coalition.¹⁰²

Collateral damage to non-combatants and local property from offensive action is the most obvious form of such failure.¹⁰³ Less intuitive illustrations come from the knock-on effects of actions like counter-narcotics operations. While the immediate objective of such operations may seem a logical way to deprive insurgents of funds, they also economically disadvantage entire communities who rely on opium cultivation for survival.¹⁰⁴ Such instances are classical examples of how an overly narrow focus on countering the insurgency may only drive populations further into the hands of the adversary. Perhaps most ignored of all, the very presence of armed outsiders in a community can be a catalyst for conflict. This is most strikingly evident in the case of interactions with the international Coalition, but can even affect operations of Afghan security forces who may likewise be treated as outsiders.

When facing local insurgents, BPC must be geared towards responding to the grievances of alienated communities. Rather than be dictated from a foreign template for effective security, local Afghans and the ANDSF should maintain a wide latitude in setting goals and mission requirements. As stated in previous chapters, the common desire for autonomy and a distrust of outsiders is a major justification for prioritizing security localization. In some cases ALP programs have proven adequate for the ease in which they

¹⁰² Mansfield, Stirring up the Hornet’s Nest, 5-8;

As an editorial choice the use of term “Coalition” is intended to provide a short form for the myriad of acronyms encapsulating joint US-NATO operations to include the International Security Assistance Force and Resolute Support mission.

¹⁰³ Mansfield, Stirring up the Hornet’s Nest, 5-8.;
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 9-10.
can empower already legitimate and dedicated local forces. That being said the ongoing push towards the Territorial Force represents a developmental improvement.

By combining localized efforts within the comparatively professionalized and trusted structure of the ANA, the ANATF is ideally suited towards building more durable security structures. So long as they are formed with the consent of the community, held to a professional standard of conduct, and logistically sustained, the programs are well poised to circumvent xenophobic friction and avoid further communities from falling to the insurgency. A shift in operational mentality is equally important for capacity building efforts. The desires of the Afghan government and the international Coalition to aggressively engage the insurgency must be tempered by a more nuanced delineation between those threats that enjoy large scale community support and those that do not. The Afghan government does not have the luxury of pursuing all possible fronts and targets simultaneously. In regions of Afghanistan where the insurgency is predominantly a community supported phenomenon, offensive action alone is futile. First order priorities for BPC should include the strengthening of friendly or disputed areas with a mix of conventional forces and security localization. On a case by case basis, containment, counter-attack, or negotiation with insurgent held areas should remain an open, but subordinate objective. With this focus in mind, concentrating on BPC is well suited to preserving gains and minimizing further loses.

The approach to winning back communities is a decidedly complicated matter. The singular variable working in such efforts favor is the potential that many local insurgents may be reconcilable. The historical trend of factional “flip flopping” is without doubt a confounding variable for planning, but it is also evidence that hostile local communities can be reincorporated. The United States and Afghan government would be well served to embrace


their more unconventional assets. Such assets to include Army Special Forces and Civil Affairs units have long proven capable of forming enduring partnerships with local communities and isolating insurgents. This emphasis on deconfliction at a community by community basis was keenly articulated and put into practice as early as 2009 in a policy paper entitled “One Tribe at a Time”.\(^\text{107}\)

Despite a lackluster commitment from American military leaders, the findings of the paper’s author, Major James Gant, in forming partnerships with tribal communities, are every bit as relevant for the present stage of conflict, and must not go unheeded. Dedicated groups, along the vision of Major Gant’s “Tribal Engagement Teams”, have the greatest potential to win over local support and ensure far reaching cooperation. As many local insurgencies form in response to systemic failures on the part of the central government and Coalition, negotiations and an emphasis on providing basic goods and services can go a long way towards deconfliction.

While offensive or counter-offensive action appear nominally more decisive, they are not necessarily preferable. As a general rule, it is more important to mitigate collateral harm than to achieve limited offensive success. The ideal win-win scenario for a counter-insurgent is based on exploiting the missteps of the adversary. Interactions between die-hard insurgents and local communities can often produce considerable friction of their own.\(^\text{108}\) In such cases, reconciliation and or defection of local fighters has proven a devastating counter-strategy.\(^\text{109}\) The resulting so called “uprising” forces have often been aided or directed by clandestine work on the part of the Afghan intelligence community.\(^\text{110}\) While imperfect actors when taken alone, these “uprisings” constitute potential openings for BPC support and convergence with more structured local security institutions.

\(^\text{107}\) James Gant, One Tribe at a Time (Nine Sisters Imports, 2009), http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/5042~v~One_Tribe_at_a_Time___A_Strategy_for_Success_in_Afghanistan.pdf.
\(^\text{109}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{110}\) Osman, Enemy Number One.
The second major category of insurgent takes the form of the hardened and generally irreconcilable adversary. Such militants are analogous to “professional” insurgents who are engaged in hostilities primarily as members of greater organizations rather than localized communities. For transnational terrorists like ISIS-K (Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham–Khorasan Province) and al-Qaeda, as well as the inner core of nationalist actors like the Taliban, armed conflict is the means to achieving total victory. Also present are strong ideological ties with the organization and a reinforcing dynamic where financial support and individual status are tied to membership. Such fighters have little to gain from compromise due to their dependence on continued backing from their wider network and foreign benefactors. When responding to such threats, US and Afghan national security interests cannot be easily satisfied by either achieving speedy military gains or diplomatic compromise. Alternatively, objectives should be more limited to building sustainable Afghan security capacity for the long-term conflict.

Such irreconcilable adversaries may be further weakened by heeding the previously mentioned methods of localizing security forces and preventing the spread of local insurgencies by focusing on engagement with individual communities. However, the organized and mobile nature of hardened insurgents requires the added strengthening of precision offensive assets like the Afghan Special Security Forces. Such elite Afghan forces are the most precise means of offensively engaging irreconcilable threats while minimizing potential for collateral damage.\(^\text{111}\) As with all security assets, these forces should not be over relied on. When appropriately balanced the ASSF have distinguished themselves as ideal partners, but there efficacy is best realized as a complimentary offensive tool to local security building in the wider BPC process.

2. The Taliban

Throughout the conflict, the Taliban have been the most effective insurgent force and command by far the greatest influence on Afghan territory. Organizationally, the Taliban are structured around the central authority of the Quetta Shura. Key to their endurance is the continued support of elements of the Pakistani state to include the ISI.112 This operational relationship affords the Taliban a safe haven as well as the means of financial and material sustainment.113 Within Afghanistan, one of the greatest boons to Taliban success has been an ability to attract both major insurgent archetypes to its cause. Disgruntled local fighters can be recruited or forcibly coerced to the Taliban, where they then benefit from the greater movement’s resources. This relationship is keenly demonstrated in Helmand, where the Ishaqzai tribe is functionally synonymous with the Taliban.

Having felt themselves marginalized by a lack of representation in the 2001 Bonn agreement, the Ishaqzai tribe has blurred factional lines between provincial conflict against rival local factions and the central government which they view as their enemy’s benefactor.114 Their participation in the wider insurgency is indicative of the way the local context of intertribal warfare can intersect with the nationwide struggle between the Taliban and the Afghan state. With the proclivity of Afghan factions for flexible affiliation already well noted, these instances of locals “reflagging” as Taliban are frequent, but should not be mistaken for seamless continuity. Defections, infighting, and assassinations occur in instances when nominal members of the Taliban have disagreed over power sharing, local goals, and the role of Pakistan.115 It is for this reason that such a patchwork affiliation can be

113 Ibid.
114 Rahmatullah, Helmand (2).
exploited by reconciliation, negotiations with the state, and defection instigated by Afghan intelligence services. By contrast, head on conflict with such local Taliban should always be a last resort, as its collateral consequences are easily seized upon by the greater organization.

In addition to a local dimension, the backbone of the Taliban is built on dedicated insurgents who can take part in fighting across the nation. These include orthodox adherents to Taliban Deobandi ideology and even a plurality of Salafi. In comparison to their local counterparts, such dedicated insurgents are directly loyal to the central leadership of the Taliban. Despite nominal cohesion, infighting has occurred in the wake of matters of secession, such as the power vacuum left by the death of Mullah Omar. In recent years, the emergence of ISIS-K in Afghanistan has also led to instances of defection. ISIS-K has facilitated this through its ideological appeal to Taliban Salafi and the high degree of economic incentives it offers fighters.

In all cases, the enduring threat posed by the inner core of the Taliban is the organization’s commitment to violent conflict. Ideologically the Taliban possess no willingness to operate as a peaceful political party within the structure of an Afghan state it rejects as illegitimate. This is evident when we consider that, throughout all stages of the conflict, the group has never wavered in its stated objective of reestablishing its vision of a “true Islamic system” (waqe’i Islami nezam).

By further refusing to negotiate with the Afghan government, the Taliban has made it abundantly clear that negotiated compromise is considered unacceptable. These stances

118 Ibid.
120 Safi, Understanding Hurdles to Afghan Peace Talks.
121 Ibid.
122 Crocker, I was ambassador to Afghanistan. This deal is a surrender.
are influenced by the group’s strong military position. Beyond matters of ideology, the continued backing of Pakistan leaves the Taliban with the added assurance of logistical sustainment. In the wake of major military success, immense de facto control over rural areas, and the telegraphed US desire for withdrawal, the Taliban perceive total victory to be an attainable objective. In light of this present orientation and their historical track record of cooperation with transnational terrorists, the Taliban continue to be a pressing national security threat to the United States. Currently, there exists no diplomatic assurance the group could offer to satisfactorily guarantee the end of this threat. Therefore, the only realistic security policy towards safeguarding the shared interests of the US-Afghan partnership is to further develop and sustain the ANDSF. For the US to meet its security objectives, the insurgency need not be eliminated, but it must be checked, and preferably by a sustainable indigenous force. There may come a day when the balance of power changes and true compromise is possible, but at present BPC represents the most direct means of preserving the Afghan state and enabling long-term independent operational capacity.

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There are no blank slates in Afghanistan. Contemporary BPC efforts must reckon with the after-effects of nearly 14 years of prior strategy, in which contrary strategies were emphasized. This era was defined by an acute lack of forethought in the initial invasion and the landscape of quasi-improvisational approaches that followed. The 2001 intervention itself was precipitated by an almost single-minded focus on destroying al-Qaeda and rendering Afghanistan unusable as a future haven for adversaries. Destruction of the Taliban’s self-declared Emirate was a necessary extension of this objective, but its effects were far reaching and largely unforeseen.

