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## Winning with warlords in Afghanistan

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A fundamental contradiction has been built into America's intervention in Afghanistan since the first days of the war in 2001. On the one hand, US policymakers have viewed the promotion of liberal democracy, economic development, and strong centralized state institutions as essential to achieve victory over the long term. On the other hand, however, the US has relied on local warlords to win its battles against the Taliban from the first days of the intervention. The Obama administration's tortured policy review reflects the intractable dilemmas involved in trying to build a modern democratic state while relying on local warlords as crucial allies in the war against the Taliban.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan; warlords; insurgency; development; Taliban; US strategy

In December 2009, President Barack Obama announced a dramatic expansion of the American war effort in Afghanistan while also insisting that the withdrawal of US troops from that nation would begin in July 2011. The result of an agonizing months-long review of policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Obama administration's December 2009 strategy responded to the steady deterioration of the American war effort that had greeted Obama upon his inauguration in January 2009. In his initial Commander's assessment in 2009, General Stanley McChrystal advised that a significant increase in US troops committed to a classic counterinsurgency strategy would be necessary to seize the initiative from the Taliban.<sup>1</sup> Obama's implementation of many of McChrystal's recommendations has, in the words of the administration's December 2010 review, 'reduced overall Taliban influence and arrested the momentum they had achieved in recent years in key parts of the country'.<sup>2</sup>

The 'civilian surge' designed to complement these changes in military strategy, however, has not been as successful in enhancing the strength and legitimacy of the Afghan government. Despite the significant increase in the official civilian US presence in Afghanistan, Afghan government agencies remain ineffective and corrupt. Officials of the Afghan government continue to siphon off a substantial portion of the billions of dollars in economic assistance provided by the international community. Poppy cultivation remains the most important industry in the nation. While the military components of American counterinsurgency strategy

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appear to have met with some success, the economic and political complements of that strategy depend on corrupt local interlocutors like Ahmed Wali Karzai, the local strongman in Kandahar and half-brother of President Hamid Karzai. President Karzai's 'victory' in the fraudulent August 2009 presidential elections, followed by the equally fraudulent parliamentary elections of September 2010, exemplify and symbolize the extraordinary difficulties the US has faced in its efforts to create a strong, legitimate, and modern political order in Afghanistan. How should we understand this combination of military progress and political setbacks in Afghanistan and how should this understanding inform the Obama administration's choices as it assesses US policy options in July 2011 and beyond?

We argue that the mixed record of the Obama administration's surge of 2009–10 reflects a fundamental contradiction that has been a part of the American enterprise in Afghanistan from the beginning. Over the long term, American policymakers have believed that the promotion of democracy, economic development, and a more capable and effective state can achieve a decisive victory over the Taliban insurgency. In 2001, however, the US achieved its initial victory over the Taliban by striking bargains with local warlords throughout Afghanistan and crafting a political settlement in which these warlords would support Hamid Karzai as the presiding officer of a constitutionally centralized, yet weak national government that generally would not disrupt warlords' control over their local districts. While this agreement brought short-term victories over the Taliban and the appearance of national reconciliation, it has fueled political fragmentation and corruption, making it essentially incompatible with the development model that policymakers have considered essential to long-term success in Afghanistan.

Until the presidential elections of August 2009, President Karzai had successfully papered over this fundamental contradiction, simultaneously posing as the leader of a modernizing project and as the patron of a coalition of warlords. During this time, he has also skillfully used his position as interlocutor between the international community and local power brokers to create an increasingly centralized, personalist, and patrimonial regime, a development that was probably unavoidable if Karzai wished to remain in office. The modernization project in Afghanistan, therefore, faces the twin barriers of local warlords and the personalist regime of Hamid Karzai, both of which US policy has strengthened over the course of the past decade.

