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CREATING VOIDS: WESTERN MILITARY DOWNSCALING AND AFGHANISTAN'S TRANSFORMATION PHASE

Florian P. Kühn



SUMMARY

Many doubt whether the Afghan state that was established during the Bonn Agreement in 2001 will survive withdrawal of Western troops after 2014. This paper addresses the impact of the withdrawal of Western combat forces and influence from Afghanistan. It examines the consequences from an economical viewpoint, carefully considering Afghanistan as a rentier state and how this will affect the urban and rural populations. It then analyzes the country in short-, mid- and long-term periods, examining these phases through social, political, legal, economic, cultural and regional lenses. The paper concludes by tentatively sketching the dynamics of Afghanistan's post-intervention future and by cautioning the change this withdrawal will have on a country caught in a balancing act between the traditional social modes and Western influence it has come to know for the last 10 years.

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INTRODUCTION

On May 10, 2011, *The Guardian* published an article that succinctly elucidated the complex debate about the withdrawal of Western troops and, subsequently, aid capacity from Afghanistan. One unidentified diplomat is quoted as saying: “Afghanistan has been the centre of the world for the past 10 years. It isn’t anymore and the purse strings from donors will soon tighten. The international military drawdown will begin...After this, many Afghans fear they will then be abandoned again. The international community will say ‘job done’ and it will be case of presenting it as ‘Afghan-good enough’” (Hopkins, 2011).

This paper addresses the impact of this withdrawal of combat forces, long seen to be a guarantee for at least the prevalence of the state that was established during the Bonn process following the events of September 11, 2001. Ten years later, Western policy makers were both disillusioned about the potential to actually influence the social and political processes in Afghanistan and fearful of their electorates (in Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany or, key to the decision to withdraw, the United States), who were tired of seeing soldiers and aid workers being delivered to their home countries in body bags.

Although, in hindsight, it seems rather inevitable that a serious downscaling would take place, the debate over Western military withdrawal involved a number of critical issues that are assessed in this paper. Even after the decision, these issues remain politically relevant and will likely remain important for any form that Western support or disengagement may take in Afghanistan in the future. The first issue concerns the strategic wisdom of withdrawal, which raises questions of geopolitics as well as the war-weariness of troop-sending countries,

and the cost-benefit calculus of continued involvement. This issue relates, secondly, to questions about the self-sustainability of the Afghan economy, as it is riddled with drug lords and smuggling syndicates. This shadow economic sector is, however, intermingled with the state and its administrators by political and family relations. Third, *The Guardian* article (Hopkins, 2011) illustrates a political-economic phenomenon that is prevalent but hardly recognized in Western analytical and, to a smaller degree, policy-making circles: the enduring claim that the collapse of Afghanistan is an imminent certainty. The fear that stability would crumble, enabling a Taliban takeover and undermining the most basic objective of international intervention, was used to try and prolong the intervention. Not surprisingly, this argument is applied mostly by the profiteers of the intervention: the aid and humanitarian industry, as well as Afghan elites working at the hinges of the local and the international fields. This argument has proven insufficient to keep the full-scale military intervention in place, but was a powerful enabler for the second-best solution — sustained aid flows. The mechanisms at play, that allowed the discourse to steer around the existential threat ostensibly emanating from Taliban influence (which allegedly reaches out into Western states with terrorist attacks) can best be described in terms of rentier politics. Afghan rentiers and all those gaining huge profits from extensive rent flows to Afghanistan have managed to attach their argument to Western discourse about global security policy, which increasingly understands international politics as risk management.

INTERESTS AND RENTS

The December 2011 International Conference on Afghanistan held in Bonn, Germany was a final and effective effort to shape the discourse, allowing intervening Western countries a face-saving exit while

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Florian P. Kühn is senior researcher and lecturer of political science and international politics at Helmut Schmidt Universität, Universität der Bundeswehr Hamburg. His current research focuses on risk policy and the resilience of social figurations in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. He has published widely on substate security, risk as a security category, intervention and state building, developmental programs for state building, war economies (especially drug and arms trafficking) and political violence such as terrorism.

His work has been published in *International Peacekeeping*, *International Relations* and *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, among others. Since 2013, he is editor of the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*. He has authored two books, *Illusion Statebuilding* (2010, with Berit Bliesemann de Guevara) and *Sicherheit und Entwicklung in der Weltgesellschaft* (2010), the latter of which earned him the Dissertation Award of the German Middle East Studies Association.

stressing their ongoing commitment to Afghanistan's development, while placing the responsibility — and the blame — with Afghanistan. Trying to keep the cake and their share in it big, Afghan elites are prognosticating dramatic consequences following Western withdrawal — even the possibility of a terrorist attack on the same scale as September 11. While this narrative reflects genuine concern for the country's future, much of it is likely an attempt to tap into further external rents that are enabled by such a threatening discourse. Western military's concerns about security aside, this seems to be the result of a substantial fear of losing all that has been achieved during the so-called "surge" since 2009, and also the military's influence, especially on US foreign policy. Politically, the aim is to rectify the mismatch of rhetoric and practice: in the eyes of many soldiers, had there only been more support, better results would have been achievable. Now, matching rhetoric and reality by putting things into Afghan hands, where they were always said to be, comes close to covering up the discrepancy between declarative aims and funding of programs, and real engagement to achieve them.

At the same time, somewhat subverting these goals to save face, government agencies have long established as a minimal standard what used to be termed "good enough governance." That so many have adopted this epithet reflects a mature consensus that initial plans — implicit or explicit — for a modern Western liberal democracy in Afghanistan were unrealistic. If anything, they remain only a dim hope for some unspecified future. Reducing military and economic assistance, however, raises several questions: What kind of governance may be good enough? Will we know it when we see it? Who is to exercise that governance? Does it mean conceding defeat to the Taliban and allowing the return of the repressive tactics of its previous stint in government? In other words: How appealing will the large-scale re-emergence of stoning, the burka and prohibition of both shaving and music be to Western societies who have financed the intervention since 2001? This situation ultimately points to the detachment of Western and local discourses, risk assessments and considerations for the future. That such a double discourse about Afghanistan exists characterizes Western engagement for state building in general; the "homeland" discourse circles around other questions than those concerning the countries where interventions are sustained (Daxner and Neumann, 2012; Kühn, 2012b). That both discourses fail to significantly affect policy can be described as organized irresponsibility, in that it fails to take responsibility neither toward those people subject to the policy, nor

toward the taxpayers financing it (Bliesemann de Guevara and Kühn, 2010). Afghan elites, who may have "collaborated" with the intervention, however, have a lot more to lose than their faces. Their discourse, hence, is driven by a desire to secure future rent flows and, at the same time, by genuine fear of extremists' reprisals.

The following section briefly elaborates the discursive strands surrounding the consequences of Western drawdown in Afghanistan. They include questions of strategic wisdom of the withdrawal, of economic self-sustainability and of how good "good enough" really is. Next, the distinct features of a fully established rentier economy are then discussed: lack of political responsiveness leading to limited legitimacy, dim development perspectives and, ultimately, collapse if future rent flows fail to materialize. Instead of proposing essentially impossible prognoses about what will happen after the last combat troops have left the country, this paper develops an analytical framework to examine military, social, political, legal and judicial, economic, cultural and regional aspects that will affect Afghanistan after 2014. By combining these categories with projections of short-, mid- and long-term developments, a fairly consistent, if tentative, picture of the dynamics of post-intervention Afghanistan can be derived. Some of the key pathologies of a decade of international state building may be corrected once the overarching influence of Western ideas and management techniques recedes (Bliesemann de Guevara and Kühn, 2010).