It was an extremely lofty proposition to fill the power vacuum of a nation so thoroughly depleted from decades of conflict and divided amongst numerous armed factions. Although the United States rightfully identified that Afghanistan’s stability was crucial to preventing the return of transnational terror groups to the region, the sudden policy transition from combat to development caught US planners flat-footed. To meet changing goals, a lightning campaign of Unconventional Warfare, pairing the irregulars of the Afghan Northern Alliance with small teams of US advisors, would have to be transformed into a gargantuan process of simultaneous reconstruction and counterinsurgency. This formulation was complicated by American domestic politics, which put a premium on rapid success in defeating the insurgency, often to the detriment of long-term planning and the relationship with the Afghan populace.

As a security policy, Counter Insurgency or COIN, as it became to be known, paired admirable aspirations for winning hearts and minds with a mix of approaches targeting the insurgency. Unfortunately, the methods used toward achieving the later goal were often self-defeating and contradictory. Two prevalent themes of COIN stand out as relevant to this thesis: first an over emphasis on kinetic operations, Second an insufficient focus on working by, with, and through local actors. Analyzing these failures is a crucial to understand the modern security landscape and adequately structuring the BPC mission.
1. Victory on Horseback and Initiative Lost

Before nation building began in earnest, the United States masterfully executed a campaign of Unconventional Warfare. The initial UW-based intervention in 2001 saw an elite force of US advisors successfully integrate themselves into a patchwork of indigenous armed factions, nominally known as the Northern Alliance. Together, the advisors and their indigenous partner forces were able to rapidly defeat the Taliban. By wresting control of urban centers and critical infrastructure, the operation further benefited from a groundswell of new volunteers with each subsequent victory. In sequence, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kunduz, Kabul, and Kandahar were seized, demonstrating the capacity for effective US-Afghan cooperation even with fractious irregular forces.124

Taking dense urban sprawl ranks among the most difficult of military tasks, and yet the Northern Alliance was continuously successful. These operations succeeded because they prioritized the role of indigenous forces, while utilizing Americans as enablers and advisors. Objectives were established jointly on the premise of deposing the Taliban in a confluence of the interests of local communities and the United States.125 This emboldened Afghan partner forces, allowing for the aggressive mentality necessary in offensive operations and added critical support from the civil population. The reliance on Afghan contributions also foreshadowed future tactics necessary for victory including the inspiring of anti-Taliban uprisings that secured Herat and Tarin-Kowt.126

125 PBS Frontline, *The Fall of Kandahar*.
Likewise, victory in Kandahar was largely the product of politically savvy reconciliation made possible by Hamid Karzai, an early Pashtun ally of the United States and future Afghan President. At Kandahar, Karzai demonstrated his political acumen by exploiting the utility of working within the dynamics of Pashtun identity and tribal affiliation by securing Taliban surrender of the city without a costly siege. The talents of US Army Special Forces, for whom language skills and partner force operations are major proficiencies, were instrumental in this cooperative model. While a large-scale deployment of conventional ground forces may have brought about a more rapid and cleanly micromanaged victory, the loss of partner capability and trust this would have engendered would have overshadowed any benefit.

In 2001 mutual trust was established because American advisors were directly embedded with their Afghan counterparts. Together they endured the same battlefield hardships and faced the very real chance of defeat. In this stage of fighting the Taliban benefited from former Soviet/PDPA stockpiles, including heavy armor and artillery. When compared to the austere supplies of the Northern Alliance, the Taliban enjoyed complete conventional superiority in addition to maintaining a rugged capacity for operating as irregular infantry. This blend of capability made early combat operations extremely perilous. Despite the constant threat of encirclement and destruction, US advisors fought alongside their partners, placing their survival and success in the hands of their Afghan counterparts. Advanced American assets including airpower, intelligence, and logistical sustainment were used to enhance, but not replace the contributions of Afghan forces.

Likewise the unique form of Northern Alliance forces, who often relied on light equipment and horse cavalry, were supported constructively rather than forcibly.

127 PBS Frontline, The Fall of Kandahar.
128 Gary Schroen, First In: How Seven CIA Officers Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan (Presidio Press, 2005), Kindle Edition, 68.
129 Perry, Toppling the Taliban, Air-Ground Operations in Afghanistan, 51.
reordered. Thus, US advisors benefited from an able partner force based along structures and equipment they were familiar with operating and capable of maintaining. As ex-Soviet/PDPA stockpiles were captured, more advanced vehicles and weapons were integrated gradually without removing Afghan fighters from their comfort zone and key center of gravity. The Taliban were soon ejected from power and forced to seek refuge in neighboring Pakistan, often with the direct intercession of the Pakistani state. In a matter of months, the decisive combination of an Afghan first mentality and small US footprint had succeeded. Furthermore, because the US cultivated widespread popular support, the Taliban had been isolated, providing the basis to prevent their return to power.

In any other conflict the convergence of factors enjoyed by the US in early 2001 would have been a “winning hand”. However, the US had been so preoccupied with military objectives it had failed to consider the scale of efforts necessary to stabilize and reconstruct Afghanistan. In turn, the ersatz stabilization plan that took shape after initial victory was rushed and uneven in its regard for the wishes of the Afghan populace. The Bonn Conference gave the new Afghan state a centralized unitary structure that both isolated rural stakeholders and instantly created a dynamic of winners and losers. While the new Afghanistan had a central government and a host of newly empowered chiefs, it lacked the means to provide security and shore up its own legitimacy. The Northern Alliance was always a force of part-time fighters rather than a centralized army. With the Taliban seemingly defeated, most of these forces rapidly disbanded and returned to the demands of their individual community responsibilities. Leftover were more than enough armed men to cause trouble, but little signs of something more constructive.

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131 Schroen, *First In*, 259-268.
134 Clark, *Graft and Remilitarisation*.
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid.
In this fashion, a lack of forethought towards BPC left a complete vacuum of reliable indigenous security partners, thus providing the impetus for the ever-expanding deployment of conventional troops from the US and its NATO allies. Still hot from the success of the intervention, such forces benefited from a conspicuous, albeit short lived, welcome from the Afghan populace.\textsuperscript{137} Afghans hoped that newly arrived foreign forces would bring about the speedy reintroduction of essential goods and services, as well as provide a crucial buffer against the predations of local criminals and strongmen.\textsuperscript{138} In both cases, they were disappointed. True countrywide policing would have certainly been infeasible for the initial international force, which directly benefited from its palatable low footprint. Nonetheless the Coalition needlessly lost the faith of Afghan civilians it failed to protect within its own sphere of influence.

Even where the Coalition had a firm foothold, it directed its efforts primarily to securing Kabul and pursuing escaping terrorists. As preparing indigenous Afghan security forces had only been an afterthought, there was nothing to pick up the slack. This regrettably left the civil populace to the mercy of malicious actors directly empowered by the sudden vacuum of authority. With an overly narrow focus on interdicting the Taliban and al-Qaeda, a pattern that would cast a shadow on operations to the present day, foreign troops failed to meet the expectations of Afghan civilians and quickly became a divisive presence. In their new role, foreign forces became something of a magnet for violent confrontation with militants. When combined with the absence of the Afghan central government, it is little surprise that local communities were alienated. Gradually, the United States recognized the danger of this insufficiency, but not before it had given fertile ground for a new phase of insurgency to develop.

By 2003, the Taliban began to effect their resurgence in earnest. In this effort they directly capitalized on the grievances of stakeholders who found themselves marginalized in the post-Bonn order. Fighting continued with the die-hard nucleus of the Pakistan-based-

\textsuperscript{137} Barfield, \textit{The War for Afghanistan: A Very Brief History}, 120-132.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
Taliban joining forces with innumerable local factions. The patchwork insurgency that followed, allowed the Taliban to take up the offensive once again. Amid a rapidly declining situation on the ground, the United States then attempted to reorient the mission into a comprehensive security and reconstruction policy, and so COIN was born.

2. Why Clear-Hold-Build Fails

At the heart of COIN lies a structural approach aimed at achieving three successive phases.\textsuperscript{139} In order of sequence these phases are Clear-Hold-Build.\textsuperscript{140} A part of the greater “Inkblot” strategy, Clear-Hold-Build seeks to create ever expanding zones of governmental control, pushing out the insurgency and spreading like ink on the face of a map. As with the majority of COIN, Clear-Hold-Build suffered from widespread failures originating in its very structure. Clear-Hold-Build undermines potential success by overemphasizing the role of international troops, who are often uninitiated in local nuances and in all cases a temporary presence. As partner capacity is already underdeveloped, prioritizing Clear-Hold-Build puts the demand of operations squarely on foreign forces.\textsuperscript{141}

The formulation begins with the premise of a “clearing” security focused operation that presents at least as many problems as it offers solutions to. Killing insurgents can be acutely counterproductive if they are respected locals with the sympathy of the community and all the more so in a culture that places a premium on honor and exercises a propensity for blood-feuds.\textsuperscript{142} In addition to this effect, even the most judiciously managed clearing

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\textsuperscript{142} Gant, \textit{One Tribe at a Time}, 13-14;

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operation may cause collateral damage and loss of civilian life.\textsuperscript{143} In the case that the insurgency draws a majority, or even a significant plurality of its fighters from the local community, “clearing” amounts more to the practice of creating exponential friction.\textsuperscript{144} This all occurs to the detriment of transitioning to the building phase where reconstruction and stabilization can be prioritized. In this manner, the indemnity sewn by the clearing operation is well posed to generate perpetual conflict, heading off any opportunity for deconfliction. In purely theoretical terms in may be possible to dominate a local population long enough to force acquiescence, but with the international presence intended to be temporary, Afghan capacity uneven, and the insurgency able to reinforce conflict areas, Clear-Hold-Build remains a recipe for instability.\textsuperscript{145}

The second “Hold” phase of the strategy is likewise problematic. While in the broad sense, Afghan territory must be necessarily held against the insurgency, this is a meaningless objective if the problem originates in a preexisting lack of community support. A district capital should have the benefit of a robust “Hold” capacity to ward off mobile elements of massed insurgents, but a contested rural community cannot be held if the opposition is made up of large numbers of its own residents. If the previous clearing operations occurred with collateral damage, as can be usually expected, then the severity of the problem is only multiplied. The long promised focus on a Build phase will never occur in earnest, and attempts to bring about simultaneous development efforts will always face insurgent disruption.

