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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

Despite interesting patterns from the past and at least superficially striking parallels with the present, policies on Afghanistan have not been adequately informed by an understanding of the country's history. Nor has the extensive academic literature on Afghan history been translated into policy; on the contrary, much that has been attempted in Afghanistan since late 2001 has been remarkably ahistorical. This report identifies broad historical patterns and distills relevant lessons that may be applicable to policies during the 2011 to 2014 transition and beyond. Responsibility for the views expressed and any errors is solely the author's.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Lessons from Afghanistan's History for the Current Transition and Beyond

Summary

- Afghanistan's history provides important insights and lessons for the 2011 to 2014 transition and beyond, but differences with the past must be taken into account.
- As the 1933 to 1973 decades demonstrate, the country can be stable and effectively governed, but that stability was anchored in the two pillars of traditional local governance and a centralized though weak state, both of which were gravely damaged after 1978.
- Given the country's history of chronic succession problems and associated conflict, the next presidential election, if successful, would be the first peaceful transfer of leadership since 1933 and only the fourth since 1747.
- Expectations about the pace of progress must be modest and the dangers of overly ambitious reforms leading to violent reactions recognized.
- Regional countries could derail peace prospects, and planning around such spoilers may be needed.
- The difficulties of reaching a peaceful solution during a military withdrawal, and the adverse consequences when such efforts fail, were demonstrated during the period from 1986 to 1992.
- The period after the Soviet withdrawal shows the potential and limitations of Afghan security forces: holding onto Kabul and other cities is probably the most that can be hoped for in the current transition.
- The option of arming and paying militias is dangerous because it opens the door to instability and predatory behavior.

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- The Afghan economy is in much better shape than it was during and after the Soviet period, and a deep economic contraction in coming years needs to be avoided.
- Afghanistan will depend heavily on outside financial support for many years, and such support must not be abruptly cut back or stopped.
- Effective national leadership is critical during transitions.
- It is important not to overlearn from history, for example, Afghanistan's problematic experience over the past half-century with political parties, which are essential to successful democratic systems.

Introduction

Afghanistan's history is replete with wars and other violent conflicts, including most recently the more than three decades of foreign occupation, civil war, and insurgency since 1978. These provide a rich set of experiences and possible lessons for the country's current transition and what follows, though the differences between the past and the present must be kept in mind and factored into any conclusions and recommendations. This report looks at Afghanistan's history in the two centuries up to the 1970s and discusses the Soviet occupation and aftermath in more detail. It focuses on identifying parallels and contrasts between Afghanistan's historical experience and its current situation, puts forward relevant policy lessons, and points out key aspects that will merit attention in coming years.¹

Several widely held but misleading myths about Afghanistan need to be disposed of at the outset. First, contrary to some views, Afghanistan is a geographically well-defined country. It is true that some of its borders were artificially delineated—in particular the Durand Line along the border with present-day Pakistan, which has been a contentious issue because it did not have a clear ethnic or geographical rationale.² Unlike those of many post-colonial countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan's borders were shaped mainly through processes of conflict and resistance not dissimilar to those in some of the smaller European countries. Indeed, Afghan national identity was formed and defined by resistance against foreign incursions, which also took on a religious dimension given that most incursions in recent centuries were by non-Muslim powers. Afghanistan's perceived fragility, domestic rivalries, succession disputes, and external challenges during most of its history resembled in many respects what smaller European countries faced during the long process of state formation there.

Moreover, Afghanistan has a far longer history as a distinct national entity with continuity to the present than most of its neighbors. It is, for example, two hundred years older than Pakistan, which was created only in 1947. The contrast with the Central Asian states to the north, which date from the breakup of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, and their administratively delineated, largely artificial borders, is even greater. Despite Afghanistan's ethnic diversity and considerable levels of interethnic tensions and conflict, strikingly there has never been a serious separatist movement in the country, let alone one with any significant prospects of success.

Second, contrary to some views, Afghanistan can be effectively governed and politically stable. The monarchial state that ruled from 1933 to 1973 differed in many ways from the typical modern state in industrialized countries. It did not penetrate deeply into the countryside in large parts of the country, nor was it very successful developmentally. It did, however, keep the peace and maintain order, was perceived as legitimate internally and externally, maintained reasonable control over its borders, exercised independent diplomacy in a difficult region, and limited and monitored the activities of foreigners within the country. Although the government did not provide services to most of the

population (education and health, for example, were available mostly in urban areas and for elites), it did carry out the above basic state functions, which subsequent governments have struggled to fulfill.

Before 1978

Afghanistan as a state was born in the mid-eighteenth century as a dynastic, expansionist Pashtun-led power under Ahmad Shah Durrani (1747–72), who conquered Delhi and took over parts of the Indian subcontinent.³ The country was molded into its present territorial boundaries during a century-long process of wars and diplomacy known as the Great Game—a geopolitical rivalry between British interests in India to the East and South, Russia expanding from the North, and to some extent Iran to the West. Three Anglo-Afghan wars were waged during that time: from 1839 to 1842, 1878 to 1880, and briefly in 1919. The period also saw numerous other violent incidents and brief skirmishes with outside powers, many internecine revolts and succession struggles, and internal invasions by Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (1880–1901) to unify the country. Afghanistan became a buffer state between the British and Russian empires, and in the process was both buffeted and strengthened. From 1880 until the end of 1979, no foreign troops occupied Kabul or other Afghan cities. For several decades following the third Anglo-Afghan war in 1919, when restrictions on Afghan foreign policy that the British Empire had imposed were removed, Afghanistan was left somewhat alone. The country went through a major but aborted reform process under King Amanullah (1919–29) and then maintained its neutrality during World War II. Afghanistan's geopolitical role again became important during the Cold War, when it benefited from major Soviet and U.S. assistance programs. The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s saw gradual modernization in what remained a very poor country with extremely low social indicators. After enjoying its longest period of relative peace and stability under King Zahir Shah (1933–73), Afghanistan saw increasing instability leading to a bloodless coup by the king's cousin Mohammad Daoud in 1973, which instituted a republic, then a bloody communist coup and takeover in 1978, and finally the Soviet occupation starting at the end of 1979, which led to more than two decades of debilitating conflict.