The August 2009 presidential elections illuminated the exhaustion of the simultaneous pursuit of modern development and warlord politics. If the US embraces the modernization strategy as its central focus moving forward, it will have to accept that the warlords that have heretofore been important allies of the US may represent equally grave threats to political democracy, state strength, and economic development as the Taliban. Targeting the warlords, however, is risky and could engulf the entire nation, including the relatively quiet northern regions of Afghanistan, in war once again, while undermining many of America's existing allies in the Pashtun south. It might mean that the still nascent Afghan

state and its international allies would have to fight warlords and the Taliban simultaneously. Alternatively, increasing America's reliance on warlords to fight the insurgency, by ignoring the illiberal and corrupt character of our warlord allies and perhaps by treating elements of the insurgency willing to break with the Taliban as it treats its warlord allies, would reinforce the corruption and disintegration of the Afghan state and polity.

The costs and risks associated with an attempt to implement fully the preferred long-term modernization project for Afghanistan make it unlikely that Obama will choose that path. Indeed, by insisting that a US withdrawal will begin in July 2011 and that he has no desire to create a 'Jeffersonian democracy' in Afghanistan, Obama has already signaled that he is unlikely to embrace such a policy fully. Thus, because the Bush administration initially decided to try to win the war against the Taliban in cooperation with Afghan warlords, Obama is likely to shift toward a strategy of winning with warlords once again as the US withdraws from Afghanistan. In this strategy, the US would rely on local warlords to keep the Taliban at bay, while in return these warlords would be given increased resources to fight the Taliban and the autonomy to govern their territories as they see fit. Although such a strategy is bound to reduce the power of President Karzai in important ways, US policymakers may continue to rely on Karzai's patrimonial role to sustain any semblance of a central government in Afghanistan.

We begin our examination of this dilemma by examining the modernization strategy that has reflected US policymakers' long-term vision for victory. We then focus on the legacies of America's decision to win its initial victories in Afghanistan in alliance with local warlords and examine Hamid Karzai's efforts to manage these contradictions during his time in office. We conclude with a discussion of the consequences of different strategies for addressing this basic contradiction in US policy.

### **Democracy, economic development, and strong state institutions for Afghanistan**

From the beginning, the United States and other international donors decided that they needed to promote a comprehensive plan for political, economic, and social development in Afghanistan to avoid the resurgence of the Taliban. Soon after a transitional government was announced at a UN-sponsored meeting of Afghan groups in Bonn Germany on 5 December 2001, international donor governments and organizations began pledging billion of dollars for reconstruction programs at a chain of conferences in Tokyo, London, and Paris.

International donors have encouraged Afghans to embrace liberal democratic norms of governance, with appropriate deference to Afghan traditions. In Bonn, therefore, the participants proclaimed:

Acknowledging the right of the people of Afghanistan to freely determine their own political future in accordance with the principles of Islam, democracy, pluralism and social justice, Noting that these interim arrangements are intended as a first step

toward the establishment of a broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government, The Emergency Loya Jirga shall decide on a Transitional Authority, including a broad-based transitional administration, to lead Afghanistan until such time as a fully representative government can be elected through free and fair elections to be held no later than two years from the date of the convening of the Emergency Loya Jirga.<sup>3</sup>

Hamid Karzai was selected to head an interim administration. Six months later, Afghanistan's former king, Zahir Shah, inaugurated an emergency loya jirga, or grand council, to select a transitional authority. A year and a half later, another loya jirga was called to draft a new constitution. Afghans selected Karzai as their president in national elections in October 2004, and a new parliament was elected in 2005. Thus, since soon after the American intervention of 2001, international donors have encouraged Afghans to construct liberal democratic institutions to govern their country.

The 'Afghanistan Compact' signed by the Afghan government and international donors at a London conference on 31 January and 1 February 2006 reflects an excellent distillation of the international community's development model for Afghanistan. The 2006 Afghanistan Compact encourages Afghans to achieve a range of specific goals in three interlocking areas: security, governance, rule of law and human rights, and economic and social development. To ensure the security necessary for the promotion of democratic governance and economic development, the Compact emphasizes that a 'nationally respected, professional, ethnically balanced Afghan National Army will be fully established that is democratically accountable, organized, trained and equipped to meet the security needs of the country'.<sup>4</sup> The Compact calls for a national police force of roughly equal magnitude to the size of the army and calls for disbanding all illegal armed groups by the end of 2007. As these institutions were being created, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) would play an increasingly important role in providing security for Afghans while preparing the new national forces to take over. Separate units under US command have undertaken independent operations against Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgents. US and NATO forces also created Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) that combined small military forces with civilian reconstruction experts in an effort to provide security and economic development projects to remote areas.