SCRUTINIZING THE EMERGING "UNSURGE"

When United States Army Special Forces killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011, perceptions of Western intervention, as well as its perspectives on it, changed. The first 10 years of military fighting under the "war on terror" label — essentially a punitive expedition against the Taliban, who allegedly harboured Osama bin Laden, and driven by a desire for revenge rather than the restoration of a pre-September 11 world order — had seen a sequence of changing aims: from overthrowing the Taliban government and catching or killing anyone loosely labelled as terrorists (Lieven, 2008), to state building and setting up a government to take on the responsibility for the West's security (Rubin, 2006), to finding a face-saving way out of this

theatre.¹ The final stage began when US President Barack Obama acknowledged important tactical errors, such as putting too few boots on the ground, disenfranchising the Afghan population and allowing corrupt elites too much leeway to develop “clientelist”² structures of personal dependencies (Rashid, 2008).

The Obama administration’s remedy was to mount the 2009 “surge.” Led by military planners, this strategy was a slightly adjusted copy of what produced (apparent) American success in Iraq. The main change was shifting from an enemy-centred to a population-centred strategy — to focus less on killing insurgents and more on denying them access to populations while protecting citizens from insurgent attacks. Providing functioning governance, public goods and services to the population in spaces denied to insurgents is a key pillar of this strategy, and shifts popular allegiance from the insurgency to the government. The basic assumption was that, by and large, the population would be receptive to government structures, and understand and welcome the ordering influence of these new institutions. The new approach allowed for much more “local governance,” preserving traditional modes of social interaction.³ The military shorthand for these operations was to “clear, hold, build” and then “transfer” to local state authorities (Bowman, 2011: 154).

1 The search for a “way out” is aptly demonstrated by the increasing prominence of drone strikes. In the course of the Afghanistan campaign, the policy of “targeted killings” (essentially state-mandated killings) has become tactical practice since Obama took office as president of the United States. As part of military tactics, drone strikes in western Pakistan increased from 33 in 2008, to 53 in 2009, to 118 in 2010, to 72 in 2011 and 36 in 2012 (New America Foundation, 2012; Cohen, 2011; Friedersdorf, 2011). Though seldom reported, the drone war has the potential to become a military asset for future campaigns. Easy to hide from the public, but also easy to hide from the eyes of controlling institutions such as parliaments, drones are deployed by intelligence services that easily escape political and budgetary sight. This strategic shift presumes that terrorism arises from the existence of terrorists, but does nothing to consider the environment that produces terrorists. For example, there is the questionable legality of drone strikes, as seen through the history of Israel’s targeted killings of Palestinian leaders. This demonstrates the ineffectiveness of such strategies (Kober, 2007) and questions the ultimate viability of this shift as a “way out” of Afghanistan.

2 Clientelism is a highly personalized form of conducting politics, in which a group of “clients” serves and supports a politically influential figure in exchange for political, economic or judicial privileges, as well as social status.

3 The term “traditional” is often used to describe something “established” which, by its very legacy, enjoys wide legitimacy. In Afghanistan, it is important to be aware of traditions often invented by power brokers to legitimize transformed institutions as more in line with local understandings of Islam, or for other reasons, such as a construction of “traditional” legitimacy. Thus, these institutions are not “traditional” in an ethnographic or anthropological sense, but are significant because they are more familiar to people than state institutions. The latter are often distrusted, as historically, the state enjoys a reputation of incapacity, repression and predation (Schetter, 2003; 2007).

Given the campaign’s unconventional nature, the strategy seldom worked well. Clearing sometimes involved heavy fighting, with significant US military and Afghan civilian casualties. When close air support was needed, the directive to spare the civilian population was often sacrificed to limit Western losses, leading to the deaths of many ordinary citizens and leaving a lasting impact on the hearts and minds of survivors. Entropic violence affected even those parts of the country not riddled by direct confrontations. Holding has also proven difficult, as seen in Marja District, when Taliban fighters re-infiltrated the area as the military waited for the civilian administration to gain a foothold, ultimately reigniting the fighting. The building phase was reportedly hampered by a lack of trained and non-corrupt personnel able to represent the government. In a personal conversation, one US soldier described the phase as holding a door open when no one wants to go through it; the cleared and held areas were hard to fill with durable governance structures. The transfer stage appears to be driven more by the frustration of Western electorates than by proper and sustainable governance in place for authority to be transferred to.

Osama bin Laden’s death offered Western leaders a convenient excuse to withdraw, even though a decade of shifting initiatives had failed to achieve their stated aims. Given the lack of administrative backup in the Afghan provinces (with the exception of those few controlled by local strongmen or where the population was always opposed to the Taliban), it is hard to envision what type of state will be in place after the 2014 withdrawal, or if state structures will be in place at all. The handover of security responsibilities started in only a few chosen locations: Panjshir and Bamiyan, as well as the affluent cities of Mazar-e Sharaf, Mehtar Lam, Kabul Province (the city is already under the Afghan government’s responsibility), Herat and Lashkar Gah. The transfer will likely underline the fragmented security landscape rather than be a path to unitary statehood. Even though many representatives, such as governors, are appointed by the Afghan president,⁴ there remains a fragmented security culture in the provinces (Podesta, Katulis and Wadhams, 2011; Bhatia and Sedra, 2008).

4 This practice is intended to ensure bonds of loyalty to the centre, but such loyalty is highly personalized, connected to individuals rather than institutions. Given this situation, President Hamid Karzai may take his political ties with him once he leaves office, throwing into question the bonds between central state and regional strongmen.

STRATEGIC WISDOM OF THE WITHDRAWAL

One question about Western withdrawal concerns its strategic wisdom. It is argued that setting a withdrawal date allows insurgents to simply wait out the intervention. There are two reasons to question this argument. First, *jihad* has become a lifestyle since 2006 and requires active “defence of the homeland” as a legitimating imperative for Afghan youths (Giustozzi, 2007b: 69–72). Second, Taliban and affiliates could have waited out the intervention in the first place when, after some years of relative quiet, the intervention (then a significantly smaller one) might have ended unceremoniously. So why did they choose to fight? They might have fought their way back into government at a later stage, when a government lacking outside support would be less able to counter the attacks.

If the intervention’s military presence causes the fiercest resistance, then it makes strategic sense to remove this bone of contention, rather than keeping up a military presence indefinitely, in spite of the lack of political progress. If the resistance of the most radical strata of Afghans could not be broken in 10 years, it may not be broken in another 10 or 20 years. While the question of why they fight, instead of waiting out the intervention, remains unanswered, what can be observed is the Taliban’s and other insurgents’ ability to opportunistically exploit whatever military and political space opens up to them (Johnson, 2011). They make use of local developments and adapt to whatever shifting tides in the confrontation offer to them, and their influence may vary over time and from province to province (Giustozzi, 2009b). This is a type of behaviour in conflict that Johnson (2011) calls the “Afghan way of war,” which implies that insurgents will always find opportunities to make use of a given constellation. On the international level, however, enduring engagement in Afghanistan limits governments’ strategic manoeuvrability. This is important because long-term and international strategies now employed by several mature Islamist groups — including the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and Hezbollah — differ from the immediacy of *jihad* ideology (Bergesen, 2008; Malthaner, 2011: 56–94).

Another question about the strategic wisdom criticism relates to the rent dependency argument. By naming a date for the beginning of a drawback, Afghan elites will be compelled to wean themselves off of external political rents, to increase their domestic political appeal in order to stay in their positions and to increase taxation in order to finance state and security apparatus. Rent is defined as an income without a corresponding investment of labour or capital; therefore, it is clearly

separate from capitalist production. While certain amounts of profit from capitalist economic activity must be reinvested in order to secure future revenue, rent flows allow for a substantially lower or no reflux of resources. Rents do not trigger such a cycle of investment, profit and subsequent reinvestment.