During the entire period from 1747 to 1978, with one very brief exception in 1929, the country was ruled by Durrani Pashtuns from a tiny number of clans within that broader group.⁴ Dynastic succession was a chronic problem after the death of a ruler.⁵ Only three—Ahmad Shah Durrani, Abdur Rahman Khan, and Nadir Shah (1929–33)—ensured smooth successions after their deaths, in each case to a son who was named heir. The usual pattern was violent contention for the throne, sometimes lasting for years. Potentially eligible claimants within the ruling clan were often numerous, and the tendency for some failed claimants to be “pensioned” with a living allowance in British India, able to return under the appropriate circumstances, further added to the complexities of succession. Legitimacy was conferred by the ability to take power, defeat rivals, and provide peace and security, as well as by perceived independence from foreign control—even when accepting financial assistance from other countries.

Although the dynasty established by Ahmad Shah Durrani was decisively put down in 1978, its legacy and aura of legitimacy remained, as evidenced by many calls over the years for the return of former King Zahir Shah, at least in a figurehead role, and his return and engagement after 2001 until his death in 2007. Interestingly, President Hamid Karzai is a member of the same Popalzai tribe of the Durrani Pashtun grouping as dynastic founder Ahmad Shah Durrani and his immediate successors, and hence some of this aura of legitimacy may have extended to Karzai in the first years after 2001.⁶

Legitimacy was conferred by the ability to take power, defeat rivals, and provide peace and security, as well as by perceived independence from foreign control.

De jure Afghanistan was always a unitary state under a monarch (first amir and later king) and in accordance with the several constitutions. The degree of de facto power concentrated at the center relative to regional interests varied over time, reaching a peak during the reign of Abdur Rahman Khan and subsiding somewhat thereafter. Local Afghan governance remained largely traditional and informal, however. When the country was stable and at peace, the two systems synergistically reinforced one other, and even when instability and change afflicted the top, local governance was largely insulated. The physical reach of the state into the countryside was limited especially in the more remote areas, but its legitimacy and overall authority were broadly accepted. At its best, the system provided workable arrangements between centralized monarchial rule and the highly diverse, decentralized, and traditional Afghan reality in most parts of the country.

Overly ambitious and rushed modernization efforts resulted in sharp domestic reactions that set back development, sometimes for decades.

A lesson from Afghanistan's twentieth-century experience is that in this kind of context, overly ambitious and rushed modernization efforts, even if internally rather than externally driven, resulted in sharp domestic reactions that set back development, sometimes for decades. This was particularly true of reforms disturbing established power relations in the rural areas and affecting religion, culture, and the role of women. The most notable example before 1978 was King Amanullah's effort to impose reforms and modernization, which stimulated a violent reaction and eventually his ouster from power. The wholesale and violent changes that the communist regime of 1978 to 1992 tried to impose in its initial years in power elicited an even stronger reaction.

On the other hand, a gradual and evolutionary approach could achieve modest progress, when moved forward in a patient manner and not directly threatening to the more conservative elements in the society. A good example during the decades of the 1950s to the 1970s was female education—including coeducation in Kabul University—and changing social norms in Kabul and a few other cities, where educated women began not wearing the traditional Afghan veil. Such evolutionary reforms were concentrated in the cities where receptivity was greater, and only gradually advanced, if at all, in the rural areas, opening a widening urban-rural cultural divide that accompanied and became intertwined with the existing bifurcation of centralized state power and traditional local governance.

During most of its existence, Afghanistan has relied to varying degrees on external financing to run its state and for public investments. The sources of such financing changed over time. In the second half of the eighteenth century, frequent military campaigns in the Indian subcontinent and associated plunder and tribute were the main source of funding, used primarily to support a large army of an estimated 120,000 at peak. Over time, this approach became increasingly unviable given weaker Afghan rulers and the rise of the Sikh confederation-empire centered in the Punjab. By the end of the eighteenth century, it no longer worked at all, and the country progressively lost much of the territory outside present-day Afghanistan that Ahmad Shah Durrani had conquered.

In the nineteenth century, external financing came in the form of subsidies from British India. These were intended to prevent unrest and uprisings fomented in Afghanistan from becoming a danger to nearby parts of the subcontinent, to enable the British to exert a modicum of influence over Afghanistan particularly with respect to its foreign engagements, and more generally to support Afghanistan as a buffer state against the expanding Russian Empire to the north.

From the 1950s to 1970s, considerable aid was provided by both the Soviet Union and the United States as part of their global Cold War rivalry, resulting in Afghanistan's becoming one of the highest per-capita recipients of development assistance in the world.

Since 1978, large quantities of material and sizable financial support were provided to the state and its mujahideen opponents during the Soviet occupation, and in recent decades the opium economy also became a fertile source of funding.