The Compact also places considerable emphasis on strengthening and rationalizing public administration to ensure that the new state institutions are both democratic and capable of delivering public goods. By 2010, the Afghan government is charged with rationalizing government machinery 'to ensure a fiscally sustainable public administration'.<sup>5</sup> A clear and transparent mechanism for public appointments is to be created and appointments will be based on merit as reflected in systematic performance reviews. Mechanisms are to be put in place to monitor compliance with international anti-corruption standards.

Finally, the Compact calls for a comprehensive plan for economic and social development that sets benchmarks for road construction, air transport, increased

access to electricity and clean water, policies encouraging mining and agricultural development, urban and rural development, environmental protection, education, and health. Considerable emphasis is placed both on state policies designed to promote economic growth through governmental investments in a wide range of infrastructure projects and on the creation of a climate conducive to private investment. The Compact emphasizes both economic growth and social protection. Essentially, this model replicates a template that has been widely applied in international development and/or counterinsurgency practice after World War II, as amended more recently for use in the context of international peacekeeping missions and post-conflict reconstruction.<sup>6</sup>

Today, an elected government sits in Kabul. A national army of more than 100,000 soldiers has been created. Tens of billions of dollars have been expended to improve the quality of governmental institutions and promote economic and social development. Yet, as the Obama administration entered office, the Taliban insurgency had become stronger each year, while analysts advocated a redoubling of efforts and resources in the execution of roughly the same strategies.<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, the Taliban have grown in strength in part because they are connected to global jihadist networks that provide resources, expertise and safe havens in neighboring Pakistan, while Pakistani military's Inter-Services Intelligence bureau has supported the Taliban since its creation in 1994.<sup>8</sup> In addition, they have been able to rely on hundreds of millions of dollars per year in revenue from Afghanistan's drug trade to fund the insurgency.<sup>9</sup> The Taliban have also been able to play upon the concerns of Pashtun nationalists in the south that President Karzai's government is too reliant on Tajiks and other ethnic minorities from the north.

Beyond these factors, the Taliban has grown stronger in part because nearly a decade of international efforts to follow the blueprint first laid out in Bonn and Tokyo have failed to build consolidated democracy, strong state institutions, or economic development in Afghanistan. President Karzai could only exceed the 50% vote threshold in the first round of the 2009 elections by stealing a third of his votes according to the Independent Election Commission.<sup>10</sup> Central and local administrations are unable to provide basic civil services and are plagued with corruption.<sup>11</sup> Patronage, nepotism, and bribery are widespread. Public funds are squandered or misused. Real income per capita has been declining.<sup>12</sup> Non-drug GDP growth has been eaten up by annual double-digit inflation rates. Unemployment rates for males exceed 40%, and there are critical shortages of electricity, water, and food supply.

One can argue that even the best-crafted and implemented programs were likely to fail in an unforgiving Afghan climate, or that failures of implementation are responsible for the shortcomings of the development project for Afghanistan. While we see merit in both arguments, we argue that US policymakers also made critical choices in the early days of the intervention that contradicted and undermined the liberal focus of subsequent policies. US policy has inadvertently weakened the capacity of the Afghan state.

**Winning with warlords in 2001**

Washington was ill prepared to go to war in Afghanistan in the wake of September 11. The US possessed no well-defined war plans for Afghan contingencies. American forces had almost no presence in the region. All of Afghanistan's neighbors were problematic partners for any large-scale conventional attack. Reliance upon air strikes alone in a country as impoverished as Afghanistan could lead to little more than 'pounding dirt'.<sup>13</sup> As late as the first week of November, policymakers in Washington feared that they would not meet with significant success until spring 2002 at the least.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, anti-Taliban forces captured Kabul on 14 November 2001, just a little over two months after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. On 7 December, Mullah Omar abandoned Kandahar. Osama bin Laden's forces left the caves of Tora Bora for Pakistan a week later. Thus, the United States managed to overthrow the Taliban regime less than three months after the attacks of September 11. It did so with only a small group of Afghan rebels working with US Special Forces and US airpower. According to Michael O'Hanlon, 'The Afghan resistance, the Bush administration, its international coalition partners, the US Armed Forces, and the CIA have accomplished what will likely be remembered as one of the greater military successes of the twenty-first century.'<sup>15</sup> On the political front, before al-Qaeda forces had left Tora Bora, Afghan exile groups had already united in Bonn around what appeared to be a profoundly liberal project and a seemingly popular pro-Western leader in Hamid Karzai.