AFGHANISTAN AS A RENTIER STATE

A rentier state is a state financed to a significant extent by natural (or economic) or political rents. A “state class” (Elsenhans, 1981) is a state bureaucracy able to monopolize rent influx but which remains autonomous to society because no taxation is likely to develop; other groups of rentiers may be politically relevant, such as the opium rentiers of Afghanistan (Kühn, 2008; 2010: 314–330; Bliesemann de Guevara and Kühn, forthcoming 2013). Naturally, political elites in a state that fails to produce enough revenue to keep the state functioning face a terrible dilemma: they can either abort statehood, which seems impossible in a world covered by states and with obligations looming large for state administrations, or they can look elsewhere to mobilize funds. In the past, this led to the changing and oftentimes competing interests of outside funding parties being played out in Afghanistan. This does not necessarily mean that all inner conflicts qualify as proxy wars; rather, internal opponents made use of outside financing options to further their respective causes.

The Afghan state’s rentier character certainly fostered the bitter wars following the Communist Saur Revolution of 1978,⁵ though almost all of the social fault lines that were exploited for political mobilization by *Mujahideen* and communists alike were long in place (Rubin, 2002: 81–105). When external rent flows dried up after the 1988 Geneva Accords and the end of the Cold War, infighting broke out for the few remaining funds. Fighting for control of Kabul resulted in more serious damage than during Soviet involvement. In an intervention with no known end date, political leaders who position themselves as intermediaries between the intervention and a constituency can flourish; in the face of a projected withdrawal, they will have to take responsibility for politics in the country. For the last 10 years, many influential political figures in Afghanistan balanced their interests sometimes with and sometimes against the state; few put their weight behind the Western-led state-building endeavour. This included

5 The Saur Revolution of April, 1978 occurred when the Communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) took political power from the government of Afghanistan. The PDPA’s weakness led to Soviet intervention a year later, which attempted to avert the overthrow of the unpopular Afghan communist rule.

positioning themselves in a militarily favourable situation (Kühn, 2011b). Projected withdrawal may force such elites to “sink or swim” in the security sphere. First, they must make the intervention’s training programs for military and police their own as they will have to rely directly on these institutions. Second, they will have to compromise and make concessions in peace negotiations rather than appealing to the preferences of international rent providers. As Overhaus and Paul imply, too strong a security apparatus may also decrease the elites’ willingness to compromise (2012: 7). Before a time schedule for a reduction in rents and military support was set, local politicians could easily deflect political responsibility for their own failings and make profits under the security umbrella provided by the intervention. This modus operandi of the last decade (at least on the state level) is already changing as politicians try to stake out their claims in preparation of the next elections — despite Western pledges to fund the Afghan state and security forces until 2024.⁶

Local Afghan leaders raise many valid concerns about the consequences of withdrawal. The strength of the Taliban and other insurgents, as well as centrifugal tendencies of groups now aligned with the government, are difficult to assess. At a more functional level, the ability of the Afghan security forces to defend the existing polity, even if it enjoyed high levels of political cohesion, remains open to debate. While legitimate, these concerns must be weighed against the aforementioned rent-seeking problem and, in terms of governance, the attendant benefits (in the context of responsibility and politics) that withdrawal could foster. Highlighting the security risks emanating from Afghanistan has worked well in the past to organize funds while, paradoxically, limiting Western influence on their disposition (Kühn, 2010: 317–319).

DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMIC SELF-SUSTAINABILITY

Afghanistan’s economy remains dependent on transfers. While the problem of dependency structures seemed unworthy of consideration in the first years of the intervention, more recently the political intricacies of funding a rentier state have attracted scholarly attention (Kühn, 2008; 2010; Suhrke, 2009). While Barnett Rubin’s *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (2002)

elucidated the development of rentier funding in the 1980s and 1990s and its contribution to the decay of the Afghan state, few people anticipated the quick recovery of rentier structures relative to societal or political ones.⁷

However, politics cannot be reduced to economic laws of function. As Antonio Giustozzi (2009a: 1–99) explains, many warlords and strongmen have turned to the licit economy (rather than international rents) to profit and legitimize their position. It remains unclear, however, to what extent this phenomenon reflects genuine entrepreneurialism or the use of power and force to capture emerging markets. This is, of course, a specificity of the political economy of the intervention, so the question remains how sustainable these effects are. Because strongmen’s activities stretch over the legal and illegal realm, they may be analyzed as transforming their power into some kind of mafia or “organized crime networks...able to use force to protect their interests and possibly to expand” (Giustozzi, 2007a: 81). Their activities improve the economy, however, and may even have positive effects for state building; it is another matter that they may not be the most desirable characters to run state institutions and be economically powerful.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

While some economic activities in Afghanistan, especially those in the building or transport sector, are connected to the intervention and its economic effects, others would likely persist even after a decreased Western role. Without industrial capacities, the mining sector (in which Chinese companies hold a number of exploitation licences) remains central to the question of Afghanistan’s economic self-sufficiency. While some of the revenues will have to be invested in good relations with power holders in the regions where mining takes place, licences issued by the state may produce

⁷ According to Martin Beck, senior fellow at Hamburg’s German Institute for Global and Area Studies, the resilience of rentier patterns can also be observed after the revolutions in the Arab world. In his view, unlike in Eastern Europe, where state industries were “simply” transferred to private entrepreneurs, in the Arab world stable rentier financing curbed any incentives to invest even in small productive capacities (personal conversation, May 11, 2011). With few modifications, the picture looks similar for Afghanistan, where vast gains have been made by trade in used cars, but this money was rarely used for investment. Instead, it was transferred to Dubai and other havens for investment in other markets. More recently, a puzzling surge in gold transfers predominantly to the Gulf Emirates can be observed (Rosenberg, 2012). A highly internationalized Afghan expatriate community, thus, did little to build a self-sustaining Afghan economy. While this is not illegal, it leaves Afghanistan to the fate of ongoing rent dependency and fosters opportunities for external meddling. Whoever is willing to spend significant money can buy influence, violence or both.

⁶ This also raises the question of whether a meltdown of Afghan institutions is merely postponed.

revenue. Given the lack of governance capacity, however, complex interplays between state authorities and extractive industries are likely to create extractive enclaves but not bolster national stability, as has been observed in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Africa (Hönke, forthcoming 2013). These sources of funding will almost inevitably attract the attention of warlords, and forced cost of protection might be so high that mineral extraction would fail to provide an economic base for the state after the military umbrella of the Western intervention is removed.

In general, Afghanistan's economic patterns show few signs of sustainability, even in sectors where Western intervention is not deeply involved. Trade is likely to continue, strengthening vibrant commerce towns like Herat, Mazar-e Sharaf and Jalalabad. This influences the political balance between urbanized centres and rural areas by further modernizing towns and leaving rural areas behind. Trade also influences relations between Kabul and regional power centres, and competition for funds between central rulers, local governors and strongmen (well established throughout Afghan history) will likely resume. The capital, Kabul, hosts the offices of most external agencies, which provide jobs for drivers, housekeepers, security guards, translators and a number of other occupations, and thus gains the most from the intervention. Access to centralized funds is also easier for groups near centres of political gravity. Withdrawal will likely increase the relative weight of regional economic centres and elites. Devolution of overly centralized powers and better control of the central government (a positive development that will strengthen the state's legitimacy) will be fostered, but at the same time, there will be the danger of increased fragmentation and disintegration. This means that the state will face hurdles in collecting revenues from economic activities in the provinces, rendering it weak in fiscal sustainability.