Persistent external financing has given Afghanistan characteristics of a rentier state⁷—more intensely during some periods than others, and arguably reaching a peak in recent years. The regime in most periods did not have to mobilize large revenues from the Afghan population or businesses to cover its costs. Afghanistan’s experience in this respect diverges sharply from the European state-building process, where the need to mobilize revenue on a sustained basis from domestic sources led over time to mutual accountability between rulers and taxpayers, synergies between economic growth and public revenue, and the rise of “open access orders” characterized by the combination of robust democracies and modern economic development.⁸

The rentier state did not guarantee Afghan responsiveness, let alone loyalty, to the source of the external funding. Past foreign criticisms of the unreliability of Afghan partners miss the point: external financing influenced the choice set and incentives Afghan rulers faced and obviated the need for them to raise large revenues domestically, but it did not buy their acquiescence to a foreign agenda which should not have been expected, particularly since doing so openly would have discredited the ruler as a foreign puppet. However, abruptly cutting off such funding was a recipe for disaster. For example, when a cost-conscious British government came into office during the First Anglo-Afghan War and payments by the British East India Company to Ghilzai Pashtun tribes to the east of Kabul were sharply cut back, these tribes revolted, blocked communications, and subsequently harassed and massacred the British army when it retreated from Kabul in January 1842.

In addition to the foolhardiness of abruptly cutting off payments to Afghan armed groups, a number of other insights from the two Anglo-Afghan wars of the nineteenth century bring out some interesting parallels and provoke thought, despite the gulf of time since then and the enormous differences in the situation faced now (see box 1).

Turning to internal security, loss of regime control over the armed forces—whether the tribes in earlier periods or the Afghan army in the 1973 and 1978 coups—was usually the proximate cause of violent changes in power. Shifting allegiances among Afghan tribal armed forces were common in times of unrest and uncertainty over who would be the ruler. This risk did not disappear when a more modern army was established in the twentieth century; the government’s decision in the 1950s to seek military aid and training from the Soviet Union resulted, to a considerable extent, in an ideologically indoctrinated officer corps and sowed the seeds for the 1978 coup.

The 1947 formation of Pakistan—a country created *de novo* with administratively determined boundaries, in two regions separated by more than a thousand miles—changed the geopolitical dynamics with respect to the subcontinent, particularly after East Pakistan broke away and formed independent Bangladesh in 1971. Unlike the British Empire in India, Pakistan came to see its interests as not with a stable Afghanistan serving as a buffer state against the north, but instead through the lens of Pakistan’s focus on the Indo-Pakistan rivalry.⁹ This led to an approach that hinged on gaining strategic depth and avoiding the perceived encirclement that would be implied by a pro-India regime in Kabul. The problematic effects on Afghanistan came to the fore in the post-1978 period.

Finally, many mistakes were made in twentieth-century aid programs to Afghanistan, and most aid did not spread benefits widely in the country, let alone spur sustained rapid economic development. For example, classic problems were encountered in the major Helmand irrigation project financed by the United States.¹⁰ Afghanistan in the 1970s remained a very poor, largely subsistence-based, agricultural economy with extremely low social indicators despite the large amounts of aid provided.

However, significant infrastructure was built, most notably highways and irrigation projects, and higher education was developed, even if on a narrow, elite-based model. The north-south road through the Salang Tunnel and the largely completed ring road around

Box 1. Insights from the Anglo-Afghan Wars

Both of the first two Anglo-Afghan wars (1839–42 and 1878–80) started with what must have seemed like surprisingly easy British military victories, occupation of Kabul and key southern and eastern towns by British and Indian forces, deposition of the existing ruler, and his replacement by a new Afghan ruler put in place by the British but having a genuine dynastic claim to the throne.

In both, however, the situation soon deteriorated, and the new regime proved an unreliable and ineffective ally, not least because its legitimacy was increasingly tarnished by being associated with the foreign power. Harassment and killing of persons seen as collaborating with the British exacerbated problems. The sizable British and Indian forces in Kabul during the first war and their behavior provoked resentment, and the large amounts of money brought in to feed and maintain them and buy alliances distorted the economy and raised prices.

It turned out to be difficult and eventually impossible to provide adequate “force protection” for British troops and civilians in Kabul, and several massacres occurred, including the killing of the top British officials in Afghanistan in 1841 and again in 1879.

In both wars, the British suffered major military defeats, the retreat from Kabul in the first war and the battle of Maiwand in the second. These elicited strong British military responses and significant victories over the opposing Afghan forces as well as violent reprisals, which provided face-saving cover for ending the war followed by military withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, there was little doubt among policymakers, observers, and the British public that these were failed military adventures.

Excessive optimism at the outset of military interventions was followed by worsening public sentiment and political opposition in the home country (Britain). Fueled by battlefield defeats and rising costs and casualties, public opinion played a significant role in turning policy against military intervention and spurring withdrawal.

More generally, the process of British extrication and withdrawal at the end of these wars was messy but did not lead to breakdowns in Afghanistan. On the contrary, periods of stability followed, during which Afghanistan was not a serious threat to its neighbors.

The Afghan rulers who were installed in power by British military interventions were subsequently deposed and killed or driven into exile. Shah Shuja came into power (for a second time—he had ruled briefly earlier) with the British occupation of Kabul in the First Anglo-Afghan War and, soon after the British left, was assassinated just outside his palace. Yaqub Khan, who came into power at the beginning of the Second Anglo-Afghan War and signed the Treaty of Gandamak, which gave up territories including the Khyber Pass and ceded control over Afghan foreign policy to the British Empire, later abdicated and asked to be deported to India for his own safety.

On the other hand, rulers who came into power during and after British withdrawals had staying power and brought stability at least for a number of years. Dost Mohammad Khan (1826–39 and 1845–63) surrendered to the British at the beginning of the First Anglo-Afghan War, was exiled to India, and then allowed back as ruler a few years after the end of the war and ruled effectively until his death. Abdur Rahman Khan (1880–1901) was initially seen as a Russian pawn who was released into Afghanistan by the Russian Empire with a view to increasing its influence there. However, he came to an accommodation with the British (who were seeking to exit) and ruled effectively if ruthlessly for more than two decades.