The United States 'won' this war in part through alliances with local warlords. It depended on these warlords in part because it possessed no easy way to launch a major conventional invasion in a timely fashion. US policymakers also wanted to maintain a 'light footprint' to avoid making the same mistakes as the British in the early nineteenth century and the Soviets in the late twentieth century, who had learned the hard way that the Afghan people despised and punished external invaders. Failing to ally with local actors 'would have increased the chances that these factions would be actively opposing the US presence . . . rather than cooperating in rebuilding efforts'.<sup>16</sup> In the early days of Operation Enduring Freedom it was unclear whether the US would even make a major contribution to rebuilding efforts and wanted to ensure they could make a quick exit. The US also needed to limit the number of troops in Afghanistan so that it could focus its resources and attention on Iraq, which was identified as a primary target of US intervention soon after September 11.<sup>17</sup> Iraq would soon consistently claim more than 100,000 US soldiers, hundreds of billions of dollars in resources, and the undivided attention of US policymakers. The US could not pursue a more costly and ambitious strategy in Afghanistan as long as Iraq was the top priority for policymakers.

Only the CIA had significant capabilities in Afghanistan, both because it had worked with the mujahideen fighters during the anti-Soviet war of the 1980s and because it was the lead agency in the fight against Osama bin Laden



and al-Qaeda. It seized the initiative in the first months of US policy toward Afghanistan after 9/11 and the Northern Alliance was its principal ally in that fight. A coalition of northern non-Pashtun militias, whose leader was the Panjshiri Tajik Ahmed Shah Masood; the members of the Alliance had been major participants in the mujahideen government that misruled Afghanistan after the collapse of the Communist regime in 1992. The Taliban had expelled this government from Kabul in 1996 and subsequently captured all but 15% of Afghanistan's national territory by mid 2001. Nevertheless, the Northern Alliance remained the best-trained and equipped military opponents to the Taliban in 2001. As Gary Schroen, who led the first CIA team into Afghanistan after September 11, put it, 'I knew that the only way to effectively get at bin Laden was to go after him in Afghanistan, and the only way to effectively chase him in that country was to eliminate the Taliban forces protecting him. The only way to do that was by using the only military force in Afghanistan that was organized and capable of taking on the Taliban in the field – Masood's Northern Alliance.'<sup>18</sup>

The first CIA team in Afghanistan landed in the Panjshir Valley and began working with a Northern Alliance coping with the recent assassination of its leader Masood by al-Qaeda. Additional CIA and Special Forces teams began working closely with local commanders affiliated with the Northern Alliance, like Ismail Khan near Herat, Rashid Dostum and Muhammad Atta near Mazari Sharif, and Karim Khalili near Bamiyan. By early November, Special Forces teams were able to call in precision air strikes on Taliban positions, which Northern Alliance forces were able to exploit to overrun those positions. CIA money was then used to bribe additional commanders to switch sides to turn the tide against the Taliban. As Schroen put it, 'the single most important factor in deciding the outcome of any battle had been defections by individual commanders to the other side at critical moments in the fighting.'<sup>19</sup>