The Afghan economy's lack of sustainable structures and of a solid capital base for investment dims the hopes of security stabilization even further. Diminishing Western funds will put the financial resources of the security forces — the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) — under stress. Even though the state's tax base has grown in recent years, it began from such a dismal baseline that Afghanistan remains at the lower end of low-income countries' revenues with a tax rate of only nine percent of annual GNP (World Bank, 2010: 6). This lack of capital accumulation, which is unlikely to change to a degree that would allow sustaining a projected Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) (combining army and police) of 228,500 personnel, estimated to

cost just above US\$4 billion annually (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], 2012: 78), puts a big question mark on the sustainability of the security forces.⁸ The nature of a potential peace agreement will influence the form of the security apparatus; the remaining external support and training input will affect the effectiveness of these forces (Barry, 2011: 133). With increasing green-on-blue attacks, or attacks by soldiers under training on their trainers (who are usually members of the Western military), it is likely that the willingness of Western militaries to put soldiers in harm's way, despite a lack of strategic gains, will soon end. The suspension of the training mission following such incidents gives an indication how quickly infiltration of the Afghan security forces may undermine Western resolve to sustain support (Oppel and Bowley, 2012).

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) Chicago Summit on May 21, 2012 referred to the Petersberg Declaration of 2011 setting a limit for force strength and budget. NATO's declaration states how much the international community⁹ might be willing to pay, even though the Government of Afghanistan decides and "envisages a force of 228,500 with an estimated annual budget of US\$4.1 billion, and will be reviewed regularly against the developing security environment" (NATO, 2012). There is an inbuilt disincentive to achieve and report progress, as funding states eager to scale down support will happily accept good news about low levels of violence. Apart from the NATO declaration, funding the Afghan state is left to bilateral partnerships; even the Petersberg Declaration has little to say about support levels and duration. Most policy makers are well aware of the artificiality of Afghan institutions and are aware that state-building efforts have only created a rentier state. At the same time, the interplay of Afghan elites and Western intervention agencies provides for a distinct mode of knowledge production that privileges an Afghan urban elite point of view in favour of continued support. For them, the argument that all will turn to chaos once Western involvement ends has become a

8 The Brookings Institution projected numbers of 195,000 ANA and 157,000 ANP as the goal for November 2012; numbers at the end of 2011 were approximately 180,000 ANA and 144,000 ANP personnel, respectively (Livingston and O'Hanlon, 2012: 6). It is unclear what will happen to those who will have to leave the forces during the years of the transition; just as the future of re-integrated Taliban fighters is uncertain, so are the terms of employment or social support for ex-servicemen and are yet another factor that will require outside support.

9 For a discussion of the so-called "international community" and how it is invoked for more or less empty political rhetoric, see Bliesemann de Guevara and Kühn, 2011.

certainty, and asking for continued rent payments is a component of their identities. It remains to be seen how sustainable the willingness of Western donors will be once Afghanistan has left the centre stage.

Many international agencies have offices in Kabul and provide jobs for a whole class of Afghan workers. Compared to Western standards, pay is relatively modest; however, in comparison to teachers or medics, drivers and translators do reasonably well. Since the amount of pay these jobs generate attracts educated workers, and because most Western employers prefer workers who have a certain command of English, it is predominantly members of the urban educated class who have been recruited to these jobs over the last decade. Although many agencies have offices outside the capital, their main contacts, often friendships, are with people from this group. Also, the military's interactions are with individuals who have significant influence on the risk and situation analyses of military planners (Münch, 2011: 236-237). A reduced Western presence in Afghanistan threatens the jobs of these individuals and it will be extremely difficult for them to find comparable employment opportunities. Moreover, as former collaborators with the Western intervention, they face the risk of being reprimanded, socially marginalized or even killed.

HOW GOOD IS "GOOD ENOUGH GOVERNANCE"?

Despite the aforementioned narrative, many have realized that the kind of state envisioned in the 2001 Bonn Agreement and reinforced in 2006 with the Afghanistan Compact is not going to materialize. In 2011, the Petersberg Declaration document stated:

At today's meeting, Afghanistan laid out its vision of the future: a country that is a stable and functioning democracy, a strong and sustainable state in the service of its people, and a prospering economy. Embedded in a region that is conducive to prosperity and peace, and enjoying friendly relations with all of its near and extended neighbours, Afghanistan aspires to becoming a contributor to international peace and security... Afghanistan reiterates its commitment to continue to improve governance, while the International Community commits to an enduring engagement with Afghanistan through and beyond 2014...we solemnly declare a strategic consensus on deepening and broadening the partnership between Afghanistan and the International Community founded at the

Petersberg ten years ago. Building on the shared achievements of the past ten years...Afghanistan and the International Community strongly commit to this renewed partnership for the Transformation Decade. (Petersberg Declaration, 2011)

Nominally, the emphasis remains on the vision of an ideal-type Western capitalist democracy. Internally, however, the focus is now on the epithet of "good enough governance" as a necessary condition for legitimizing the withdrawal. As the withdrawal ramps up, the question of what "good enough governance" really means remains unanswered.

One needs to start looking beyond formal institutions and functional aspects of the executive's enforcement agencies; administration of funds and the pursuit of government policies are just as important. Further, the Afghan government's and the parliament's ability to even formulate, consistently sequence and communicate policy coherently is in doubt (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2011). Capacity building has not been successful — Western donors cannot easily hand out money to Afghan authorities with the expectation that it will be effectively spent. This capacity deficit will, in the medium term, most certainly work to lower available funds even if — despite downscaling of the military branch of the intervention — the civilian support was upheld. Afghan authorities, however, often remain unaccountable both financially and in terms of the legality of their conduct. The same applies to the judiciary, which is dominated by clerics and very conservative judges. Within the indecisive terms of the Afghan constitution, for example, they have frequently attempted to extend the Islamization of the population, a tendency that will likely intensify after external oversight recedes. It should be rather easy to interpret the constitution in such a way that allows strict *sharia* punishments, declares political opponents apostates and reigns in government business, all in the name of fighting heresy.¹⁰ This constitutional ambivalence was already recognized when it was adopted (Poya, 2003). In short, what Westerners describe as rule of law, strictly applied, may not be part of the "good enough."

The obvious charm of "good enough" is that everybody can apply their own standards. This means charging the "enough" with a number of distinct considerations.

¹⁰ Not even in constitutional theory is a constitution clear in all its terms. For Afghanistan, not all factions were able to agree to the terms during the formulation of the constitution, and many articles were deliberately left ambiguous, planting the seed of bitter rivalry over how to interpret these sections. In reality, political power, mostly held by extremist Muslim clerics, determines how the constitution is read — they claim a prerogative on all matters constitutional since no law can be against Islam.

Those looking for women's rights, religious freedom and minority protection might have too high a standard to be pleased. Those looking for Westphalian sovereignty as a minimal standard (that is, a presidential phone number to call and ambassadors in the United Nations and Western capitals) may be more satisfied. "Good enough" may epitomize the conflict management approach that has been the guiding idea of security policy since the end of the Cold War. Instead of substantially engaging in solving conflict, the makers of security policy settled with what Paul Rogers famously called "liddism": "Attempting to keep a lid on insecurity...without addressing the core reasons for dissent" (2002: 10). The approach to kill or capture people labelled as terrorists is consistent with such a containment strategy. Apart from the generally minimalist and reactive security approach, even if one knew "good enough governance" upon seeing it, it might turn out to be unacceptable for Western donor communities. While after years of frustrating experiences the minimal requirement is to have an Afghan counterpart, Western donor publics might not be happy with public stoning or discriminatory laws enacted by the Karzai government or its successor.