British withdrawals were complete in that all military units left and there was no continuing foreign troop presence in the country. This reflected not only strong Afghan demands but also the British realization that the presence of foreign military forces was in itself destabilizing, fueling grievances during both wars and inciting violent opposition.

Britain's indirect interventions using money (especially the regular subsidies to established Afghan rulers) and diplomatic pressure were generally far more effective than its military interventions in Afghanistan.

Source: Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*; Dupree, *Afghanistan*; author's assessments.

Afghanistan stimulated greater internal trade and integration, even though the Afghan economy remained largely rural, agricultural, and subsistence based. The country was close to self-sufficient in wheat (the primary staple) in good harvest years—but suffered from periodic droughts—and generated significant agricultural and downstream exports (such as dried fruits and nuts as well as carpets). Higher education, though small in terms of numbers and narrowly based, was considered to be of good quality.

Soviet Occupation, Withdrawal, and Aftermath

The defensive and opportunistic coup that brought a pro-Soviet communist Afghan government into power in April 1978 was followed by ambitious reforms (notably land reform and gender equality), wholesale arrests, torture and execution of opponents, and ruling-party

infighting.¹¹ This repressive behavior and mounting opposition to the government's radical agenda gave rise to widespread resistance that threatened the new regime, which in turn led to the Soviet military intervention at the end of 1979. This was an important juncture in Afghanistan's history and precipitated several decades of conflict that has continued in various forms since then. Both parallels and striking differences between the Soviet occupation and the current intervention are evident and worth noting (see table 1).

Several significant characteristics of the early post-1978 period are echoed today:

- Overly ambitious reforms led to strong domestic reactions and setbacks, leaving the country worse off and stifling progress for decades.
- Excessive optimism on the part of the Soviet Union in launching a military intervention with initially limited objectives and a short time frame proved unwarranted—same as in the case of the first two Anglo-Afghan wars.
- The Soviet Union was unable to exert strong control over Afghan politicians, despite their being nominally subject to Communist Party discipline.
- The sanctuary for antigovernment mujahideen forces in Pakistan was an important factor in preventing an outright Soviet military victory.
- A purely military solution proved impossible despite massive injection of forces and brutal counterinsurgency methods.

When it comes to lessons that may be relevant to the current transition, including the drawdown of international troops and the handover of security responsibilities to Afghan security forces by 2014, the Soviet withdrawal and what followed merit particular focus. This includes both from 1986 to 1989, when the USSR changed its strategy to focus on reconciliation while trying to strengthen the Afghan government and then withdrew all of its military forces, and from 1989 to 1992, when the Najibullah regime left in place after the Soviet military withdrawal survived, contrary to widespread expectations, until aid and material support to it abruptly stopped as the Soviet Union began to fall apart.¹²

After a final unsuccessful military offensive mounted in 1986, the Soviet Union shifted away from striving for a military solution in Afghanistan and started seeking a way to withdraw its military forces. The Afghan government initially resisted this withdrawal, having tied its survival to the USSR's presence, and the Soviet leadership was divided over when and how quickly to withdraw. Soviet domestic political reforms (perestroika and glasnost) resulted in declining interest in Afghanistan and helped spur withdrawal.

The Soviet-Afghan strategy for withdrawal pursued between 1986 and 1989 included certain key elements. First was removing Babrak Karmal, who was seen as ineffective, as head of state and Afghan Communist Party leader in 1986, and replacing him with Najibullah, the former head of Afghanistan's secret police. Second was reversing the communist reform agenda and switching wholesale to a national reconciliation policy that called for a ceasefire with the mujahideen forces, talks, a transitional government, and elections. Third was a government focus—after mujahideen groups and their foreign supporters turned down reconciliation overtures—on making individual deals with local leaders, providing some financial incentives and reportedly achieving considerable success.¹³ Fourth was further strengthening and enlarging Afghan security forces, which peaked at 400,000 after the Soviet military withdrawal and demonstrated significant operational capabilities. Fifth was seeking international agreement and cover under UN auspices through the Geneva Accords of April 1988. Last was the well-organized and orderly withdrawal of Soviet military forces between May 1988 and February 1989, which was carried out with no major problems.

The withdrawal occurred under difficult conditions with little support from other parties, when the USSR itself was weakening. Given these circumstances, it must be deemed a success in narrow terms—achieving the limited objectives of a face-saving exit and leaving

Table 1. Comparison of Interventions

Aspect	Comparison	Current	Soviet
Motive	different	defeat Taliban regime and al-Qaeda following 9/11 attacks	prop up a failing communist regime—"Brezhnev Doctrine"
Initial scope	similar, limited	depose Taliban and root out al-Qaeda	protect and strengthen Communist government
Evolution of scope	different, but both expanding	state-building, democracy, economic and social development; regime protection	major social reforms; strengthen regime against expanding attacks
Length of time	somewhat similar	thirteen years (2001–2014), longer-term noncombat commitment beyond 2014	ten years (1979–89), followed by continuing support for Afghan regime (1989–92)
International sanction	different	UN Security Council mandate, Bonn Agreement, ISAF-NATO engagement	Warsaw Pact backing but no UN mandate
Foreign troop levels	similar	100,000 U.S. troops plus 50,000 from other countries at peak	90,000 to 120,000 Soviet troops
Counterinsurgency approach	different	targeted, limited civilian casualties, population-centric approach; also counterterrorism	indiscriminate attacks, many civilian casualties, widespread destruction and displacement
Economic policy	different	private market-based economy, but legacy of illicit and war economy	vener of central planning, public enterprises, rationing in urban areas
Economy during intervention	different	recovering, growing rapidly	destruction of infrastructure and rural economic base
Fiscal situation	somewhat similar	heavily dependent on external funding; growing domestic revenue	heavily dependent on external funding; declining domestic revenue
Aid dependence	similar	extremely high (total aid and security support about equivalent to GDP at peak)	very high (including in-kind food, fuel, military supplies)
Aid effectiveness	somewhat similar	massive waste, losses, lack of accountability; variation across sectors; on-budget aid effective	much waste, losses; reportedly only 10 to 15 percent of aid reached Afghan population
Afghan government leadership selection	different	one leader since 2001; chosen by Bonn, Loya Jirga, imperfect elections	chosen by Soviet Union and Afghan Communist Party, violent changes in early years
Patronage	similarities and differences	international, domestic contracts; senior appointments; also drug money	based on Communist Party, government payroll (civil service, security forces, militias)
Government capacity issues	somewhat similar	very weak; "second civil service" at higher levels, implementing programs	weak, augmented by large-scale training in USSR
Technical assistance approach, effectiveness	similarities and differences	massive, often wasteful, little lasting effect; but second civil service effective	out-of-touch advisors with their own agendas, but worked with government
Program effectiveness	different	some rural national programs highly effective, urban programs less so	greater effectiveness in urban areas due to security
Domestic antigovernment forces	different	major opposition concentrated among Pashtuns in the south and east	nationwide except for a few urban areas, but stronger in south and east
Foreign opposition	different	no country openly supports Taliban despite some support in Pakistan and other countries	United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, others directly supported mujahideen
Pakistan sanctuary	somewhat similar	somewhat hidden but robust and effective, ambivalent Pakistan government stance	much more open sanctuary, large-scale supply of weapons and other support