Policymakers in Washington, however, were worried that a return of the minority Tajiks and Uzbeks of the Northern Alliance to power in Kabul, after their disastrous stint in power from 1992 to 1996 would generate opposition and support for the Taliban in the south. They, therefore, discouraged the Northern Alliance (unsuccessfully) from entering Kabul and sought to develop a 'Southern Alliance' that would place equal military pressure from within the Pashtun community as that being applied by the Northern Alliance. The US once again looked to revive ties to warlords from the mujahideen past to assist in the war effort. In some cases this worked poorly from the beginning. The Pashtun warlords who were pressed into service against al-Qaeda in Tora Bora in December 2001, for example, 'were just not up to the job... Afghan opposition forces were also less than fully committed...'<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps most crucial, however, were the militias resurrected to evict the Taliban from their home in Kandahar. While the US provided support to Hamid Karzai, who led a couple hundred armed supporters in an effort to push the Taliban out of Kandahar, the strongest militia supported by American Special Forces near Kandahar belonged to Gul Agha Shirzai, who had been the unpopular



governor of Kandahar run out of town by the Taliban in 1994. Shirzai entered Kandahar on 6 December 2001 and assumed the governorship of Kandahar Province (against the instructions of Karzai, who had just been named the head of the provisional government). Over the next couple of years, he used his close relationship to US forces and control of the governorship to set up a parallel militia that was better armed than the official police. He provided selective intelligence that helped convince the Americans that his local adversaries were allied with the Taliban. He controlled most foreign aid dollars in the province and ensured that most of the money and reconstruction projects went to his closest supporters and his Barakzai clan. He controlled the large sums generated by customs receipts that came through the province and refused to share that revenue with the central government. Shirzai was also involved in drug trafficking, in at least one case, smuggling drugs out of the country in the tanker trucks he used to deliver fuel to American forces at the air base in Kandahar. He also played a double game working with Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) to undermine the stability of the national government in order to enhance his own position.<sup>21</sup>

Shirzai successfully convinced many Americans that he was an essential bulwark against the return of the Taliban in Kandahar, but in practice his behavior fundamentally undermined the central government, alienated the local population, and weakened the modernization project. He exhibited what became a common problem throughout the country. US support for warlords helped ensure that the Afghan state would not have a monopoly over the use of force. Warlords either continue to control private armies or have established control over local public security forces in their areas of influence. Warlords deny tax revenues to the state, especially through their control of international 'tariffs' in border regions they dominate. In addition, they are often major players in drug trafficking, which undermines legitimate economic activity and corrupts public institutions. The warlords in the north like Rashid Dostum and Ismail Khan weakened the central government, but at least they did not also help generate support for the Taliban in their areas, given the extreme oppression Uzbeks and Tajiks had faced at the hands of the Pashtun Taliban.<sup>22</sup> Shirzai also helped make the people of Kandahar remember fondly the order and stability of the Taliban era.

### **Karzai's 'fully representative, broad based and multi-ethnic government'**

The US relied on Hamid Karzai to help resolve these potential contradictions. From the beginning of the air war in Afghanistan, the US called consistently for a government that would be broad based and representative of all Afghans. Building a multi-ethnic coalition with strong Pashtun participation was seen as necessary for victory as well as for long-term stability. Karzai was selected to head the transitional authority because he was the only candidate acceptable to all groups. He was the preferred candidate of the US and other international actors in

part because he was diplomatic, eloquent, fluent in English, and a vocal proponent of a Western development model for Afghanistan. To reinforce this commitment to Western models of development, Karzai named several Afghan expatriate technocrats as cabinet ministers, like Ashraf Ghani, Karzai's first finance minister who had served previously at the World Bank, or Ali Jalali, who worked for the Voice of America for 20 years before returning to Afghanistan to become interior minister in 2003. Karzai was also the leader of the royal Popalzai Pashtun clan, which policymakers hoped would blunt Pashtun concerns that the military leaders of the anti-Taliban alliance were Panjshiri Tajiks.

Recognizing the concerns of the Bush administration, a new generation of leaders of the Northern Alliance positioned themselves as a modern, liberal, Western force. Alliance representatives like Abdullah, foreign minister of the interim government, and Yunus Qanooni, the new interior minister, appealed to the US by emphasizing their commitment to liberal norms. Thus, Qanooni proclaimed at the Bonn summit that, 'It is not our intention to monopolize power. It will be our pride to work for a broad-based government based on the will of the people of Afghanistan. We want a system in which all Afghans, including women, participate in an equal manner in the structures of power.'<sup>23</sup> Qanooni and Abdullah, and the Alliance's military leader, Muhammad Fahim, let the UN know before the Bonn conference that they would be happy to work with Karzai. According to Abdullah, 'Karzai is a man who shares our vision of building a modern stable Afghanistan and creating a multi-ethnic government.'<sup>24</sup> They also realized that Karzai was militarily weak and would be dependent on their armed support to survive in office.