Canadian and Dutch forces have already left Afghanistan (US and British forces are planning a quick exit and others, like Germany, are more quietly welcoming disengagement in the near future), and the US government's discontent with the Karzai government is evident. Negotiations lasted long enough to achieve a strategic partnership agreement (Government of the United States, 2012), signed by Afghan President Karzai and US President Barack Obama in May 2012. This agreement is remarkable for its absence of numbers to quantify the financial support the United States is willing to provide; at the same time, its availability is subject to annual review. It seems that the withdrawal outweighs in importance even the "good enough" criteria; strategic assets, such as access to Afghan military facilities beyond 2014, remain to be agreed upon in a bilateral security agreement, its terms still to be negotiated. It is likely, in this regard, that Afghanistan will play this card to gain as much rent for the use of those bases, while for the United States, other aims will be of little interest. "Good enough," then, is — in all its ambivalence, or better, multivalence — a cipher to palliate the decision to leave Afghanistan. "Good enough" should not be confused with a newly adopted modesty in state-building aims, but should rather be understood as a rhetorical minimum to justify withdrawal without publicly admitting the defeat of all stated aims — rule of law, democracy, human rights and the removal of al-Qaeda extremists. With regard

to the half-hearted support from Pakistan's security apparatus, the precarious situation in Iran and the tacit complicity of Central Asian neighbours in illicit markets, it may be the only option the West has left (Kühn, 2011a).

THE TRANSITION PHASE: DIMENSIONS AND FACTORS

Having explored the different discourses surrounding NATO withdrawal, including their problems and merits, this section develops a framework to analyze the transition. First, it describes factors critical to the transition phase, including the dimension of time. Second, it analyzes those factors whose mutual interplay shape the path of the transition phase.

Military planning for this phase set out to transfer responsibilities province by province, with the intention of opening opportunities to prolong the deployment indefinitely where necessary. This made sense militarily, to avoid having to leave a theatre without being victorious; domestically, it helped emphasize the importance of military actors in the state-building field, justify preservation of these structures and resist attempts to bring down budgets.

Political leaders, bending to domestic pressures in the face of economic crises, however, upended this approach by setting deadlines. US President Obama set the date of 2014 without conferring with any ally except the British; newly elected French President François Hollande accelerated the run for the door by declaring that French troops would leave Afghanistan even earlier — meanwhile, French combat troops have left, while about 1,500 remain as trainers and logistical support. Others, such as the German government, are keeping their options open. Germany will likely be last to leave since its area of responsibility in the North is important to transport troops and material out of Afghanistan via Central Asia. With decisions about withdrawal dates being made, however, the whole discourse changed — political deliberations about "winning" in Afghanistan seem not to be of concern anymore.

THE SHORT- AND MID-TERM PERIODS

In the short-term period, troops will be withdrawn from some areas, and budget assistance will remain high in order to allow the state some leverage and possibly provide stability, which will be necessary to sell the

mission as rather accomplished. The mid-term period will stretch as long as international agencies remain in the country on a significant scale; that is, as long as Afghanistan remains a development priority and programs that began before withdrawal was decided continue. The mid-term situation would be exceeding the limited presence of aid organizations during the time of the Taliban government (Dorrnsoro, 2005). On the military side, advisers during this mid-term period may be influential regarding tactical and some strategic decisions for fighting against insurgents. Simultaneously, state actors will have to negotiate power arrangements with all parties concerned about the future composition of government agencies. Such agreements, however, will likely contain internationalized or Western content. Programs may be steered by (Western-educated) Afghans but assisted, monitored and regulated by international consultants and advisers.

THE LONG-TERM PERIOD

The long-term period may be some years away, or may arrive much earlier, depending on how quickly Western troops and agencies withdraw — which is itself contingent upon the level of violence within Afghanistan and developments elsewhere, for example, in the Middle East or in the Western economy. The Petersberg Declaration of 2011 envisions a strategic cooperation that may quickly become void once the relevant partners change. The Declaration states: “[The] International Community and Afghanistan solemnly dedicated themselves to deepening and broadening their historic partnership from Transition to the Transformation Decade of 2015–2024. Reaffirming our commitments as set out in the 2010 London Communiqué and the Kabul Process, this renewed partnership between Afghanistan and the International Community entails firm mutual commitments in the areas of governance, security, the peace process, economic and social development, and regional cooperation” (Petersberg Declaration, 2011). Even if these statements were made in the spirit of strict belief, if history is any indication, neglect sets in quickly once other problems start taking the strategic stage.¹¹

The main issue during the long-term phase will be the transition from a rentier to a productive economy. It

is doubtful that this change will be structural and of a scale significant enough to make the negative effects of rentier politics disappear and the Afghan state’s legitimacy and effectiveness rise. After all, rentier states have shown remarkable stability in preserving their characteristics despite outside and domestic shocks of all kinds (Beck, 2009). Neighbouring states’ stability or instability will likely also influence long-term developments. Despite all structural hindrances, positive long-term development depends on the prudent decisions of the political elite, who may have developed sufficient interest in the state over the last 10 years to adhere to state politics rather than undermine them. Such stability considerations might soften, or even trump, short-term interests in individual gain. If this is the case, then a decade of state building may have planted a seed for state formation (Bliesemann de Guevara, 2012).

In addition to the analysis of phases, some tentative hypotheses concerning the downscaling of Western intervention across sectors may be derived. The following sectors, which are put into a “phased” perspective in the next section, provide a starting point: military, social, political, legal/judicial, economic, cultural and regional.

The first key factor is the military domain, and it is also the one most talked about. There seems to have been a one-sided concentration on training military and police, while only late in the process has it been realized that military units pose grave danger to a state when they are unpaid. This is what happened after the Soviet withdrawal, and might be the case after 2012 — especially when donor publics in the West are reluctant to pay an army widely seen as incompetent, corrupt and committing human rights violations (Maaß and Ruttig, 2011: 4). Additionally, if green-on-blue attacks remain at such high levels, it will be tough to argue for a sustained training mission. Even if history does not repeat itself, certain patterns may re-emerge, such as military factions seeking to dominate the state because it may be seen predominantly as a source of funds. As is the case in most rentier states, this may start when the state is still sustained by high amounts of external funding. Shrinking funds likely result in fighting for the remaining money and the intensity of such fighting depends on the level of training the groups enjoyed during Western intervention.¹²

11 For example, Soviet support for the Najibullah regime continued for a few years but collapsed with the Soviet Union; as a result, Najibullah was fought by his former partners in order to secure what was left of the state. Central statehood disappeared for some years until the Taliban forcefully restored it in the second half of the 1990s.

12 For the political and military interaction during the decline of the Najibullah regime between 1990 and 1992, see Dorrnsoro (2005: 201–206) and Saikal (2004).

Strategic considerations remain regarding energy resources in Central Asia, political instability in Pakistan and a projected Islamist terrorist risk stemming from its instability and nuclear armaments (as well as its proximity to Iran), making it unlikely that Western militaries will leave the region altogether. Building activities, including heavily fortified bases in Afghanistan and the expansion of airfields around the country, suggest a willingness for longer involvement. The asset of providing bases may become a trump to blackmail-sustained funding on the side of the Afghan government. Afghan President Karzai's announcement in March 2012 that he wants Western forces out of the country by 2013 (a year earlier than planned) points to tactics of raising the stakes. Afghan lawmakers, who might fear being seen as complicit with Western strategic desires, may well deny the right to use these bases in the future (How Long?, 2011). Even though NATO stated in its Lisbon joint declaration with the Afghan government (and repeatedly after Bonn and Chicago) that it would continue to support the training of Afghan forces, the declaration stresses "a common understanding that NATO has no ambition to establish a permanent military presence in Afghanistan" (NATO, 2010). This may prove a tough point in negotiations and an incentive for the Afghan rentier class to trade an agreement against prolonged payments.