Source: Author's assessment

behind a regime in Afghanistan that did not immediately collapse. Numerous advisers, KGB personnel, and civilian personnel remained in Afghanistan to support the government, and large quantities of military hardware were left behind for the Afghan army. However, the weaknesses of the Geneva Accords,¹⁴ already evident at the time, meant that the Soviet withdrawal did not occur in conjunction with a meaningful peace settlement. The accords did little more than provide some degree of face-saving and international cover for the Soviet military withdrawal and did not stem the tide of violence afterward.

The Najibullah government was attacked by the mujahideen immediately after the Soviet withdrawal but demonstrated its ability to hold onto the large cities by its effective defense of Jalalabad against some fifteen thousand Pakistan-backed forces, whose disorganization and military weaknesses were exposed. Moreover, the complete withdrawal of Soviet combat troops took away to a considerable extent the jihadi moral high ground and time-honored narrative of fighting against foreign invaders. The continuing conflict then took on more of

an Afghan-versus-Afghan character, exacerbating divisions among the various mujahideen groups that had been papered over by their unified stance against the Soviet occupation.

However, Afghan security forces could do little more than hold onto the larger cities and proved unable to exert any meaningful control over the countryside. Instead, exploiting the fragmented opposition, the government co-opted a range of tribal leaders into not fighting, often using Soviet-provided aid—including weapons, food, and fuel—to make local deals. Some militias joined the army and were deployed in other regions when needed. The militia-based approach worked in the short run but carried serious risks, given that leaders and their militias easily could (and did) change sides and turn against the government if funding was cut off—as happened comprehensively starting in 1991 during the process of disintegration of the Soviet Union—or if the opposing side offered a higher price for the loyalty of the leader, group, or militia concerned. In this regard, the problematic characteristics of an unstable “political marketplace” were evident, where patronage is used to hold together different groups and regional interests, but it is factionalized and short-term oriented, with deals frequently reopened, sometimes through violence.¹⁵ In addition, the Najibullah government continued to face internal divides and factionalism, including between the two major groups within the Communist Party, although the party structure did provide a foundation of core support for the regime.

Although the post-Soviet Afghan government may well have progressively weakened and perhaps eventually would have fallen, given its precarious alliances and continuing hardline opposition from Pakistan and mujahideen groups based there, assessments by the United States and others at the time considered that it had largely stabilized the situation and conceded that a mujahideen victory in the near term was unlikely. Clearly, the proximate cause of the Najibullah regime’s collapse was the cutoff of Soviet material assistance, financial aid, and military supplies in 1991 and 1992. This did not reflect policy as much as lack of resources given that the Soviet Union was coming to an end. The Afghan government began to see military defeats and militia defections, and Kabul fell in April 1992.

The mujahideen regime that took over was highly factionalized and faced opposition from other groups. To a large extent, it was a government in name only, and the situation soon degenerated into a vicious and bloody civil war that destroyed Kabul, which had largely escaped damage during the Soviet and Najibullah periods. Much of the country descended into warlordism, brutal human rights abuses, and criminality. This created the conditions for the emergence and rapid expansion of the Taliban movement starting in 1994, which took over Kabul in 1996 and by the end of the decade controlled some 90 percent of Afghanistan’s territory. A systematic consideration of the mujahideen civil war period and 1990s Taliban regime is beyond the scope of this report,¹⁶ but clearly this worst-case outcome had extremely damaging effects on Afghanistan, the ramifications of which continue to be felt today.

Parallels and contrasts between the Soviet withdrawal and the current transition are interesting, numerous, and instructive (see table 2).

Taken as a whole, the Soviet withdrawal and the Najibullah period that followed offer several important insights. First, effective Afghan leadership was very important in the Soviet withdrawal and temporary survival of the post-Soviet Afghan government. Additionally, withdrawal of foreign military forces, in removing much of the *raison d’être* for the opposition, created opportunities for the government to take advantage of resulting divisions and loss of energy among opposition groups. At the same time, total reliance on Afghan security forces after the Soviet withdrawal turned out to be unrealistic: the post-Soviet Afghan army was well equipped and well officered (many officers were trained in the USSR) but was not able to do much more than hold onto the larger cities. The alternative of relying on local deals with militias and armed groups worked for a while but was quite dangerous, carrying risks of instability due to shifting alignments and changing sides,

Parallels and contrasts between the Soviet withdrawal and the current transition are interesting, numerous, and instructive.