Karzai also became a favorite of many of Afghanistan's warlords. His connections to the Northern Alliance frayed within the first few years, with Fahim and Qanooni removed from the cabinet after the presidential election of 2004, and Abdullah replaced soon afterward. The most prominent expatriates in Karzai's cabinet left Afghanistan within two to three years. In contrast, some of Afghanistan's most notorious warlords remain in positions of power today, appointed by President Karzai. Mohammad Atta is governor of Balkh, whose capital Mazari Sharif is one of Afghanistan's most important cities. After his service in Kandahar, Shirzai was named governor of Nangarhar Province. Though removed from his post as governor of Herat, Ismail Khan remains minister of power and electricity.<sup>25</sup>

By strengthening warlords as a crucial component of its war-fighting strategy against the Taliban, the US increased the costs any new government would pay if it attacked the power of these warlords. Karzai decided instead to incorporate them into his 'broad-based' government. Therefore, despite the fact that the rules set up for the *loya jirga* in 2002 called for the exclusion of warlords, Karzai and the UN insisted on their inclusion.<sup>26</sup> Warlords were also well represented in the subsequent *loya jirga* that drafted a new constitution. In many provinces, the governorship was formally given to those with the strongest militias in the area. Lower-level officials were also likely to be tightly connected to local militias.<sup>27</sup>

Karzai promoted warlords to executive positions in Kabul. In this context, Karzai used the distribution of foreign aid to ensure the cooperation of warlords. According to some reports, between 35% and 50% of all aid money is squandered or stolen, much of this to feed the rent-seeking behavior of warlords.<sup>28</sup> As in the African experience during the 1990s, international efforts to promote private enterprise and foreign investment also increased the political and economic strength of Afghan warlords, through joint ventures with international firms or security contracts to protect international investments.<sup>29</sup> Increasingly, it has become clear that the Karzai administration protects warlords engaging in drug trafficking and may provide active assistance to that industry.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, warlords retained their local status and power and increased their presence in the national government. As long as poppy cultivation, transit trade, and development assistance are the most important sources of economic activity in Afghanistan and warlords control a substantial portion of all three, it will be difficult to develop the kind of strong local economic elite that could serve as a political counterpoint to the warlords and advocate for the rule of law.<sup>31</sup>

At times Karzai has appeared ready to confront warlords directly, but has always stepped back from the brink. In 2003, there were plans to fire a half dozen of the most corrupt and violent warlord governors, but instead Karzai merely summoned them to a meeting in Kabul where he exhorted them to turn over their customs revenue to the central government and clean up their acts. The warlords dutifully promised to change their behavior and then for the most part went back to their established practices.<sup>32</sup>

Each time Karzai backed down he blamed the Americans for failing to support him in his efforts to punish warlords close to the US military. American policymakers in turn would blame Karzai, suggesting that they had no choice but to support these corrupt governors because they were Karzai's men and the US supported Karzai's government.<sup>33</sup> In practice, reaching an understanding with the warlords served the interests of both Karzai and the US.

Reaching an accommodation with the warlords provided safety to a Karzai administration that still lacks a sufficiently strong national security apparatus to guarantee success if it were to have to fight both warlords and the Taliban. Furthermore, to the extent to which Afghanistan is developing a democratic electoral process, that electoral process resembles machine politics, with local bosses encouraging or coercing their constituents to support their preferred slate of candidates. Karzai received hundreds of thousands of votes, perhaps more than a million, from areas controlled by warlords who were more than happy to trade votes for local autonomy to continue their existing rackets. These warlords delivered the votes in their districts to Karzai because he was the leader most likely to ensure a continued flow of economic aid for Afghanistan, which the president then distributed to appreciative provincial leaders. Was the level of fraud in the 2004 election sufficient to allow Karzai to avoid a run-off election (he received 55.4% of the vote)? We do not know because no one has looked as closely at the 2004 ballot as they have at the 2009 election.