Many of the deficiencies inherent in Clear-Hold-Build, like all of COIN, can be traced to the difficulty of balancing three major priorities: force protection, distinction between enemy combatants and non-combatants, and the physical elimination of insurgents.\textsuperscript{146} It has

\textsuperscript{144} Mansfield, \textit{Stirring up the Hornet’s Nest}, 5-8.
\textsuperscript{146} Zambernardi, \textit{Counterinsurgency’s Impossible Trilemma}, 22.
been posited that while all three objectives are desirable, a counter-insurgent can only reliably satisfy two of the three, thus giving rise to the concept of an “Impossible Trilemma.” Rather than be taken as a hard and fast rule, the concept of the trilemma is a useful tool in understanding the burden of competing priorities facing COIN. In the first case, the demands of force protection have often isolated US forces from the very communities they are attempting to interact with.\textsuperscript{147} Rather than live with or near the local populace, force protection concerns have often concentrated international troops in sprawling bases. As a result, insurgents are given a free hand to maneuver in and around local communities, while international troops, secured behind layers of concrete barriers and concertina wire, are slow to respond and thus discredited as potential protectors. This isolation acutely dissuades local communities from the risky proposition of supporting the central government.\textsuperscript{148}

Contrary deployment strategies can succeed decisively, but not without greater risk. In one example, the direct embedding of units like Major James Gant’s advisors, who lived alongside the Mohmand tribe, allowed for a robust ALP program, but its success was predicated on building mutually supporting community partnership.\textsuperscript{149} “We were safer in Mangwel than we were in our own firebase in Asadabad”.\textsuperscript{150} In the appraisal of Major Gant it is evident that the close bond formed between his men and the local community provided his greatest means of force protection. Conversely, when improperly positioned and without the benefit of strong local support, dispersed combat outposts have been ideal targets for massed Taliban attack. Both the 2008 Battle of Wanat and 2009 Battle of Kamdesh, involved isolated US bases sustaining high casualties while narrowly surviving Taliban attempts at overrunning their perimeter.\textsuperscript{151} Such attacks illustrated the vulnerability of remote combat outposts and the underlying push towards more concentrated deployments.

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{149} Gant, \textit{One Tribe at a Time}.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 15.
Subsequently, the emphasis on distinguishing between civilians and combatants has been critical to the sustainability of US efforts on the ground, but is also fraught with pitfalls. Throughout the conflict, insurgents have responsively adapted to the restrictions imposed by Coalition rules of engagement. Prominent examples of such adaptation include making use of unarmed spotters and scouts, hiding weapon caches in prearranged ambushed positions, and initiating contact from within civilian buildings.\textsuperscript{152} On balance, international forces have prioritized the protection of noncombatants, but the very setting of asymmetric conflict makes civilian casualties a near certainty.\textsuperscript{153} This priority is often directly in conflict with the final element of the trilemma which prizes the elimination of insurgents.

Over the course of the conflict US policy has embraced every combination of pairings within COIN’s “trilema”, oftentimes simultaneously, and without decisive progress. This had led to the supposition that Counter-Insurgency itself is impossible. However, the seemingly insurmountable nature of the balance is symptomatic of a misframing of the conflict. International troops, as temporary forces and outsiders whose presence hinges on continued domestic support may be handicapped, but Afghan forces are a different matter entirely.\textsuperscript{154} Through central-local partnership, Afghan forces are capable of greater sacrifices in force protection, while maintaining an appropriate balance of restraint and offensive capability.\textsuperscript{155}

Unlike foreign forces, their presence is intended to be a permanent one. Once committed, the survival of their state and/or local community is contingent on victory. This provides a superior basis for long-term cooperation. Furthermore, as Afghan forces operate from within the local culture, distinctions between friend and foe that may be challenging for

\textsuperscript{153} Zambernardi, \textit{Counterinsurgency’s Impossible Trilemma}, 27
\textsuperscript{154} Cordesman, \textit{The Afghanistan Campaign: Can we win?}, 10-16.
\textsuperscript{155} Zambernardi, \textit{Counterinsurgency’s Impossible Trilemma}, 31.
outsiders are far more intuitive.\textsuperscript{156} This is not to say that such a process would be without endemic hurdles of its own. However, addressing the imperfections of Afghan security assets cannot be indefinitely postponed. Rather, prioritizing Afghan capability from the onset of operations and using US resources only to smooth out shortcomings through BPC would provide a more constructive approach to tackling COIN. In the present day, the foundation of the tools necessary to engage in such Afghan-led sustained engagement are present. Combining the precision offensive tools of the ASSF and the localized dimension of the ALP or ANATF forms a sound theoretical model.\textsuperscript{157} Such tools only exist due to a shifting focus of international forces on the BPC mission. In this way, much of the trilemma of COIN can be mitigated. However, such an approach was acutely lacking in the early stages of the conflict, and its absence greatly disadvantaged the US-Afghan partnership.

Clear-Hold-Build fails because it multiplies its own adversaries, but it also fails because it does not adequately prioritize the efforts of Afghan forces and the formulation of jointly defined objectives at the level of the local Afghan community and the central government. That being said, Clear-Hold-Build is not without its merits and its departure from purely offensive Counter-Insurgency is a step in the right direction. The underlying problems it faces are largely a factor of the extreme complexity of the political situation on the ground. Communities are not composed of easily distinguishable civilians desperate for rescue and villainous insurgents committed to a fight.\textsuperscript{158} Instead, every community is a latticework of disparate and often competing interests generally seeking personal advantage.

Constructively disentangling these latticeworks into bodies that can be shaped through security policy is no easy task. Among the greats vulnerabilities of COIN is the conceit that its model is capable of working everywhere, rather than being limited by pre-

\textsuperscript{156} Gant, \textit{One Tribe at a Time}, 27-29.
\textsuperscript{158} Ucko, \textit{Clear-Hold-Build-Fail?}. 
engagement factors and the disposition of the target community. Where Clear-Hold-Build has continuously fallen short is in its pre-engagement pursuit of partnership. Whether in Afghan or US hands, improving COINs prospects rests on achieving local partnership from the onset of operations. In the absence of a clear route to partnership only an overwhelming and sustainable force presence will be capable of holding an area. The latter option may be necessary in certain cases, but is limited in its utility and best left to holding critical urban areas and infrastructure. In most cases, without first partnering, there can be no hope of clearing let alone building.

The need for a leading role for Afghan civilians and security forces alike is central to the issue. Successful COIN requires communities to be addressed on an individual basis in order to identify the causes of violence and their relationship with the insurgency. As the legitimacy of the state is often at the core of the conflict, establishing a basis for partnership cannot be left to a later stage of holding or building. In these cases Afghan forces, particularly with the aid of locally recruited units like the ALP or Territorial Force, have a far superior grasp of cultural knowledge and better claim to legitimacy.

One size fits all “clearing” would be better substituted for a pre-engagement process designed to identify local grievances and offer opportunities for reconciliation and partnership. Whether achieved through the form of Tribal Engagement Teams proposed by Major James Gant, the direct appeals to kinship that won Hamid Karzai Kandahar, security localization seen in the ANATF, or covert campaigns inspiring uprisings, the goal is the same. Establishing joint objectives and avenues for partnership between the local community and national government from the onset of operations are crucial to success and engendering legitimacy to the Afghan state. Such an approach favors burden sharing and prioritizes the role and contribution of local forces. By contrast, relying on International troops

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159 Ibid.
161 Gant, One Tribe at a Time, 26-27.
162 Ibid.; Hanlin, One Team’s Approach To Village Stability Operations.
to do the heavy lifting before achieving an optimal handover point to their Afghan counterparts has repeatedly failed. Before this dynamic it becomes necessary to acknowledge, what cannot be first secured with host nation assets can likely not be held by them.

The Afghan government does not have the means to simultaneously engage all areas of its territory, a fact the myriad of currently contested or Taliban occupied areas attests to. In light of this fact, a policy of nationwide COIN and Clear-Hold-Build is unsustainable. That does not leave the US-Afghan partnership without options. The slow realization of deficiencies in Coalition-led COIN has contributed to the post 2014 shift in focus towards BPC. Among its benefits, prioritizing US efforts on BPC removes an international heavy focus in a contentious clearing role. Instead, BPC allows the Afghan government to develop and sustain their own capacity, while more sensibly applying force on communities it currently holds or may later sway in its favor.

3. The Failure of Kinetics

Clear-Hold-Build is far from the only problematic component of security policy circa 2001-2014. The hearts and minds focus of COIN was also seriously undercut by a parallel focus on kinetic tools and offensive operations. These included, direct action raids undertaken by SOF, counter-narcotic operations, targeted killings facilitated by drones, and large scale offensives. As a matter of framing, the differing focus of such operations often disrupted human-centric Counter-Insurgency. Likewise, the high demand of so many parallel operations and a desire to simultaneously influence the maximum possible span of territory necessitated unsustainable demands on personnel allocation. As BPC efforts were not the focus of operations, Afghan capacity was correspondingly underdeveloped. Therefore, expansions in international troop deployments continued to be the recourse of

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164 Ibid.
165 Ibid.
166 Mansfield, *Stirring up the Hornet’s Nest* 1, 5-9.
choice for US theater-level commanders and successive presidential administrations. The resulting strategies of successive surges and the mentality they fostered won short-term improvements in security conditions, at the cost of providing long-term indigenous capability.\textsuperscript{168} As the withdrawal of international combat troops illustrates, gains made by the surges proved to be unsustainable, and greatly fatigued both the Afghan and US public in the perception of the conflict.

A popular saying holds that when one has a hammer everything looks like a nail. As the world’s foremost military power, the United States entered the Afghan conflict with no shortage of advanced tools. While to its credit, the US pursued a number of unconventional strategies aimed at reconstruction and Counter-Insurgency, the temptation to lean on offensive power has been irresistible. As previously explored, the myriad of armed factions who resented the post-Bonn order coupled with the long influence of the Taliban makes Afghanistan a battlespace rich in potential adversaries. Interdicting these adversaries through kinetic actions has been an omnipresent facet of US security policy. Certainly the elimination of insurgents constitutes an intuitive goal of Counter-Insurgency. However, the perils of such an approach are manifest in the simple fact that insurgencies are inherently resistant to attritional warfare.\textsuperscript{169}

Yet another popular anecdote holds that for militant organizations like al-Qaeda or the Taliban, there is no more dangerous role than the position of 2nd or 3rd in command. This stems from the long patterns of nominally successful targeted killings of militant commanders that in turn only seem to beget their unceremonious replacement. Among the most readily recognizable forms of such kinetic strategies has been the use of Special Operations Forces in Direct Action raids.\textsuperscript{170} Often executed under cover of darkness for


maximum surprise, these raids are intended to cripple the insurgency through capturing or killing high value targets and psychologically demoralize other militants to disincentivize further hostile action. Regarded in a vacuum, it is a robust logic. By contrast, when taken with the far reaching goals of COIN in mind it appears notably more counter-productive. In an apparent example of tactics dictating strategy, Direct Action raids generally succeed in filling lists of captured or killed insurgents. However, the unending stream of subsequent targets suggests a failure to halt the insurgency.