Table 2. Comparison of Withdrawals and Transitions

Aspect	Comparison	Current Transition	Soviet Withdrawal
Foreign objectives	similarities and differences	drawdown of international troops, stable regime afterward, counterterrorism activities to continue	withdrawal of Soviet troops, survival of Afghan communist regime
Size of Afghan security forces in transition	similar	target is 352,000, declining to around 230,000 by 2017	around 400,000 Afghan security forces at peak
Capabilities of Afghan security forces	remains to be seen	few units with independent operational capability, limited air power and logistics	effective, independent operations, low desertion rate until near the end
Effectiveness of Afghan forces after transition	remains to be seen	concerns about operational effectiveness, cohesion, political and fiscal sustainability	held cities but could not contest rural areas, used militias for latter
Reconciliation strategy	remains to be seen	not prioritized until recently, ongoing efforts	called for cease-fire, talks, transitional government, elections
Success of reconciliation	remains to be seen	too early to tell, but limited progress so far in current efforts	negative response by opposition, government co-opted local groups
Antigovernment forces' stance on reconciliation	similar	preference for talks with or including United States, a variety of "secret" talks	Afghan regime not recognized but secret talks, willing to talk to Soviet Union
Multilateral-UN role in transition	remains to be seen	not clear, but may be important if peace negotiations are held	UN engagement, Geneva accords, but did not include mujahideen
Government leadership	expected to be different	presidential election with open seat mandated for 2014 by constitution	Najibullah stayed in power after Soviet withdrawal until aid cut off
Foreign military withdrawal process	similarities and differences	security transition just starting, gradual drawdown over three years	Soviet withdrawal quick (nine months) but orderly, no immediate collapse afterward
Post-transition foreign military presence	different	some continuing presence envisaged in noncombat and counterterrorism roles	many advisers but no Soviet military units remained after withdrawal
Time horizon beyond transition	different	longer-term U.S.-NATO commitment; ten-year Strategic Partnership Agreement	short-term support provided, may have feared regime would fall after Soviet withdrawal

Source: Author's assessment

and requiring continuing large injections of external funds to be viable. No durable peace was possible without the buy-in of key regional players, Pakistan in particular; although Pakistan was a signatory to the Geneva Accords of 1988, the mujahideen groups were not, and Pakistan intervened actively through proxies in the subsequent civil war. Finally, the post-withdrawal Afghan government did not survive the loss of Soviet financial and material support.

Similarities and Differences, Then and Now

Opening to the outside world in recent decades, especially during the past ten years, has been unprecedented in that the bulk of Afghanistan's population has been affected in one way or another—through refugee experience during the protracted conflict, rampant growth of urban population (partly due to displacement but also as a result of return of refugees, rapid population growth, and urbanization since 2001), and much greater connectivity with the rest of the world through television, electronic media, mobile telephony, and the like. A new generation of younger Afghans has become accustomed to such connections. Most Afghans do not personally remember the pre-war period or Soviet occupation, and many were not adults during the civil war of the early 1990s or the Taliban regime that ended in 2001. This generational change and greater connectivity also applies to antigovernment elements and their wider connections with regional and global religious fundamentalism and terrorist networks.

However, in other periods of Afghanistan's history, the state and at least elements of the elite also looked outward and were influenced by global connections, trends, and ideologies. In the twentieth century, for example, King Amanullah's reign (1919–29) was a period of wholesale reform when the ruler deliberately brought in strong Western influence, which

was followed by a sharp conservative reaction. More gradual modernization followed in the 1950s through the 1970s: education expanded among urban elites, significant numbers of Afghans went abroad for education or training, and some investments (most notably in transport) began to open the Afghan economy more to international trade. Political liberalization, albeit modest, also manifested itself in the 1960s with a new constitution and parliament. Various political parties and groupings were formed, with ideologies ranging from Soviet and Chinese communism at one extreme to Islamist radicalism at the other, leading in turn to some degree of political turmoil, pulling back of some of the political reforms, and eventually the two coups d'état.¹⁷

Afghanistan appears to have changed in terms of receptivity to having foreign troops stationed in the country on a long-term basis, which would be unprecedented. The positive popular reaction to the recently signed Strategic Partnership Agreement with the United States and its quick approval by the Afghan parliament are indications that a sea change has occurred in this regard. However, even if acceptable to most Afghans, a long-term foreign troop presence may lead to issues with some of Afghanistan's neighbors. Moreover, it might serve as a continuing rallying call to mobilize antigovernment forces.

As noted, Afghanistan has more often than not during its history depended on external financing of various kinds, so the post-2001 dependence on aid is not entirely new. However, the sheer magnitude of aid in recent years is so much larger than in the past that its roles and impacts may well be qualitatively different. Aid as a share of GDP was almost uniquely high at its peak in 2010–2011 and was very high for several years. From a historical perspective and a different angle, domestic revenues are estimated to have accounted for more than 60 percent of total budgetary expenditures in the 1970s, more than 70 percent in 1982, but only 31 percent in 2004–2005.¹⁸ Another significant difference is that past dependence on external funding largely involved resources channeled through the Afghan ruler and government, whereas post-2001 aid has been much more fragmented, and most of it has not been under the control of national authorities.

Traditional governance is sometimes seen as a way forward to better local security and greater political stability in Afghanistan and indeed could play a role in this regard. However, simplistic recommendations harkening back to pre-1978 stability, such as to rely on tribal leaders, village elders, or local tribal militia (*arbaki*), fail to recognize how much the governance situation at the local level has changed over the past thirty years. In particular, traditional forms of governance and traditional leaders have been severely weakened during the conflict—suppressed successively by the communist and subsequent regimes and captured, supplanted, or replaced by war-related arrangements characterized by armed violence and the threat of it. Massive urbanization also has eroded traditional rural governance mechanisms for a large part of the increasingly urbanized population.