This political bargain with warlords was acceptable to US policymakers because it prevented the outbreak of a new cycle of turf battles and brought a measure of peace to Afghanistan. This policy has been very much a replication of the British carrot and stick strategy, which kept a friendly ruling elite in Kabul by appeasing otherwise intractable warlords through subsidies and cash allowances.<sup>34</sup> This strategy worked well for the British but did little for Afghanistan's social and economic development.

The US obviously has had no specific intention to pursue this colonial policy but rather sought an ad hoc solution to fill the power vacuum and to provide a smooth political transition after the ouster of the Taliban. It was hoped that economic reconstruction and democratization would facilitate political and social change that in the end would undermine the pillars of Afghan warlordism. This has not happened, however. Instead, the US helped sustain a warlord system that undermined the long-term modernization strategy it preferred. It did this both through its initial support for warlords in the effort to overthrow the Taliban and defeat al-Qaeda and in its unqualified support for Hamid Karzai, who realized early on that he was more likely to remain in power by accommodating and co-opting warlords than by challenging them.

Over time, the balance of power between Hamid Karzai and Afghan warlords has shifted toward the president. Warlord politics remains the norm in much of Afghanistan, but President Karzai plays an increasingly central role in the management of the warlord politics system. For most of the last quarter century, Adbul Rashid Dostum and Ismail Khan have been among Afghanistan's most powerful and notorious warlords. Both had been defeated by the Taliban during the late 1990s, but were restored to power by the US in the wake of September 11. Since 2001, Karzai has managed to diminish the power of both warlords. Mohammad Atta became governor of Balkh and probably the most powerful figure in northern Afghanistan in part because he was used by Karzai to undermine the power of Dostum, who had run against him in the 2004 presidential elections.<sup>35</sup> Ismail Khan's 'promotion' to head the Power and Electricity Ministry followed a military attack on Herat in the summer 2004 that led to an intervention by the Afghan Army that froze the situation in a manner that benefitted Ismail Khan's regional rival, Amanullah Khan, and led to Ismail Khan's ouster as governor of Herat.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Gul Agha Shirzai remains a powerful figure as governor of Nangarhar, but he was removed from his initial power base in Kandahar to make room for the president's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, to cement his position as the local strongman. Ahmed Wali was complicit in the delivery of hundreds of thousands of fraudulent votes to his brother's candidacy. He is also widely rumored to be a major player in southern Afghanistan's drug trafficking networks. Nevertheless, he is also receiving substantial amounts of financial support from the CIA for his assistance in that agency's counterterrorism efforts.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, Governor Shirzai continues to play the game of warlord politics but as an ally and agent of the president more than as a competitor.

In sum, while foreign assistance to Afghanistan has followed the guidelines of a modern Western model of development, it has operated in a political context where the power of warlords and the personalist regime constructed by President Karzai undermine the effectiveness of this assistance. While Afghanistan's reconstruction has been losing momentum, the Taliban has hijacked public dissatisfaction, intensified its insurgent tactics, and come back to mount a serious threat to Karzai's government.

### **Winning with warlords in 2011?**

The future course of America's war in Afghanistan will be determined by how Americans and Afghans address the contradiction between the legacy of America's initial political-military strategy to win the war and its longer-term modernization strategy. If the US embraces the modernization strategy as its central focus, it must find a way to target warlords as a principal threat to the creation of a strong, democratic, and prosperous state and society in Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> It might also be compelled to oppose the Karzai administration because of its close collaboration with warlords throughout Afghanistan. US efforts to distance itself from Karzai in early 2009 demonstrate the difficulties of implementing such a strategy. The more the Obama administration pressured Karzai to conduct free and fair elections in August 2009, the more Karzai embraced his warlord allies, to the point of naming Muhammad Fahim one of his vice presidential nominees. Early indications, including its acquiescence in Karzai's second term, suggest that the Obama administration is reluctant to pursue the modernization nation-building strategy to its logical extreme, especially in light of a deep global economic downturn that makes the extraordinary expenses of this strategy untenable. President Obama made this clear to the participants in the 2009 policy review: 'I'm not doing 10 years. I'm not doing a long-term nation-building effort. I'm not spending a trillion dollars.'<sup>39</sup> For this reason, Obama narrowed US objectives in his speech of 1 December 2009 to improving the capacity of the Afghan state rather than building Afghan democracy.<sup>40</sup>