Complicating the picture is the tendency to increasingly wage war through drones and CIA military special operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This makes the use of these bases imperative for continued US pressure on alleged militants in the tribal belt of Afghanistan and Pakistan; in turn, to remotely "manage the conflict" (as opposed to resolving it) allows a significant reduction of boots on the ground — in extremis to the point where only a few soldiers are left to supervise those protecting US facilities. The Afghan/Pakistan theatre might, in this respect, turn into the first fully fledged "video-game war," led from safe bases with little Western presence on the ground; personal risk is non-existent since the war itself is outside the reach and vision of those conducting it. Such a scenario reduces the risk of Western casualties, but leaves the West ill-positioned to understand the politics and violent dynamics of the country. Whether this is considered an important factor under military risk management doctrine remains to be seen. What can be expected, however, is a significant transformation of the dynamics of conflict in these areas and the prospects for the formation of state structures there (Kühn, 2012a: 35).

The social implications of the transition affect parts of Afghanistan's social strata differently. The rural population, unless part of a Western-funded rural

development program, may feel the difference the least. Poppy production and trade as a valuable market might be contested more greatly in some areas, but will generally remain a priority for many as a cash crop. It is hard to tell if the Taliban's policy regarding opium will resemble that of 2000-2001, when they were in control and banished opium production as un-Islamic. Given their current dependence on opium funds, they might take a more pragmatic stance to secure funding.¹³ Further, indirect payments, now paid by Western militaries for safe passage and abstaining from direct attacks and which amount to US\$1-2 million in some areas, will stop (Kursawe, 2011: 174). For the urban population, on the other hand, changes would be felt more sharply if conservative hard-liners gain influence and enforce extremist values in place of the liberal modernity promoted by the international presence.¹⁴ The affluent classes will remain mobile, as many have the security of a foreign passport, allowing them to leave the country when the situation becomes too dangerous.

Politically, well-established clientelist networks can remain stable as long as there are funding and posts to be distributed. As with rentier states in general, the need to secure loyalties by the clientelist distribution of funds becomes one of the most important tasks of the state bureaucracy (Kühn, 2008; 2009a; 2009b). As was the case in Afghanistan over the last century, this relationship means that regionally powerful actors continue to engage with the central government, negotiating favours but not establishing loyalty (Schetter, 2011: 148). Afghan President Karzai is at the centre of the evolving network of personal relations, but, according to Dodge, "he has by no means insured those opponents' sustained dependence on him, nor achieved a monopoly over the power of patronage" (2011: 87). Such relations are negotiated informally and individually between influential persons in the capital and the periphery. Often tied to funds, these relations

13 After all, the continued external funds to the Taliban may wane in the wake of Western withdrawal, as there will be less incentive to fund an insurgency to hit the West. For a discussion of Taliban involvement in the opium economy, see Peters (2009), Giustozzi (2009b) and Kühn (2011c).

14 This is an indirect result of the Pashtun code of social conduct, Pashtunwali. It distinguishes between *nang* and *qalang* Pashtuns, the former denoting a social code based on honour, the latter subject to state rule and taxation. Absent state domination, *nang*, in its ideal-typical form, is paradigmatic for its freedom from hierarchies (between males). Extending this code of social exchange to urban life means, among other problems, suspending legal relations as well as subduing other ethnic groups who do not share that code. For Pashtunwali see Rubin (2002), Ahmed (1976), Steul (1981) and Dupree (1997: 126-127). For the Taliban's conduct in the decidedly non-Pashtun cities of Kabul and Herat, where the dividing line between "arrogant urban dwellers" and "unrefined boors" was connected to speaking Dari or Pashto, respectively, see Schetter (2003: 531-541).

need to be renegotiated once there are changes in personnel on either side of the connection. This sort of political relationship was, according to Giustozzi, never intended to put centre-periphery politics on a solid, durable base (2009c). When funds dry out and fall below a certain threshold, regional creation of revenues — either by intensifying the drug (opium and hashish), as well as other illicit trade, or by appropriating sectors of the market of goods — becomes imperative for social and especially military figurations.¹⁵ In addition, opening external rents in such situations becomes attractive by strengthening relations to neighbouring peer groups. This fosters increasing independence of, or even opposition to, the institutions of a central state.

A case in point is the control over the gem trade, such as that exerted by the Panjiri group under Massoud¹⁶ in the 1990s, in the context of an increasingly impotent state (Rubin, 2002: xxv). It seems impossible to predict future patterns of irregular revenues, as local conditions dictate economic opportunities. Hence, economic activity may look different from province to province or even from district to district, by and large shaping the political leverage of the central government over regional entities. The existing fragmentation of the economy will likely remain in place, limiting the government's ability to tax and control trade. In effect, the government may end up at the mercy of local power holders: When they see a chance for personal gain (economic and ideational, such as legitimization through offices, posts and licences) they might pass on a share of their revenues; if not, they may refrain from funding central institutions. The military balance also plays a role: Will the central state have the security actors (police, military) necessary to enforce taxation? Will these forces have sufficient internal cohesion and fidelity towards the state to be reliable?

On the legal side, the rational-bureaucratic application of laws of the central state will likely retreat and give way to judgments based in customary law. With increasing influence from conservative Islamist

strata,¹⁷ appointments of judges will likely depend on personal connections and religious creed (“true” dedication to Islam), rather than on the ability to understand and interpret laws. This may prevent a professionalization of judges and slow down or reverse the development of legal equality between men and women. This may affect the economy, as legal titles of possession may or may not be honoured depending on political considerations. People have reportedly been dispossessed when power holders want to acquire land for themselves or, more often, for their accomplices to strengthen group cohesion. While this runs counter to a liberal understanding of rights (Kühn, 2010), it might not destabilize and delegitimize legality in Afghanistan altogether, as long as judges manage to leave a general impression of prosecuting corrupt individuals and officials, as well as providing some kind of crude on-the-spot justice, as the Taliban do in some of the regions they control. The current impression that people siding with the government enjoy impunity may change under these circumstances in the eyes of the population.

An economic downturn following international departure is to be expected. Besides a decrease in development funds, shrinking secondary economic effects of the international military and civilian presence, as well as influential groups benefitting from rackets against coalition forces, will hurt the urban middle classes. If legal titles become insecure, foreign, direct or domestic investment in productive economic segments will become riskier and thus less likely. This includes the opening up of vast raw material and ore deposits, which will be economically risky and thus unfeasible. Trade will continue, but may fall prey to the strongest faction controlling a lucrative trading route. Controlling key spots along a route is one of the best sources of income, regardless of whether or not a group is with the state or working against the “monopolisation mechanism” (Elias, 1997).

The current targeting of drug traders who cooperate with insurgents, supported by Western troops, has already led to a specialization of traders. Paradoxically, opium traders' complicity with the government might appear similar to what Elias describes: cooperation has set in motion an exclusionary process, sidelining anti-state opium dealers and favouring those who are with the government and can avoid prosecution. A merging of the political sphere and the opium business becomes more likely as the Western presence diminishes. This development might render useless most attempts at curbing opium production, processing and transit. In

15 For the concept of “social figurations” see Elias (1978: 128–130), and for its application on substate armed groups see Kühn (2011b: 366–372).

16 The Panjiri group, led by the charismatic Ahmed Shah Massoud, was the most important military group of Mujaheddin, resisting Taliban attempts to rule the whole of Afghanistan. Their main base was the Panjir valley in north-eastern Afghanistan, where resistance against the Soviet military had already been fiercest in the 1980s. Massoud had turned his militia into a properly organized military organization and flanked it with political representation. This brought him to speak in the European Parliament, representing the old Afghan state officially still headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani during the Taliban era. Massoud's political weight led to his assassination by alleged al-Qaeda suicide bombers on September 9, 2001.