Finally, Afghanistan's geopolitical significance, actual and perceived, has ebbed and flowed at various times during its recent history, but this is nothing new. Afghanistan by all indications will continue to play an important part in the regional Great Game. Although it has never been a passive actor—indeed Afghan national leadership has often been decisive, especially when outcomes were positive—the country inevitably will continue to be buffeted by the currents of a difficult, turbulent region defined by geopolitical rivalries and fault lines.

Conclusions

Afghanistan's past clearly offers important lessons for the current transition, but they need to be applied cautiously and carefully—in full cognizance of the present context, the major changes since the Soviet occupation and withdrawal, and the even greater differences from

Afghanistan appears to have changed in terms of receptivity to having foreign troops stationed in the country on a long-term basis.

before 1978. It is also important not to overlearn lessons from history. For example, the country's poor experience with divisive, ideologically and ethnically oriented political parties during the 1960s to the 1990s has made many Afghans vehemently opposed to political parties. International experience demonstrates, however, that political parties play crucial roles in successful democratic systems. These caveats aside, some patterns and at least superficial continuities are significant.

On the positive side, Afghanistan's experience between 1933 and 1973 demonstrates that the country can be stable and effectively governed, even though the state was weak and development progress slow. Domestic and regional conditions have changed since then, but that period also presented its challenges, which were effectively managed, giving some ground for optimism. It must be kept in mind, however, that the stability of that time was anchored in a centralized but weak monarchical state and traditional informal local governance. Both of these to a large extent crumbled during the period of protracted conflict after 1978. Significant efforts have been made since 2001 to rebuild a unitary, centralized state, albeit with mixed progress. Little headway, however, has been made in restoring or replacing informal local governance. On the contrary, this remains a major problem area dominated by regional and local power-holders who lack legitimacy, and characterized by lack of rule of law, formal or traditional.

Afghanistan's experience highlights the need for modest expectations about how quickly progress can be achieved.

Afghanistan's experience also highlights the need for modest expectations about how quickly progress can be achieved. In particular, overly ambitious reform efforts can backfire; national reactions to perceived impositions from outside (including by the central government) can be violent and extreme, and can set back progress for long periods. However, as in the case of political parties, this lesson can be overlearned; certainly immediately after the downfall of the Taliban in 2001, opportunities to break from the past appeared to exist.¹⁹

Another common pattern in Afghanistan involved succession problems and frequent associated conflicts. Undisputed succession from one amir or king to a designated successor was the exception rather than the rule. Disputed successions were settled violently and sometimes involved years of civil war. This pattern continued during and after the Soviet occupation; among the four communist-era leaders, three died violent deaths and one was exiled. Since 2001, two presidential elections (one of them disputed) have been held, but no transfer of power from one head of state to another has occurred. Thus the next presidential election, scheduled for 2014, will be a test of whether peaceful transfer of power based on popular vote is possible. For such prospects to be good, the election will need to have a modicum of credibility, and the preparatory phase of coalition building and possible emergence of an elite consensus will be very important.²⁰

Interference by outside powers has been a well-established feature during most of Afghanistan's history, despite significant periods when such influences were more limited and benign than in other periods. Afghanistan appears to have been most stable when outside and particularly regional influences were contained and managed by a stable, reasonably effective Afghan state. Problematic involvement on the part of regional countries and certain interest groups within them could derail peace prospects and severely constrain Afghanistan's freedom of action and that of global actors. The current situation in Pakistan indicates a need to plan around, or at a minimum for contingency planning, with respect to Pakistan playing a spoiler role and perhaps preventing a meaningful peace agreement between the government and Taliban. Iran and to a lesser extent other regional countries raise similar issues.

Afghanistan will continue to depend heavily on international financial support for many years to come, and, based on the experience following the Soviet withdrawal, such support must not be abruptly cut back, let alone precipitously stopped. Despite their many differences, heavy dependence on external financing is a common feature of both the post-Soviet withdrawal Afghan regime and the current government.

Afghanistan's history underlines the importance of effective national leadership, both internally and to contain and manage the influence of external actors. This is consistent with the more general lesson from international experience, emphasized in the World Bank's 2011 World Development Report *Conflict, Security, and Development*, of the critical importance of national leadership at key points in postconflict transitions. Although domestic leadership cannot overcome insuperable obstacles arising from factors beyond the country's control (such as the complete cutoff of Soviet support when the USSR was dissolved), it can make things better or worse and in some circumstances could play a determining role in the success or failure of transition. Leadership refers not only to individuals but also to groups, and in this context the lack of effective, nationally oriented political parties in Afghanistan has been a signal failure since 2001.

The post-Soviet period also indicates the potential as well as the likely limitations of Afghan security forces. The most that can probably be hoped is for the Afghan National Army (ANA) to hold onto Kabul and other major cities: it is unlikely to be an effective counterinsurgency force in rural areas. Moreover, the ANA lacks air power and various logistical capabilities for independent operations and, as a post-2001 creation has been functioning largely under ISAF leadership and guidance. Indeed, more risks may be associated with the ANA during and after the current transition given greater ethnic factionalization; the ANA could fragment or desert from the government earlier rather than later, whereas the post-Soviet Afghan army held together reasonably well until near the end.

The Soviet and post-Soviet experience with arming and paying militias suggests that this option is fraught with danger. Arguably a tempting approach to achieving a modicum of security and stability in areas beyond the reach of government and formal security forces, it risks instability given the dependence on payments to militia leaders. Moreover, given the tendency of militias to engage in predatory behavior, this approach could also exacerbate grievances and drivers of conflict. And such militias easily can become proxy forces for neighboring countries, as amply demonstrated in recent decades.