Furthermore such raids have a deleterious effect on relations with the general populace, who view raids as disruptive at best and threatening to their way of life at worst. In dire cases, raids miss their intended targets entirely and either through faulty intelligence or more general incompetence lead to death or capture of innocent civilians. Residents of rural Afghanistan live primarily in walled compounds known as Qalats and rely on personal arms for protection from criminals and tribal enemies alike. It is little surprise then that launching night time surprise attacks has often drawn innocent bystanders into the line of fire. Many of those slain are in fact only reacting defensively to the presence of sudden armed intruders in their community. Invariably, Counter-Insurgency can not be limited solely to defensive actions, but the legacy of Direct Action raids has led to condemnations from the civil populace and the Afghan central-government. On balance, the over-reliance on Direct Action raids represents a lose-lose strategy that has failed to meaningfully damage

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175 Foschini, Because the Night Belongs to Raiders: Special ops in Nangarhar.
the insurgency while also threatening the sustainability of all important US-Afghan partnership.

When insurgents themselves have not been the target of interdiction, their material sources of financing have. Once again this is a sound guiding premise, but one complicated by the fact that the true sources of insurgent sustainment are difficult to influence when sheltered across the Pakistani border. As an ersatz target, the US has orchestrated numerous counter-narcotics raids aimed at destroying and supplanting the poppy trade which provides a steady source of revenue for militant groups.\textsuperscript{177} The inherent drawback of this approach mirrors the general pattern of unanticipated knock-on-effects alienating the civilian populace.\textsuperscript{178} The cultivation of the poppy is not conducted by groups like the Taliban alone. Instead, it forms the economic cornerstone of many rural communities. Devoid of alternative economic resources, such communities owe their continued subsistence to the profits made in poppy farming.\textsuperscript{179} When counter-narcotic operations become emphasized in struggling provinces like Helmand, local residents are financially disadvantaged.\textsuperscript{180}

Additionally, the perception of governmental legitimacy is often damaged in the eyes of locals who see resources being spent on counter-narcotics, but not missing infrastructure and vital services.\textsuperscript{181} At times the US and Afghan central government have sought to more proactively incentivize the replacement of opium in favor of alternative crops with targeted subsidies.\textsuperscript{182} Such programs are more constructive in theory, but notoriously difficult to implement on the ground.\textsuperscript{183} Rather than acknowledge the futility of kinetic counter-narcotic

\textsuperscript{177} Mansfield, \textit{Stirring up the Hornet’s Nest}, 12-16.
\textsuperscript{178} ICOS, \textit{Operation Moshtarak}, 17-18.
\textsuperscript{179} Mansfield, \textit{Stirring up the Hornet’s Nest}, 12-16.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 9 10.
campaigns, the slow progress of alternatives has sustained the practice of interdiction to the
detriment of relationships with the population.

In light of the dispersed nature of insurgent targets, the US has one particular kinetic
tool it favors. The use of armed unmanned-aerial-vehicles, commonly referred to as
drones, allow for the elimination of high value targets even in areas otherwise denied on the
Pakistani side of the border. Much like the use of SOF in Direct Action raids, armed
drones are advanced military assets capable of relatively precise applications of force. However, when applied to the asymmetric security landscape of Afghanistan, drone strikes,
like raids, often fall short of their intended effect.

Collateral damage poisons the perception of the US and by extension the Afghan
government, while successful strikes are indecisive methods of halting the spread of the
insurgency. There exists a counter argument that emphasizes the role of anti-drone
organizations, the Pakistani state, and lack of on the ground access to international
journalists in inflating civilian casualty numbers and the negative opinion of locals.
Whatever other merits it might have, this counter-argument fails to substantively address
whether the wide proliferation of drone strikes is actually curbing the insurgency. In many
cases the data points to a long-term danger in provoking insurgent support. Like Direct
Action raids, this does not leave drone strikes an irredeemable tool, but rather emphasizes
the necessity that their role be constrained to more limited circumstances. In any case
kinetic operations are no substitute to building lasting indigenous capacity and strengthening
the legitimacy of the central government.

184 Kate Clark, *Drone warfare 1: Afghanistan, birthplace of the armed drone*, (Afghanistan Analysts
armed-drone/.
185 Ibid.
186 Ibid.
187 Ibid.
188 Aquil Shah, *Drone Blowback in Pakistan is a Myth, Here’s Why* (The Washington Post, 2016),
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/17/drone-blow-back-in-pakistan-is-
a-myth-heres-why/?utm_term=.5e763933e27b.
189 Audrey Cronin, *Why Drones Fail When Tactics Drive Strategy* (Foreign Affairs, 2013),
Perhaps the most grandiose kinetic tool available to the US and its partners has been the execution of large scale offensive operations. Such operations have pitted thousands, and sometimes tens of thousands, of conventional troops in wide area clearing operations. As a focal point of the insurgency, the Helmand province has been host to several such undertakings including the 2007 Operation Achilles, 2009 Operation Panther’s Claw, and 2010 Operation Moshtarak. While the former two examples were NATO-led operations with personnel balances skewed far in favor of international troops, operation Moshtarak was intended to spotlight a focus on the Afghan component.\textsuperscript{190} Troublingly, Operation Moshtarak, meaning joint or combined in Dari, fell far short of its namesake.

Rather than be an equal division of effort, the Helmand offensive was once again spearheaded by international troops of the US in Marjah and the British in Nad-E-Ali with Afghan participating in an auxiliary fashion.\textsuperscript{191} Where present, ANDSF forces made a good account of themselves, and it is clear that international troops earnestly set up layers of organizational liaisons.\textsuperscript{192} However, there are numerous signs the operation was NATO, rather than Afghan-led in any substantive fashion.\textsuperscript{193} Statements made by commanding General McChrystal vowing to “install a government in a box” further outline the fashion that the operation lacked the necessary pre-engagement establishment of local partnership.\textsuperscript{194}

Unsurprisingly the offensive-first build-later approach to capturing Helmand led to an arduous multi-year process of fighting. When a roughly functional chain of localized security

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{190} Spiegel, "Operation Achilles” Targets Taliban (Spiegel, 2007), http://www.spiegel.de/international/operation-achilles-targets-taliban-nato-launches-major-offensive-in-southern-afghanistan-a-470083.html;
\item Thomas Harding, Operation Panther’s Claw: how British troops are hunting the Taliban to the end (The Telegraph, 2009), https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstips/onthefrontline/5859653/Operation-Panthers-Claw-how-British-troops-are-hunting-the-Taliban-to-the-end.html.
\item \textsuperscript{192} Theo Farrel, APPRAISING MOSHTARAK The Campaign in Nad-e-Ali District, Helmand (RUSI, 2011), 4.
\item \textsuperscript{193} Committee on Armed Services, BRIEFING ON OPERATION MOSHTARAK IN HELMAND PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN (US Government Printing Office, 2011), 3.
\end{itemize}
partnerships was finally established, they proved vulnerable to sustained Taliban resurgence in 2015. Thus, the use of large scale international heavy efforts to secure Helmand not only failed to provide the easy establishment of short-term governance, but extended Afghan control to regions they could not realistically hold with their correspondingly limited capacity. What was missing was a genuine commitment to the Moshtarak concept. Handoffs and “governments in a box” are insufficient substitutes. Failures in Helmand resulted from a lack of joint planning, implementation, and local partnership.

Throughout the conflict, force size was a constant sticking point for planners. As the demands of COIN dictated a country-wide presence, renegotiating and expanding operational footprint became a priority for each successive theater commander and American presidential administration. This gave rise to the concept of the surge and the mentality it fostered. By 2009 US troop numbers had grown from around 25,000 to 67,000. By 2011 Coalition presence had reached its zenith at over 130,000. The logic followed that flooding Afghanistan with combat troops would deny the enemy freedom of movement and grind down the insurgency. By pursuing a maximalist posture, the central government could rapidly be improved and the Taliban could be made manageable enough to handover security responsibility to the ANDSF. Problematically, this formulation levied immense international resources on the concept of succeeding first and handing over second. True Moshtarak would have to wait. BPC continued in the background, but sustaining aggressive Counter-Insurgency with hundreds of thousands of combat troops commanded central billing in security policy.

195 Rahmatullah, Helmand 2.
196 Mansfield, Stirring up the Hornet’s Nest, O’Hanlon, Afghanistan After Mattis, 1-8.
200 Ibid.
The dangers of this strategy were not limited to its reshuffling of priorities, but also included an increased tax on the political will of both the US and Afghan public. As the surges dramatically increased force size, they also significantly raised the profile of the conflict. By promising sustained improvements in security, the many subsequent shortfalls left the American public exasperated.\textsuperscript{201} In effect, by increasing troop numbers the US had staked their viability on a kind of rapid success they could not deliver. The equation was equally fraught from an Afghan perspective, where the expansion of international troops throughout the country immediately rankled the xenophobic apprehensions of the circumspect public.\textsuperscript{202} Amid a backdrop of historical invasions, the increasing footprint looked evermore like a permanent occupation. For whatever benefit increased resources offered Coalition commanders, their very presence on the ground handed the insurgency ready-made propaganda fodder.

Despite the risk involved, the increased force presence may have at least won over Afghans if it enabled a corresponding increase in security. This did not come to pass. Already acutely limited in capacity, the strategy of the surge expanded the presence of the central government far beyond what it could realistically sustain.\textsuperscript{203} Ensuing failure, blunted the central government's claim to legitimacy and multiplied the burdens it bore. For years international forces tried to fill these gaps with their own programs and resources, but their role as foreigners was innately divisive. As violence continued rural Afghans in particular grew war-weary, with many preferring total victory of any side to the constant tug-of-war that divided their communities.\textsuperscript{204} This military reality has done little to dissuade the spreading of myths decrying the supposed failure to “go big early” with an immense force presence in 2001 or to indefinitely sustain the surges. In contravention of this myth, Lt. Gen David Barno,


\textsuperscript{203} Rahmatullah, \textit{Helmand} (2).