17 For the Islamization of Afghan politics and society see Roy (1986; 1995).

any event, the logics of political rents, driving political action and economic rents (which largely determine opium traders' actions) are highly compatible and have haunted the intervention's attempts from early on (Kühn, 2008; see Schlichte, 2005a and 2005b). The virtues of a conflict economy, accessible only to the few presiding over the means of violence, will continue to open opportunities for vast returns. Overall, post-withdrawal projections range from a 13 percent decline in GDP to the more extreme estimate of a 41 percent fall (Rosenberger, 2011). As GDP growth could be roughly correlated to the dominant role agricultural produce plays, good years with high yields strengthen the economy; otherwise, it depends on foreign funds (Redman, 2011: 98–104).

Afghanistan is bound to remain a rentier state, relying on a mix of funding sources. The main revenues will come from external political rents (in turn opening the political space for foreign influences), as has been the case throughout most of Afghanistan's history. Redman reports that spending for upholding the ANSF alone — that is, military and police — was 449 percent of government revenue in 2008-9 (Redman, 2011). World Bank estimates put this figure at 270 percent in 2013-14, 195 percent in 2018-19 and 154 percent in 2023-24 (World Bank, 2010). "Thus the ANSF is likely to be an unsustainable burden for at least a decade, even before the Afghan government's other commitments are taken into account" (Redman, 2011: 102). In any case, doubts remain about the Afghan state's capacity to effectively and efficiently handle the cash that will be required to uphold even the most basic security structure (Bajoria 2011). Substantially, however, even if natural rents — from raw materials such as drugs, gems, minerals, copper and resources — were to become a large source of revenue, the rentier character of the Afghan state will still remain.

Regardless of the source of rent, rent influx always tends to isolate the ruling elite (especially when they are able to monopolize their resources) from the population. Those collecting a rent have, in general, few incentives, and certainly no need, to invest their funds in a productive cycle (Beck, 2009; Beblawi and Luciani, 1987). As a rentier state, Afghanistan's prospects to kick off a new cycle of investment, which might, in turn, spread wealth more evenly amongst all strata of the population, are close to zero. The political patterns of rentier states are shaped by a political class unreceptive to the demands of the population, simply because there is little direct exchange with the population in the form of taxation. Such a relationship would improve the chances for democratic participation; after all, the American independence movement's slogan

was "no taxation without representation." Without realistic opportunities for the population to decisively participate in political decision making, the population in rentier states is usually prone to radicalization. This tendency to channel politicized issues into violence is thus likely to continue, as elites will have little need or interest in "pluralizing" the political system. Similarly, the development prospects of a rentier state are not very promising.¹⁸

The cultural backlash will be a decrease of Western influences and the re-emergence of tensions between rural and urban groups in Afghanistan. Even though Western influence is, after 10 years of perceived cultural abuse of Afghan values, highly discredited, those who cooperated with the West may not easily sacrifice new-found freedoms. Access to social media, mobile phones and other communication technology is unlikely to recede very easily. A reinvigoration of "Afghan-ness" and Afghan culture, however, is likely to serve to legitimize political actions and may increasingly become a point of reference in the political arena, especially for those relatively Westernized elites seeking to enhance their legitimacy and credibility. Again, this political discourse will affect urban populations more than those in rural areas, and it relates to how the population in cities and the capital is perceived. They would have to publicly alleviate the influence of conservatives, who will likely mobilize their cultural capital to try and dictate the notion of what ought to be seen as Afghan culture. After all, it will be a question of how deeply the appeals of secular education, as well as popular forms of entertainment, have taken root. In order to culturally stabilize Afghanistan, some kind of balanced understanding of what is permissible needs to be established between these younger groups and older conservatives.¹⁹ As the "Arabellions"²⁰ have demonstrated, generational and gender conflicts may play into such processes. Aiming at democracy, economic development and military stabilization, the intervention seemingly neglected the cultural sphere, in which these goals require a culture of ideological de-radicalization and pluralistic "live and let live" attitudes.

18 The question of political behaviour of state classes is best explored by Elsenhans (1981).

19 An intergenerational conflict shapes the political outlook of different age groups, which is aggravated culturally due to rules that make it socially unacceptable to speak out against older people who are viewed as wiser and more prudent by seniority.

20 "Arabellion" is a term combining Arab and rebellion to describe what has more commonly been named "Arab Spring" after 2011.

A more complex issue is that of regional influences.²¹ Certainly, the impact of the situation in Pakistan will be felt in Afghanistan. This is also affected by how Pakistan-India relations develop, or how they choose to play out their rivalry on the Afghan stage. At the moment, Pakistan's distrust of economic aid sent to Afghanistan by India, and a general assumption that the Northern Alliance-dominated²² government remains tightly pro-India (a term coined by Pakistan during the Taliban's rule to emphasize the non-Pashtun bias of the Alliance), will not make things easier. As long as Pakistan continues to view Afghanistan as its strategic backyard in the confrontation with India, it is unlikely to abstain from trying to control Afghan matters. For Western countries, trying to change the outdated strategic outlook of Pakistan, which remains premised on a conventional war with India despite both their nuclear armaments, would be a worthwhile endeavour (Kühn, 2011a: 70).

However strong the political will of Pakistan's state elites, the permeability of borders and the cross-border nature of social relations follow their own dynamics and are of critical importance to the future of Afghanistan. Criminal networks that exploit political instability in the south of Afghanistan, and which also include the so-called Pashtun belt syndicates, reject open dynamics of state formation (Schetter, 2011). Analogously to Giustozzi's (2007a, 2009a) portrait of warlords who may play a role similar to American robber barons during a phase of primitive capital accumulation, these syndicates may grow into stabilizing the state once entrepreneurial interests dominate. Likewise, Tilly's idea that strongmen's racketeering might turn into state services in a complex process of balancing acts (1985, 1992) illustrates that these activities are not necessarily against the state.²³

That said, the extent to which such groups are under the influence, or even control, of neighbouring countries can be important regarding their stance toward the state. The Taliban, financially and militarily supported by Pakistan's intelligence sector, may go to great lengths to undermine a state they do not dominate. Reconciliation and power-sharing agreements notwithstanding, the question of Pashtun primacy is an issue that may

also affect the political process. Pashtun nationalism remains a potent worry for Pakistan's cohesion (Saikal, 2010; Kühn, 2011a). Others, such as the traders across the borders to Central Asia — especially Tajikistan and Uzbekistan — are more likely to be indifferent to, or even support, a state formation process, as long as it does not impinge on their respective businesses. Again, the economic side is critical for the stability of the state. As long as Central Asian regime elites continue to fill their purses by providing transit for drugs and other illicit goods, their influence is likely to be small in scale. They could, however, hurt Afghanistan when they close borders due to a real or perceived risk of an Islamist spillover.

As for Iran, it is likely that the theocratic regime will provide support. After all, the relatively well-established state in Iran is heavily affected by the insecurity spilling over from Afghanistan, while the Western, especially US, presence has a problem with the theocratic regime. Thus, Iran may be expected to support Shiite Hazara against a Sunni predominance,²⁴ as well as stirring resistance against the United States that may be exploited when the issue of US forces remaining in Afghanistan needs to be negotiated. Iran's central interest, however, stems primarily from the severe damage that the opium economy inflicts on Iran's population and economy, and also on state agencies such as border control, which suffers several hundreds of casualties and deaths each year in skirmishes with drug traders at the border (Kursawe, 2010: 162–177). This means that while there is deep enmity between the Shia regime in Tehran and the Taliban, stabilization will be in the interest of Iran. However, if Shia minorities appear to be threatened, these minorities are first to receive support — potentially even against a central government and regardless of its ethnic composition (Bookmiller, 2011).

China, rather than becoming directly involved, is likely to strike deals with whoever is in power and can guarantee exploitation and export of Afghanistan's natural resources. The most visible role played by Chinese companies today is a sort of regional governance that provides health facilities, infrastructure and basic social services without

21 For individual regional influences and the interplay of regional dynamics see David Carment (2011). "Getting Afghanistan Right: The Quest for Regional Stability." *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 17, no. 1.