The Soviet withdrawal and its aftermath show both the difficulties in trying to reach a peaceful solution during a military withdrawal and the adverse consequences that can ensue if such efforts fail. Thus striving for reconciliation is called for, but contingency planning against failure of reconciliation efforts also would be advisable, particularly if a peace agreement is being rendered impossible by one or more countries in the region playing a spoiler role.

Last, the Afghan economy today is a wild card—currently in much better shape than during the Soviet period and aftermath. The potential impact of such widely differing economic performance on respective outcomes in the 1990s and during the next several years is difficult to gauge even speculatively, but clearly there has been some positive impact in recent years, not least in mitigating and (at least partly) offsetting other problems. Afghanistan could not have achieved the successes it did had the economy been stagnating since 2001. Thus, avoiding a deep economic contraction and sustaining robust economic growth, even at somewhat lower rates than during the past decade, would be beneficial and should be a priority.

In conclusion, this report has made a broad-brush attempt to derive some patterns and to distill a few lessons from Afghanistan's turbulent history. Some of them are cautionary, even pessimistic, but it is necessary to acknowledge the disadvantages and risks so they can be managed better and mitigated to the extent possible.

Notes

1. Comments on this report from Richard Hogg, Shahmahmood Miakhel, Barmak Pazhwak, Scott Smith, and Andrew Wilder are gratefully acknowledged.
2. For a discussion on the legal status of the Durand Line based on recently released archival documentary evidence, see Bijan Omrani and Frank Ledwidge, "Rethinking the Durand Line: The Legality of the Afghan-Pakistani Frontier," *RUSI Journal* 154, no. 5 (October 2009): 48–56.
3. This discussion of Afghanistan's pre-1978 history draws on a number of sources, including among others Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Michael Barry, *Kabul's Long Shadows: Historical Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Lichtenstein Institute on Self-Determination, 2011); and Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).
4. The tribal structure among Pashtuns is complex and sometimes somewhat ambiguous. The two major groupings, the Durrani Pashtuns centered around the Kandahar area and the Ghilzai Pashtuns concentrated more in eastern Afghanistan, overlap geographically a great deal, and the tribal picture was further muddled by forced relocations of various Pashtuns to the north and to newly irrigated areas, for example, in Helmand province.
5. Afghan rulers typically had many sons, and there was no established practice of primogeniture among them. Moreover, credible claimants to the throne often included other relatives and collateral lines.
6. See Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 284 and elsewhere.
7. See Astri Suhrke, *When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
8. See Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For an analysis of European history focusing on the role of wars in spurring development of the state, see Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1992).
9. For an extensive discussion on how Pakistan pursued its perceived strategic interests in Afghanistan, and the detrimental effects on the latter, see Barry, *Kabul's Long Shadows*.
10. See Nick Cullather, "Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State," *Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (September 2002): 512–37.
11. For an hour-by-hour account of the 1978 coup that brought a communist government into power and precipitated more than two decades of conflict, see Louis Dupree, "Red Flag over the Hindu Kush, Part II: The Accidental Coup" (Asia Series Report no. 45, American Universities Field Staff, 1979). Following the pattern set in the Anglo-Afghan wars, the first two communist leaders of Afghanistan died violent deaths and the third ended up in exile in the Soviet Union.
12. This discussion on the Soviet withdrawal and its aftermath draws from Fotini Christia, "Lessons from the Soviet Withdrawal for the Present-Day Afghan Transition" (paper prepared for the World Bank study "Afghanistan in Transition: Looking Beyond 2014," May 2012).
13. By 1989, reportedly more than 70 percent of mujahideen commanders had ceased military operations against the government, 25 percent of the opposition armed units had signed reconciliation agreements with the government, and 40 percent had signed ceasefire agreements. This approach had more traction in minority areas and was less effective in the eastern and southern Pashtun belt.
14. The Geneva Accords were signed by Afghanistan and Pakistan, "guaranteed" by the Soviet Union and the United States, and provided for the UN to oversee implementation, but did not include any mujahideen representatives—which strengthened Pakistan's influence over the Pakistan-based mujahideen groups. The accords did not prevent either the Soviet Union or the United States from continuing to supply arms and other assistance to their respective protagonists in the conflict, and resources for postwithdrawal reconstruction were grossly inadequate and did not materialize in the end.
15. For a discussion of the political marketplace and its damaging effects in the African context, see Alex de Waal, "Mission Without End? Peacekeeping in the African Political Marketplace," *International Affairs* 85, no. 1 (2009): 99–113.
16. For extensive reviews of this period, see, for example, Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan: 1979 to the Present* (London: Hurst & Co., 2005) and William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).
17. This pre-war experience, combined with the role of the Communist Party when in power and the behavior of antigovernment parties during that period and subsequently in the civil war, discredited political parties in the minds of many Afghans, and in part explains the lack of stable, effective political parties to this day.
18. Astri Suhrke, "When More Is Less: Aiding Statebuilding in Afghanistan" (working paper no. 26, FRIDE, Madrid, September 2006), 5.
19. For a discussion of windows of opportunity in post-2001 Afghanistan and the extent to which some of them were effectively exploited or missed, see William Byrd, "Responding to Afghanistan's Development Challenge: An Assessment of Experience During 2002-2007 and Issues and Priorities for the Future" (PREM working paper no. SASPR-11, World Bank, New York, October 2007), 31–33 and elsewhere.
20. For a discussion of political issues and some scenarios on Afghanistan's next presidential election, see Scott Smith and Andrew Wilder, "Lost in Transition: A Political Strategy for Afghanistan," Foreign Policy AfPak Channel, May 22, 2012, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/05/22/lost_in_transition_a_political_strategy_for_afghanistan.

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