\textsuperscript{204} Mansfield, \textit{Stirring up the Hornet’s Nest}, 5-6.
who commanded international forces from 2003-2005, has aptly reaffirmed that such policies failed in their own right by alienating the populace and leaving the true sources of Taliban sustainment untouched.

4. COIN’s Diamonds in the Rough

Outright victory through destruction of the insurgency is not a viable end state for security policy. Instead a more reasonable objective is the incremental strengthening of the Afghan government’s capacity and claim to legitimacy. Such a goal prizes long-term strategies, partnership building, and a focus on the local. Within the immense breadth of strategies executed during COIN, two stand out in particular for their forward thinking composition. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and Village Stability Operations (VSO) were both approaches that emphasized a holistic approach to improving the hand of the Afghan government. Through judiciously managing their footprint, both programs were constructed around teams of international experts who augmented rather than replaced their Afghan counterparts and thus had a strong institutional grounding on working by with and through. While subject to a degree of shortcomings inherent in any policy, PRTs and VSO rank amongst the most constructive policies to come out of the 2001-2014 era conflict.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams are the military equivalent of development organizations working to stabilize Afghanistan within US AID or non-governmental organizations. Made up of subject-matter experts in fields as diverse as law, diplomacy, and civil engineering PRTs engaged in a wide range of development activities. Unlike their civilian counterparts, PRTs have the advantage of being able to operate in traditionally non-permissive areas. Civilian agencies, to include the Afghan central government's National Solidarity Program, are no less critical to stabilization and deconfliction in the long-term.

207 Ibid.
208 Malkasian, PROVINCIAL RECONSTRUCTION TEAMS: HOW DO WE KNOW THEY WORK?, 28.
However, the utility of PRTs was demonstrated in their ability to make short-term inroads even amid active hostilities, thus opening the way for other agencies. Even in their short-term work, PRTs were not exclusively military entities, but drew upon civilian personnel and representatives from their counterparts to aid in coordination.

Taken alone, PRTs could not right the course of Clear-Hold-Build. Continuing hostilities, often exacerbated by a large footprint and collateral damage in kinetic operations made transitioning to a pure “Build” phase an elusive prospect. Furthermore, the underdeveloped capacity of the Afghan central government in governance and security furnished PRTs with additional problems relating to endemic corruption and poor performance among their counterparts. Even successful programs could upset the balance between rival tribal factions requiring a diligent and oftentimes prohibitive balancing of priorities. Rather than remain static, PRTs distinguished themselves by positively influencing contested regions even amid ongoing hostilities. While violence continued to rise due to other driving factors of flawed policy, the projects completed by PRTs had a statistically significant role in reducing violence where they were active. By further providing avenues for increased local-national partnership in the pursuit of development projects, PRTs had a tangible effect in benefiting the legitimacy of the state and opposition to the insurgency. Jointly pursuing development projects often correspondingly made local residents active stakeholders in resisting the insurgency. Insurgents attempts to attack programs like PRT-led road building initiatives repeatedly led to counter attacks by local tribal fighters. Also noteworthy, the promise of PRT development was enough to drive wedges between many insurgent groups themselves resulting in instances of infighting.

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209 Ibid., 36-34.
211 Ibid., 15-18.
212 Malkasian, PROVINCIAL RECONSTRUCTION TEAMS: HOW DO WE KNOW THEY WORK?, 1-6, 9, 14, 20.
213 Ibid., 20-21.
214 Ibid.
Village Stability Operations were designed to interface with individual communities in a bottom up approach. Its major objectives were the improvement of security, civil programs, and good governance. On the ground, VSO was highly adaptable in structure and able to be localized to meet the demands of differing contexts.\textsuperscript{215} While no two VSO programs were the same, their general framework took the form of embedding small teams of SOF directly in rural villages. These teams were reinforced with specialists in language, civil affairs, intelligence, and Afghan culture.\textsuperscript{216} VSO efforts enhanced their force protection capability by directly fostering partnerships with Afghan police and military forces present in the wider district as well as by spearheading security localization within the community. VSO also worked to promote interagency cooperation between their own mission, Afghan government ministries, and NGOs. To streamline day to day activities, as well as to gradually connect successful local program to the central government, VSO maintained multiple layers of liaison teams at the district, provincial, and national levels.\textsuperscript{217}

The strengths of VSO began with their low footprint and focus on partnership. Rather than control an area with large numbers of conventional troops in fortified bases, VSO teams were embedded directly within their host communities for deployments in excess of a year at a time. While such a time scale did not always furnish definitive results in a single team’s deployment, mutually reinforcing VSO rotations were often able to build on successive progress.\textsuperscript{218} Unlike other forms of COIN, predicated on forcible entries and installing “government/s in a box”, VSO also benefited from its ability to focus first on partnering with locally legitimate authorities like tribal elders. By working with, rather than against, the grain of such venerable cultural structures, VSO efforts legitimized their own presence and won over stakeholders with the pursuit of mutually beneficial projects.\textsuperscript{219}

\textsuperscript{217} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{218} Hanlin, \textit{One Team’s Approach To Village Stability Operations}.
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid.
Improving governance at the district, and village level while navigating tribal dynamics, and limitations of local and national Afghan security assets are all enviable goals, but also immensely challenging. As a low-footprint operation, VSO is able to realistically tackle the long-term commitment these challenges face without the prohibitive costs inherent in high risk surge-era COIN. VSO is an evolutionary strategy uniquely suited to Afghanistan, but it does not require reinventing the wheel. In developing VSO, its architects have directly applied institutional knowledge won through similar long-term capacity building operations undertaken in environments including Columbia, El Salvador, and the Philippines. In the manner of such operations, VSO can be sustained more economically and consistently than contrary approaches in COIN.

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V. The Transition to BPC 2014-Present: Capacity Built and Persistent Problems

By 2014 the Coalition confronted the consequences of deferring partner capacity building for so long. The effect was so great as to force strategy back to square one. Certainly the spectre of previous shortfalls in structuring the Afghan state and the failure of set-piece offensives lingered. However, the old model of Coalition-led COIN, which sought rapid success before an optimal handover and withdrawal point, was at an end. By withdrawing large-scale combat formations, Coalition forces definitively refocused on the mission of Building Partner Capacity. Whether through adaptation or simple exhaustion, the United States had learned that the insurgency could not be defeated through any combination of unilateral force. Furthermore, deferring capacity building, to instead focus on immediate security, was unsustainable. In light of this hard-won realization, focusing on standing up Afghan security capability and settling in for the long haul was the only viable alternative. The overarching goal of achieving a favorable political settlement guaranteeing vital US interests in counterterrorism remained, but the dynamics of partnership changed substantially. For the first time in the conflict, international troops would largely fulfil an advisory and support function while Afghan security forces would be responsible for major ground operations and day to day security.

The previous years of COIN had put Afghan forces in a rocky starting position. Now dispersed throughout the wide area engaged by the Coalition, the uneven capacity of ANDSF came under immense strain. Combat attrition, difficulties in recruitment, and the general matter of retention continuously gauged the Tashkil, or official number of security forces. Simultaneously, underdeveloped capacity in organic logistics, mobility, and the poor state of interagency cooperation hamstrung effective operations. Nonetheless, the ANDSF had made admirable strides in key competencies, with elite units of the Special Security Forces performing particularly well. Likewise, Afghan aviation assets snapped into readiness

and while their function was imperfect, their very existence paid homage to hard work in BPC that would have been unfathomable in the early conflict.

A clear benefit of shifting to BPC was preventing further provocation of domestic fatigue in the American public. With international troops now working as advisors rather than combat troops, their casualty figures fell significantly. While past years of Coalition-led COIN had averaged hundreds of killed and wounded, the shift to a BPC focus set a new average in the low double digits. Correspondingly, the conflict fell out of the political limelight and finally afforded planners a measure of flexibility in looking towards the long-term. It is no small turn of irony that the most substantive progress made in building the Afghan state may have occurred in a time when it was the least micromanaged by Washington. On the ground, the compromise of a light footprint may have meant less resources, but it also allowed the mission to continue. Finally, BPC was afforded the resources needed to tackle long differed, but urgently required reforms in the ANSF.

1. BPC: Major Obstacles

Of the myriad issues hamstrunging the ANSF, its dysfunctional logistics system is among the most acutely galling. Like any system of governmental procurement, security focused logistics have been a constant target for corruption and patronage. The flow of resources ranging from fuel to high-grade medications are lucrative opportunities for graft and thus material urgently needed on the frontlines is under constant threat of redirection. Structurally, Afghan logistics lack proper standardization and digitalization making even earnest accountability efforts difficult. While numerous Afghan actors are guilty of its exploitation, the origin of this logistics deficiency lies squarely with the international Coalition. During the 2001 intervention, the United States failed to adequately plan logistics

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224 Andrew Carpenter, ANDSF Logistics: A snapshot for incoming advisors at the tactical and operational levels (Army Sustainment Magazine, 2018), https://www.army.mil/article/212265/andsf_logistics_a_snapshot_for_incoming_advisors_at_the_tactical_and_operational_levels.
frameworks for the newly formed Islamic Republic Of Afghanistan. Subsequent ad-hoc efforts suffered from this absence of forethought, with the Coalition failing to intervene decisively until 2011. This long span of deferment in capacity building is precisely what made 2014-15 such a dramatic shift in mission. Previously, even where international actors took the lead in logistics, the primary focus was on equipment readiness rather than training their Afghan counterparts.

The failure to support capacity building in Afghan logistics in previous stages of the conflict have left contemporary efforts with significant gaps in partner capability. In particular, a lack of competently trained Afghan personnel has correspondingly led to a preponderance of contractors. Such contractors fulfill critical roles in maintenance and sustainment of complex equipment like aircraft. While vital in the short-term, contractors are expensive and no true replacement for competently trained indigenous personnel. Alternatively training Afghan technicians is possible, but time intensive. The modern BPC mission has sought to address this deficiency and prioritize Afghan self-sufficiency in maintenance, but contractors are likely to remain involved in some form or other for years to come.