22 Northern Alliance is a term coined by Pakistan during the Taliban's rule to emphasize the non-Pashtun bias of the Alliance.

23 See also Floral, Kuhnle and Urwin (1999), and for the effects of tax harvesting in the Ottoman empire see Salzmann (1993).

24 Afghan Hazara are a religious minority. Predominantly Shiite Muslims, they have, in the past, been socially suppressed, often only able to work as day labourers and in other socially less-respected professions. Because of religious ties to Shiite Iran, Iran is believed to have supported Hazaras for a long time, intensifying support for Hazara resistance during Taliban rule. Likewise, there have been unproven allegations against Iran suggesting support for Taliban insurgents against Western powers, mainly the United States. This seems to be contradictory given the strained relations between the Taliban, who often cooperated with Sunni extremists, and Iran.

attempting to transform social structures. This has, however, not prevented Chinese actors from getting into local and regional feuds, resulting in casualties of Chinese workers. Warnings of Chinese influence taking over Afghanistan and harvesting the fruit of Western benefactors, thus, seem exaggerated.²⁵

CHARTING RELEVANT FACTORS IN AFGHANISTAN

The table below organizes the relevant factors that should be kept in mind when discussing the future of Afghanistan under the condition of diminishing Western presence and a restructuring of state and societal funding and economic reproduction. It includes economic patterns as well as the mobilization of cultural, legal and, to borrow Bourdieu’s famous term, social capital. This table should not be read as an exhaustive matrix, and the significance of different factors may not be as even as the layout suggests; not only is the impact of one action contingent upon the general policy direction within which it occurs, but policies and actions are interdependent. Similarly, the specific moment in which political action takes place determines its impact: some actions may go unnoticed while others may gain significance well beyond their actual content. The uncertainty of political developments cannot possibly be sketched out accurately, let alone predicted with accuracy. The further political considerations reach into the future, the more likely a misconception will be. The chart may thus guide political considerations or inform political preparations in analyzing a highly conflictive situation, but is not intended to provide any specific predictions.

Table 1: Afghanistan and Western Intervention Withdrawal, in the Short, Mid and Long Term

	Short Term	Mid Term	Long Term
Military	Combat mission	Training mission	Unstable, open for capture by external forces
Social	Rural resistance to urban-led modernization	Islamic values in politics	Mobility of elites, reliance on <i>qawm</i> identities (social ties to neighbours, fellow workers, family, tribe, etc.)
Political	Clientelism — personal relations	Access to revenues prescribes coalitions	Fragmented economy leaves state underfinanced — low taxation, little state impact on society
Legal/ Judicial	Restricted scope of Islamic jurisdiction	De-professionalization; legal volatility	Local or regional, ad hoc jurisdiction, customary law gains upper hand; de-rationalization
Economic	Cronyism, fiddling of public affairs	Merging of political and economic spheres	Fragmentation; regional fiefdoms; untaxed trade; importance of border controls for local strongmen
Cultural	Social divisions increasing	“Afghan-ness” — generational conflict	Backlash against Western values; struggle for interpretation of reality by “Facebook generation”
Regional	Pashtun role in state: Pakistan; Iran in background	Increasing influence by Iran; stable trade relations with Central Asia	Economic interest; pending stabilization, but little manipulation

Source: author.

CONCLUSION

When the ICG’s report *Afghanistan: The Long, Hard Road to the 2014 Transition* (2012) was published, the reaction was angry: “The Afghan government labelled the predictions ‘nonsense and garbage’” (BBC Asia, 2012). Subsequently, Afghan President Karzai’s government threatened to ban the independent group’s work in the country (*The Nation*, 2012), highlighting its concerns about critical assessments of the situation. This corresponds with widespread fears in Afghanistan

²⁵ US Army Colonel, personal conversation, Kabul, March 2011.

about developments in 2013 and 2014, when elections will run parallel to Western withdrawal. The presidential elections are widely viewed as essential: If they are marred, manipulated or rigged, it is feared that widespread resistance against the emerging new (or old) government will erupt.²⁶

This view places the government at the centre of all social activity in the country, which might not cover the full picture of Afghanistan's situation in the next few years. Despite the undoubtedly weak and corrupt ways of the government, and despite ICG's convincing analysis that weak institutions seem unable to manage pressures on the path to elections and thereafter, putting these very institutions at the centre of one's perspective might overestimate their social relevance. From a political economy point of view, the political actor or group of actors best equipped with international contacts to acquire rent flows has the most leverage to be influential in a post-Western Afghanistan. The government, at the moment, is in a privileged position, enjoying the basic legitimacy that the international systems provides.

However, power and influence are likely to be reshuffled along the flow of funds. Regional power holders can — if they are able to gain revenues from external donors, but also from self-generated funds (such as trade taxes), raw materials (such as gems) or even opium — out-act central influence in the provinces. Structurally, the political urgency of stabilizing the central government is still high in Western donor countries and is likely to remain that way at least during the transition. Later, other influences may take over, trying to balance interests of regional or neighbouring countries, represented by local groups with limited spheres of influence within the state. The state of Afghanistan may become subject to struggles over power and influence, for example, between India and Pakistan, between China and Central Asian states, or between Iran and remaining Western influences. Many influential actors in Afghanistan now have more to lose than gain from outright violent fighting; however, a scenario where fighting breaks out over the last few resources the state can provide to substate groups cannot be ruled out entirely. In trying to position themselves against each other, fighting will remain an option — and one that may not simply be directed at an opponent but at acquiring a better position in the political economy of remaining rent flows.

The social dynamics of these struggles may not be easily distinguished from the outside, as they may join forces with, mobilize through, and exploit social unrest and local resistance against central rule. Whether these escalate into provincial “civil wars” is impossible to predict; however, in a country as fragmented as Afghanistan, establishment is a strategic necessity for any group aiming to exert greater influence. It is unlikely, though, that this expansion will not meet any resistance. Paradoxically, short of disintegration, Afghan-ness could become decisive for legitimizing such national aspirations — certainly the question of Pashtun dominance in political matters will play an important role. After many years of this dominance in state institutions and with ideas of Pashtun supremacy prevailing, conflict with other currently empowered groups is likely. In any case, these rivalries may guarantee that relations between central rulers and provinces remain strained, weak and oftentimes contingent upon personal relations. The inherent clientelism of such a system, in turn, fosters rent flows to uphold loyalty while being notoriously unstable in cases of persons dying or losing office.

Trying to keep relations stable, however, tends to foster over-centralization of the state; this can be observed in the current state architecture and is likely to continue as long as the state has sufficient funds to secure followers' consent. In this, the state will compete with funds from neighbouring countries, whose staunch cooperation to jointly support Afghanistan politically is unlikely to materialize any time soon. Not only are there few precedents of continuous political cooperation in South and Central Asia, of which Afghanistan is the geopolitical interface, but Afghanistan may also become instrumental (again) in balancing regional relations.

Finally, while at first look it may seem that after the stabilizing effect of the Western intervention and International Security Assistance Forces are gone the whole state will collapse, there is reason to believe that Afghan elites have, in the meantime, understood the value of at least a core state structure. If such a state is seen as worth keeping, we may well see quite a different form of state evolving than envisioned in and following the Bonn process. Nevertheless, such a state may fulfill its international role while leaving Afghanistan what it has been for a long time: a wild and beautiful country, yet hardly touched by central rule.

²⁶ Personal conversations, Kabul, October–November, 2012.

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57 Erb Street West
Waterloo, Ontario N2L 6C2, Canada
tel +1 519 885 2444 fax +1 519 885 5450
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