Organic mobility ranks as another cornerstone capacity for its intersection with numerous other functions. To influence the conflict, both personnel and material must be able to move freely. In Afghanistan, a combination of rugged terrain and limited roads make basic matters like transport disproportionally complex. Additionally, the favored tactics of the insurgency in mining roadways and executing ambushes further hampers freedom of movement. When operating as the primary combat force, International troops were afforded the benefit of diverse forms of air transport as well sophisticated ground vehicles and engineering tools capable of mitigating the threats of hidden explosives. By comparison,

226 Ibid., 153-155.
227 Ibid., 155-156.
229 Ibid., 13.
230 Ibid., 24-26.
Afghan forces make due with far more meagre resources. Limited logistical proficiency means Afghan force are generally equipped with vehicles no more complex than Humvees and in many cases unarmoured pickup trucks. This is a pragmatic compromise to structuring the force, but it has negative implications for mobility and survivability in combat.

The matter of dealing with hidden explosives is equally confounding, because although all branches of the ANDSF are likely to encounter roadside bombs, only certain units retain competent engineers. In some cases, when facing mined roads undersupplied Afghan units have made due with sending courageous, but untrained personnel with nothing more than long hooked poles or even their bare hands to disable explosives.231 This continually undermines Afghan mobility, to the detriment of security. Key factors in the loss of territory in fronts such as Helmand circa 2015 were predicted by a lack of ability for Afghan forces to respond to mobile insurgent threats.232 In the same period, audacious Taliban attempts at seizing Kunduz exploited the inability of ANDSF-reinforcements to quickly push through ambushes in order to reach the city's beleaguered defenders.233 Across Afghanistan, as international forces withdrew large scale forces, the lack of investment in Afghan maneuver capacity was laid bare.

Beyond moving troops into combat situations, Afghan military capability to extract personnel and casualties from the battlefield is also an ongoing issue. A major factor in a soldier’s morale is the understanding that if they are injured or killed, their comrades will work tirelessly to recover them. The significance of the “no man gets left behind” mentality in reinforcing combatant confidence and personnel retention is impossible to overstate. As late as 2013 the independent capability of Afghan forces to effect such evacuation was critically underdeveloped.234 This was in turn identified by the US Department of Defense as an

232 Rahmatullah, Helmand (2).
234 SIGAR, Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, 158.
influencer in poor morale and retention. With the shift to BPC, the evacuation of casualties, like all matters of mobility, have been appropriately reemphasized. By 2018, the situation has been much improved, with the expansion of Afghan aviation assets becoming particularly promising. Nonetheless, the neglect of building organic maneuver capacity early in the conflict furnishes BPC with a hurdle that must be consciously addressed in the future.

Beyond the matter of battlefield casualties, Afghan force strength has been continuously drained by issues with retention. At a baseline, Afghan security forces face a life of hardship in a form of asymmetric warfare that targets both their own lives and those of their families. These conditions are worsened by infrequent and inconsistent periods of leave to return home and recuperate. Additionally, the very real threat of injury or death has been compounded by shoddy handling of both medical care and benefits. In a nation stricken by endemic poverty, mishandling of benefits along with low wages have been a leading cause for desertion. This latter fact has raised significant alarm, with former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates noting that Taliban fighters often received better salaries than the soldiers of the ANDSF. In the appraisal of the US Department of Defense, poor leadership accounts for the largest single cause of personnel loss in the ANDSF, with the rank in file becoming disillusioned through poor treatment and the incompetence of their superiors.

As the current mission emphasizes working through partners and in particular Afghan ministries, all progress is put at the mercy of the widespread dysfunction of such institutions. Interagency cooperation is paramount to combating the insurgency, and yet the Afghan Ministries of Defense and Interior as well as the National Directorate of Security often

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237 Ibid., 159.
238 Ibid.
operate as rivals rather than partners.\textsuperscript{240} Competition between leadership has led to chronic compartmentalization and the practice of withholding information.\textsuperscript{241} This is no small thing. When the goal is thwarting imminent terror attacks, deliberate failures to share intelligence can be every bit as damning as an inability to gather it in the first place.\textsuperscript{242} Likewise, on the battlefield the various branches of military, police, and paramilitary forces are disadvantaged by failures to coordinate. In all cases, the prevailing low standard of interagency cooperation imperils the future of Afghan security and is in need of urgent remediation.

Afghan ministries are widely divergent in terms of their relative capacity. Both the law enforcement functions of the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) and military strength of the Ministry of Defense (MoD) are ultimately necessary for long-term security, but unmatched in developmental maturity. While the MoD can muster a comparatively high approval rating within the Afghan public, the MoI is rightful considered chronically dysfunctional.\textsuperscript{243} Corruption, patronage, and incompetence are particularly rife and until recently the United States has sacrificed reform efforts in favor of sustaining force size to suppress rising violence.\textsuperscript{244} This quantity-over-quality approach has negatively affected the development of Afghan police forces by producing subpar personnel who are more susceptible to corruption and incompetence. Simultaneously, entrusting police development to the US Department of Defense has shifted the MoI into a paramilitary role they are ill suited to performing while also forfeiting the urgently needed capacity for civil policing.\textsuperscript{245}

Historically, both the MoD and MoI have suffered from needlessly top-heavy structures. The surplus of high ranking positions has fostered an environment in which corrupt and incompetent officers can maintain their positions with little oversight. Previous

\textsuperscript{240} Ibid., 95.
\textsuperscript{242} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{244} DoD, \textit{Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan} (2018), 89-90.
attempts at professionalizing the force through mandating background checks and ongoing professional examinations were promising in curbing this phenomenon, but ultimately derailed.\textsuperscript{246} This resulted from the Coalition's preoccupation with short-term security and the obstruction of the Karzai administration which sought to benefit from establishing patronage networks.\textsuperscript{247} A further quirk of Afghan law has meant that for general officers, nothing short of a presidential decree or criminal conviction is suitable to ensure their permanent removal from the force. By contrast to Karzai, the Ghani administration has shown an enhanced commitment to reforming leadership positions and made noted strides in removing mid-level and general officers alike.\textsuperscript{248} Nonetheless, problems in the officer corps are deep seated and will take years to stamp out, even if properly supported.

Insider attacks in which members of the ANDSF turn their weapons on Coalition personnel and Afghans alike constitute one of more insidious obstacles facing the BPC mission. The success of an advisory mission is directly predicated on establishing trust between partners. So called insider attacks undermine this trust and can drive a wedge between Afghans and international troops. While both the Afghan government and Coalition have cooperated to produce refined vetting procedures and force protection policies, insider attacks continue to claim scores of lives per year.\textsuperscript{249} In truth, no combination of measures is feasibly capable of preventing the practice outright. The austere nature of Afghan record keeping makes background checks limited in their effectiveness, and groups like the Taliban are seasoned in their ability to exploit state institutions. For the foreseeable future, the insurgency will likely continue to infiltrate the ANDSF and in some instances target its members for defection. Professionalization of the force and preventive security measures may mitigate the potential of insider attacks, but the asymmetric nature of the conflict keeps the threat very much alive.

\textsuperscript{246} Clark, \textit{Reforming the Afghan Ministry of Interior}.
\textsuperscript{247} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{248} Ibid
The size and sustainment of the advisor force is also a matter of paramount concern. Reduced force numbers have gradually consolidated advisors into higher echelons of Afghan command, leaving fewer eyes on the ground at the tactical level. This lack of advisor penetration disadvantages conventional combat units and makes evaluation of their performance increasingly complicated. By comparison, elite units within the Special Security Forces and aviation are well staffed, with international advisors leading to demonstrably superior performance and greater ease in charting development. Recent policy has recognized this deficiency, and sought to shift advisors to sub-corps and tactical levels as of 2017, but the effort will require sustaining if it is to succeed.

In order to sustain the advisory mission, the US has opted to stand up purpose-built units formed for the task. This has the benefit of consolidating the responsibility for conducting BPC in lieu of continuously depriving existing units of personnel. However, enlarging these dedicated Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFAB) has not been easy. Recruiting candidates for the SFABs initially relies on leveraging benefit packages to entice mid-career redirection, meaning the first wave of volunteers was slow to build. Additionally the SFABs have had to overcome the widely perceived failure of previous advisory initiatives like the Af-Pak Hands Program. Such programs left many of its members feeling caught in a thankless position where their work was compromised by poor implementation and senseless restrictions. Even as the SFABs have gradually taken shape, they face a new obstacle in the form an ongoing culture-clash within the US military. The existence of such advisory forces rankles traditionally minded factions, who see SFABs as a distraction from

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250 GAO, AFGHANISTAN SECURITY, 15-16.
251 Ibid.
254 Thomas E. Ricks, It may be the top personnel priority of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs — but is the AfPak Hands program flopping? (Foreign Policy, 2011), https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/04/08/it-may-be-the-top-personnel-priority-of-the-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-but-is-the-afpak-hands-program-flopping/.
the military's role in confronting peer-level adversaries.\textsuperscript{255} Despite the centrality of BPC to modern security and the nature of the Afghan conflict as the longest conflict in American history, such factions argue that dedicated advisory units come at the cost of resourcing conventional formations and should thus be halted. This mindset is nothing less than a short-sighted conflation of security priorities on the ground and must be overcome if the US intends to succeed in its present day conflicts.

\section*{2.BPC: Progress and Opportunities}

The United States and the Ghani administration have been proactive in confronting the legacy of underdevelopment in the ANDSF. In the days of the Karzai administration, the Afghan government was often a spoiler to serious reform attempts, preferring instead to hedge-bets with privately loyal patronage networks.\textsuperscript{256} Equally obstructive, President Karzai often sought to elicit popular support with a feigned sense of neutrality in the conflict by distancing his own government from international efforts. In a night-and-day shift, President Ghani has not only championed Afghan-led framing of the conflict, but likewise spearheaded reform measures and joint-planning with his international peers.\textsuperscript{257} As part of a multi-year plan, the Ghani administration begun to implement an ANDSF Road Map aimed at tackling long standing deficiencies. This model has included elements of anti-corruption, force-restructuring, and professionalization.

The ANDSF Road Map makes major strides towards addressing failures in inter-agency cooperation and ministerial dysfunction. One such component of the plan was shifting paramilitary forces like the Civil Order Police and Border Police out of the MoI and over to the MoD.\textsuperscript{258} As a first order effect, realigning combat forces under a single ministry dramatically streamlines unity of command and preempts inter-service confliction. The creation of parallel combat forces was a holdover from Coalition-led COIN which was

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{255} Myers, \textit{Tough sell.}
\bibitem{256} Clark, \textit{Reforming the Afghan Ministry of Interior.}
\bibitem{258} DoD, \textit{Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan} (2018), 37-42.
\end{thebibliography}
expensive to maintain and prone to poor performance. Now operating as a true gendarmerie, the reflagged Civil Order Force and Border Force relieve a burden of management stress on the MoI, while the units themselves are likely to benefit from the comparatively professionalized structure of the MoD. Additionally, subordinating paramilitary forces to the MoD, enables the MoI to refocus on the matter civil policing for which it is originally tasked and presently in high demand.

In the interests of tackling corruption and professionalizing the force, the Road Map has also launched a retirement initiative known as Inherent Law. At present, the initiative has seemed to bypass the stagnation of previous efforts and resulted in large scale removal of redundant, incompetent, and criminal senior officers. Over a year long period, Inherent law identified and retired 247 Generals and 1,335 Colonels from the MoD along with 281 Generals and 1,138 Colonels in the MoI. The forcible retiring has been accompanied by merit-based promotions of younger officers aimed to revitalize Afghan leadership. Reforming the officer corps will require accompanying sustainment of education and training programs, but unlike the glacial progress of past measures, Inherent Law has shown tangible results in opening the way for new leadership and heading off further damage.

Counter-corruption and accountability have been further aided by the creation of new oversight bodies and at times the temporary delegation of key distribution channels to the international Coalition. The prosecution of large scale corruption cases through the Major Crimes Task Force, Anti-corruption Justice Center, and the office of the Attorney General have made gradual progress, but still lag far behind optimal outcomes. More promising has been the development of preventative measures such as the National Procurement Commission personally chaired by President Ghani. Its first successes have come from cost saving measures in consolidating contractual awards and greatly reducing procurement

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259 Ibid.
261 Ibid.
262 Ibid., 40-41.
contracts.\textsuperscript{263} In light of the dire state of compliance and its negative effect on logistics, the Commission has taken the decisive step of revoking the MoI’s procurement authority and re-staffing both MoD and MoI procurement departments.\textsuperscript{264} In the interim, the Coalition has directly taken responsibility for managing fuel distribution and medical supplies.\textsuperscript{265} These countermeasures notably break with the failed piecemeal approach of prior years. While disruptive in the short-term, redelegation of procurement authority preserves combat critical logistical chains and paves the way for long-term counter-corruption efforts.

To address the related field of corruption in reporting force size, partner capacity building efforts have been reinforced with the implementation of biometric enrollment and renewed international oversight. Until now, the practice of corrupt officers pocketing the salaries of non-existent personnel or so called “ghost soldiers” has been rampant and difficult to curve. By implementing biometric based pay systems, the official force size or \textit{Tashkilo} of the ANDSF can now be confirmed through technological authentication rather than self-reporting.\textsuperscript{266} Centralization of biometric personnel records will not only enforce transparency in the force structure, but also benefit vetting procedures and the processing of benefits.\textsuperscript{267} Complete biometric enrollment of security forces was nearing completion by the end of 2018.\textsuperscript{268}

The most tangible successes of the BPC mission have been the maturation of key Afghan forces. One such example has been the emergence of Afghan aviation assets as a highly credible force. For reasons of austere geography and the asymmetric nature of the conflict, aviation is indispensable to battlefield commanders. Unfortunately, cultivating able aircrews and support staff is no easy matter. The technological complexity of operating the aircraft requires selective and time intensive training programs. English language

\textsuperscript{263} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{264} Clark, \textit{Reforming the Afghan Ministry of Interior}.
\textsuperscript{265} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{266} DoD, \textit{Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan}, (2018) 40-41
\textsuperscript{268} Ibid.
proficiency, as the international language of aviation, constitutes another obstacle. Finally, integrating the planning and utilization of air assets with ground forces is the final hurdle to battlefield success. In all cases ANDSF has made admirable progress.\textsuperscript{269}

Divided between the conventional assets of the Afghan Air Force and the elite Special Mission Wing, the ANDSF benefits from emerging capacity in airmobility, reconnaissance, and close-air-support. Three-years ago, ANDSF aviation was incapable of independent function.\textsuperscript{270} Presently and for the first time in the conflict, more than half of all aerial operations are conducted by Afghan forces.\textsuperscript{271} For a field of great technical complexity, such a rate of progress is astounding. Expanding Afghan aerial operations have accompanied noted development in the precision of strikes and superior integration with ground forces.\textsuperscript{272}

All of these factors can be expected to increase as ANDSF aviation benefits from continued US support. A statistically higher proportion of advisors at all levels of command has been a contributor to such success and has also allowed for greater ease of gauging progress as well as ensuring accountability.\textsuperscript{273} Likewise, material commitments to supplying new airframes have allowed the ANDSF to sustain operational tempo and retire aircraft that have exceeded their operational life-span. As part of the ANDSF Road Map, aviation forces are earmarked for expansion in order to magnify their impact and spread the burden of constant deployment. The net-result of this support has made ANDSF aviation into a high performing force, noted for its resistance to corruption, and high esprit de corps.\textsuperscript{274}

On the ground, the Afghan Special Security Forces have likewise been a resounding success story. As with aviation, building capacity in special operations forces is programmatically challenging and technically complex. Competent SOF are expected to be an elite force and a clear cut above conventional troops. These standards immediately limit

\textsuperscript{269} DoD, \textit{Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan}, (2018), 38. \\
\textsuperscript{270} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{271} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{272} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{273} GAO, \textit{AFGHANISTAN SECURITY}, 10, 15. \\
\textsuperscript{274} Clark, \textit{Looking at the ‘Nicholson plan’}. 
the potential pool of recruits. Training includes proficiency in specialized equipment, a mastery of aggressive combat roles that entail heightened risk to their participants, and an emphasis on self-sufficiency in small-unit tactics. Furthermore, sustaining special operations forces requires the development of independent logistics and intelligence assets alongside other support staff. Success in special operations is a tall order for any armed force and yet the ASSF have succeeded in every respect.

Presently the ASSF are the premiere Afghan ground force and accordingly responsible for the majority of offensive actions.\(^\text{275}\) Within the Ministry of Defense, ANA Commandos are the backbone of the ASSF, where they provide a light infantry Direct-Action capability patterned after the US Army Rangers.\(^\text{276}\) Like their American counterparts, the Afghan Special Forces provide the MoD with an elite advisory force of their own, already proven to be well adapted to bridging the security gap with rural populations.\(^\text{277}\) While ANA Commandos give the Afghan military a flexible offensive tool, the ANA Special Forces allow the central government to implement VSO of its own. The most sensitive targeted raids and reconnaissance missions are entrusted to the Afghan Ktah Khas (Dari for “to touch success”).\(^\text{278}\) Like the US units that trained them, the Ktah Khas comprises the top-tier of Afghan special operations forces and boast a favorable record of counter-terror operations.\(^\text{279}\) In a complimentary law enforcement capacity, the General Command of Police Special Units affords the Ministry of the Interior with a similarly reputable special operations force capable of high-risk raids and offensive operations.\(^\text{280}\) Currently, the ASSF are either regionally divided to support Corps level ANA units or kept in self-sufficient National Mission Units capable of rapidly deploying to any part of the country. This autonomy


\(^{276}\) Ibid.

\(^{277}\) Ibid.

\(^{278}\) Ibid.

\(^{279}\) *Special Infantry - Ktah Khas (KKA) (Afghan Special Unit)*, Global Security https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/ktah-khas.htm.

is facilitated by organic capacity in supporting intelligence, engineering, and logistical sustainment.\textsuperscript{281}

On the battlefield, the ASSF are well regarded by their international counterparts. As an elite force they enjoy high unit cohesion and an accompanying resistance to corruption.\textsuperscript{282} Their proficiency in a wide range of traditional SOF roles including Special Reconnaissance, Security Force Assistance, and Direct-Action is not just a force multiplier, but indicative of the way BPC has succeeded in cultivating competency within the most difficult of military tasks. As with positive developments in aviation, the model of successful BPC at work in the ASSF bears all the same hallmarks. The ASSF have benefited from the highest percentage of advisory support, including tutelage by US SOF-trainers.\textsuperscript{283} Gains have been consolidated with ongoing sustainment from the ANDSF Roadmap which singles out the ASSF for resources. In order to meet the demands of operational tempo, the MoD component of the ASSF have been successfully expanded from 11,300 to 22,994 personnel, effectively doubling the force.\textsuperscript{284} A further boon exists in the form of a three tiered 32 week rotation policy that shifts the ASSF from combat, training, and rest, with special attention paid to affording personnel leave after operations.\textsuperscript{285} This form of rest cycle is decisive in maintaining the edge of the ASSF and badly needed in other branches of the ANDSF.

If there’s any potential drawback to the development of crack units in aviation and the ASSF, it is the danger presented by their overuse in combat. Their track records make them the go-to resource for ongoing operations to contain insurgent and trans-national terror threats. This role is disrupted by the chronic underdevelopment of conventional ANDSF units, forcing the ASSF to take on ever expanding responsibilities. As a special operations force, the ASSF are purpose built for decisive action against militant threats, but poorly suited to long-duration deployments in static security roles. Misuse of the ASSF negatively

\textsuperscript{281} Ibid, 9-10, 83-85.
\textsuperscript{282} Clark, Looking at the ‘Nicholson plan’.
\textsuperscript{283} GAO, AFGHANISTAN SECURITY, 4, 11-18.
\textsuperscript{284} DoD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan (2018), 9-10, 83-85.
\textsuperscript{285} Ibid.
affects operational readiness by needlessly risking casualties and overworking personnel. In the face of such obstacles, the US has been highly proactive. Preventing the misuse of the ASSF constitutes a rare example of consistency in conditionality. In jointly signed memorandums, the United States has clearly defined the role of the ASSF and responsively pressured the Afghan ministries to uphold these standards by issuing formal complaints and monetary penalties. While the threat of ASSF misuse should not be disregarded, the current standard of fiscal conditionality has proven effective in its short-term prevention.

In addition to outright misuse, the necessity of expanding force size has posed the danger of lowering standards and diluting competence. Conventional wisdom holds that elite forces cannot be mass-produced and criticism has justly followed the decision to double the ASSF. At present the danger of diluting competence through force expansion seems to have been mitigated. This has been made possible by the corresponding expansion of training institutions and international advisors, particularly special operations trainers. Simultaneously, overall numbers have been increased by placing complimentary, but previously distinct forces under the ASSF umbrella. Such units include light armored Mobile Strike Kanadaks and the Special Mission Wing of aviation. The net result is an increased force size for the ASSF and the expansion of organic capability, without flooding the force with inferior new recruits. Additionally, reassigned units are positioned to benefit from the superior organizational track record of the ASSF.

The success of BPC in cultivating crack specialized units, but lagging far behind with large scale conventional formations, poses interesting questions on underlying mission dynamics. On one hand it is clear that the success of aviation and the ASSF is partly a product of their size and self-contained nature. As largely independent organizations with the benefit of increased advisor support, elite units are more easy to insulate from ministerial

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286 Ibid., 43-45.
287 Ibid.
288 Marty, Expanding Afghanistan’s Special Operations Forces.
289 Ibid.
290 Ibid.
291 Ibid.
dysfunction. By contrast, conventional units are very much at the mercy of politics. However, the difficulty of producing specialized units should not be understated. The ASSF are not just miniaturized versions of larger dysfunctional units. Rather they constitute a tangible success in fostering truly rare and sought-after skills. The development of specialized forces underscore the viability of BPC and the recipe necessary for its success. Proliferation of multi-level advisory support, the implementation of rest and training cycles, conditionality, and consistency in sustainment are all cornerstones of specialized Afghan forces, but acutely lacking in other sectors of the ANDSF.

The latest stage of BPC has also produced favorable results in improving security localization. As the ASSF increasingly becomes the favored offensive tool there is still the matter of producing a suitable hold force for defensive purposes. So far the conventional ANDSF has proven dysfunctional when used as the primary hold force and partnership with local defense units has long been considered a desirable alternative, albeit one challenging to implement. At present, partnerships with local communities within the framework of VSO continues and in some cases local police programs have been successful.292 As an evolutionary improvement, the Ghani administration, with the support of the US, has stood up the Afghan National Army Territorial Force.

Theoretically the ANATF combines the benefit of attracting personnel with local knowledge as well as a strong incentive to stand and fight to protect their homes.293 In a break from previous local forces, the ANATF would curb potential abuses by fulfilling a strictly military rather than a law enforcement function and draw its higher leadership exclusively from professional army officers from outside the local area.294 Skeptics have noted the need for careful oversight and avoiding a temptation to rush implementation. In a positive display of BPC, the pilot program of the ANATF has been so far successful. The first companies have been deployed to their districts and appear to be performing adequately.295

292 Muzhary, How to Set up a ‘Good ALP’.
293 Clark, The Afghan Territorial Force.
294 Ibid.
Likewise, both the US and Afghan governments have shown caution in force development, by temporarily pausing new recruitment in order to focus on evaluating current units.\footnote{Ibid.} This attention to sustainable development is a major break in the quality over quantity approach of previous chapters in the conflict.

Much of these expansions in partner capacity have been directly facilitated by the deployment of additional advisors. The Security Force Assistance Brigades have benefited the mission by allowing for tactical level advising and corresponding increases in accountability.\footnote{GAO, \textit{AFGHANISTAN SECURITY}, 14.} Although challenging to initially stand up, the first deployments of the SFABs have favorably illustrated their suitability as long-term solutions to BPC, cutting dependence on contractors and ad-hoc approaches.\footnote{Michael van Ginkel, \textit{An Advisory Capacity: The Wider Ramifications of Security Force Assistance Brigades in Afghanistan} (Small Wars Journal, 2019), https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/advisory-capacity-wider-ramifications-security-force-assistance-brigades-afghanistan.} As part of their first deployment, the SFAB model has been noted for its flexibility and positive effect on numerous sectors of the ANDSF. This has ranged from bolstering logistical hubs to supporting reemphasized training rotations.\footnote{DoD, \textit{Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan} (2018), 12-13.}

Recent Afghan parliamentary elections are a further milestone in the BPC mission. For the first time in 17 years, the latest round of parliamentary elections were entirely Afghan-led and secured by the ANDSF.\footnote{Ibid., 46.} Election security is a critical function for the ANDSF and directly tied to fostering the legitimacy of the central government. As an asymmetric conflict, militants enjoy diverse means of disrupting elections through violence. In such an environment security is a monumental undertaking, but spoiling attempts are comparatively permissive. Despite the challenges involved, the ANDSF have distinguished themselves. Election security was complemented by preparatory offensive operations.\footnote{Ibid.} Critical polling infrastructure and personnel were transported by ANDSF aviation.\footnote{Ibid.}
components had the benefit of robust inter-agency cooperation and effective use of command and control.\textsuperscript{303} When compared to previous elections, the latest electoral process was free of major disruption and overall low in violence.\textsuperscript{304} This positive performance illustrates the progress made in BPC and tangible strides in Afghan self-sufficiency.

3. A Summary of Necessary Improvements

The future viability of BPC is contingent on efforts to reform elements of ANDSF doctrine, further expand key capabilities, and maintain a positive shift in mentality throughout. Doctrinally, the US and Afghan governments should continue to embrace security localization. With the promise of the ANATF already noted, localization will continue to be crucial to improving central-rural security partnership and in shoring up state legitimacy. In any case, securing rural Afghanistan will require an end to the proliferation of isolated static positions like small-scale checkpoints. Such checkpoints do little to aid security, but rather provide insurgents with easy targets, having become the leading cause of preventable casualties within the ANDSF.\textsuperscript{305} As resistance to abandoning isolated checkpoints is often rooted in the desire of corrupt officers to exploit them for use in eliciting bribes, any doctrinal shift should be supported with anti-corruption efforts, enforced conditionality, and Inherent Law.\textsuperscript{306} Likewise, static security is an unacceptable waste of special operations personnel. Conditionality will be key to keeping the ASSF in an offensive role while avoiding misuse.

Within the lens of expanding capability three matters immediately stand out. The logistical backbone of the ANDSF is indispensable. Reform efforts have made progress in places, but there is much to do. As the positive results of SFAB cooperation have indicated, Afghan combat units are far from the only units deserving of advisory support. On the battlefield as with logistics, Afghan mobility is crucial to security. At present Afghan aviation
assets are the only forces capable of reliable maneuver and casualty evacuation. As the ANDSF Road Map has keenly identified, sustaining these assets while continuing to expand mobility overall is crucial to combat effectiveness.

Programmatically, all facets of BPC must be accompanied with consistency, conditionality, and ongoing anti-corruption efforts. Consistency, has long been a shortfall of US planning despite being one of the few variables in its direct control. Commitment to conditions based withdrawal and joint US-Afghan planning is a prerequisite for a favorable outcome in the conflict. No less significant is a commitment to conditionality in funding, not only for elite units, but in all programs.\footnote{DoD, \textit{Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan} (2018), 44-45,105-106.} In the short-term, issuing fiscal penalties have protected the development of the ASSF, but a comparable level of zeal must be extended to conventional forces. Complimentary anti-corruption measures are also pressing, although their overall complexity makes their success one of the more distant goals of BPC.\footnote{Ibid., 14-15.} In the interim, radical solutions like directly taking over procurement are necessary, although supporting Afghan-led institutions like the National Procurement Commission are preferable.

Finally, BPC must never again return to an expand-at-any-cost mentality. Forcing expansion of forces already suffering from endemic corruption and poor performance does far more harm than good. Rather than have a short-term benefit to afford Coalition planners breathing room, rapid expansion only accelerates the degradation of relations between Afghan civilians and security forces through incompetent and/or predatory behavior. Many previous failures have their origins in this rush-now fix-later approach. By contrast, serious BPC requires genuine reform and improvement among existing forces far more urgently than rapid expansion.
VI. Conclusions

In Afghanistan, the United States faces its greatest threat, not from any regional actor or armed group, but rather with the lack of clear consensus on its end-goal and the policy meant to bring it about. This is due in no small part to the vast complexity of the conflict. Operations in Afghanistan are truly difficult, but by no means impossible. When jointly planned and implemented with its Afghan partners, US policy has shown genuine promise. When formulated in a vacuum it has blundered. No amount of failure can be dismissed by the supposed unchangeable nature of Afghanistan. The true culprit frustrating success has been incohesive and contradictory policy.

Preventing Afghanistan from reverting to a terrorist safe-haven is a valid national security priority. However, realizing this goal has entailed a long and hard road towards defining supporting means of implementation. At present, the clearest means of achieving this end state lie with enabling robust and sustainable Afghan institutions. Working with local actors was the source of success in 2001 and their marginalization a key factor in the following decade plus of insurgency. The 2014 shift to BPC reemphasized the focus on partnership. As a result, current Afghan forces possess capabilities that would have been unimaginable in earlier stages of the conflict. Even as their capability grows, Afghan success is often overshadowed by a simplistic reading of the conflict that does not recognize the significance of the 2014-15 era shift to BPC and the myriad of obstacles already overcome.

While BPC has produced clear improvements in the ANDSF, hard won gains are in a critical stage requiring continued support. This support, more so than anything else should be clearly articulated as an element of both the near and short-term goals of the US. This clarification of US objectives should not only define what the mission is, but also what it is not. It is not the complete suppression of the Taliban. It is not the end of the insurgency. It is not the complete end of corruption and perfection of the Afghan state. Rather, it is an advisory mission with a very low footprint, echoing other long-term US BPC operations, and aimed at enabling Afghan security forces to stand on their own.
The consequences of premature withdrawal or a rushed diplomatic process are dire. The Taliban have never renounced their ties to transnational terror groups like al-Qaeda. The material backers of the Taliban have not been dissuaded. Concrete leverage that could force actors like Pakistan to end this support remains a fleeting prospect at best. So long as the leadership of the Taliban feel total victory to be within their grasp, a peaceful reconciliation process is an impossible premise.

If the greatest international priority of the United States continues to be the security of its homeland and the homeland of its allies, then the threat posed by an Afghanistan dominated by the Taliban and their transnational terrorist allies cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the courageous example of Afghan partners, from the civil bureaucracy to the security forces, must be recognized and rightfully entitled to continued support. Abandoning allies in the midst of an existential struggle is unacceptable. For matters of both morality and pragmatism, the future ability of the United States to cultivate international partnerships depends on its credibility as an ally.

Ultimately, negotiations in good faith between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban will determine the end of the conflict and provide the only concrete means to deny a future safe-haven to transnational terrorists. The basis for such a peace process has not been reached at present. In order to enable a true reconciliation process the United States must focus its resources on working by, with, and through its Afghan partners in a sustainable fashion. Unilateral action, large offensives, and limited counter-terror operations are insufficient and in actuality self-defeating. Only truly self-sufficient Afghan National Defense and Security Forces can deny Taliban victory and enable negotiations towards lasting peace.
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