Instead, the Obama administration has indicated a willingness to work with local provincial and tribal leaders, which could approximate a proxy war strategy of winning by subsidizing local warlords to fight the Taliban.<sup>41</sup> While the Obama administration is likely to draw distinctions between support for some of Afghanistan's most notorious warlords and its new strategy of forging cooperative relationships with local tribal leaders, the dynamics of the relationships in which the US pays local militias to fight the Taliban on our behalf could easily approximate our existing relationships with local warlords. Biddle et al. describe one version of this approach as an embrace of a 'mixed sovereignty' strategy for Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup>

This strategy is likely to be coupled with efforts to negotiate with more 'moderate' elements of the Taliban. In practice, this could mean negotiations with the elements of the Taliban most willing to be bought off with deals similar to

those received by America's warlord allies in Afghanistan. As General David Petraeus put it when he headed CENTCOM, 'In concert with and in support of our Afghan partners, we need to identify and separate the "irreconcilables" from the "reconcilables", striving to create the conditions that can make the reconcilables part of the solution, even as we kill, capture, or drive out the irreconcilables.'<sup>43</sup> Reaching out to the Taliban, therefore, could reflect a more straightforward commitment to a strategy of winning with warlords. If one were to take the nineteenth-century British strategy to its logical extreme, Taliban leaders willing to break with the insurgency could be given local autonomy, international acquiescence to continued drug trafficking, arms for their militias, and a share of the patronage from aid flows. Many extremists would not accept this deal, especially Pakistan-based jihadis, but large numbers of the Taliban might discontinue their war against the Afghan state in exchange for such an understanding. Buying off elements of the Taliban in this way could split the insurgency and provide counterinsurgent forces with the actionable intelligence they need to fight the irreconcilable elements of the movement more effectively, as arguably has been the case with the Awakening Movement in Sunni Arab communities in Iraq.<sup>44</sup>

As President Obama himself has admitted though, 'the situation in Afghanistan is, if anything, more complex [than in Iraq]. You have a less governed region, a history of fierce independence among tribes. Those tribes are multiple and sometimes operate at cross purposes, so figuring all that out is going to be a much more of a challenge.'<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, a full embrace of a warlord strategy for achieving victory in Afghanistan is likely to weaken state authority even more severely, make economic development even more difficult to attain, and render electoral processes even less of an exercise in genuine democracy. It is difficult to imagine that women's rights would be advanced if the US allowed former leaders of the Taliban insurgency to govern areas of southern Afghanistan.

Despite these costs, the Obama administration is likely to shift toward a warlord strategy, in practice if not in name, because it is the most likely path to an extrication of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan. Relying on a coalition of local warlords to fight the Taliban is likely to be sufficient to deny victory to the Taliban and ensure that Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for al-Qaeda. Over time, it could allow for a withdrawal of most international troops. This shift could lead to a warming of relations between Hamid Karzai and the Obama administration. For close to a decade, the United States asked President Karzai to do two contradictory things, build a strong, modern liberal democratic state and manage a warlord-based political system. Karzai's continuation in office depended on his ability to be seen as succeeding in both missions. The increasing tensions between President Karzai and the Obama administration in 2009 were to a substantial degree a function of the exhaustion of this contradictory strategy in the context of a resurgent Taliban insurgency. If Presidents Obama and Karzai reach a tacit understanding that the primary goal is to sustain a political order that



will allow the US to draw down its troops and rely on local warlords to keep the Taliban at bay, it could reduce tensions between their administrations.

This strategy is unlikely to generate a definitive end to the war, however, in part because Afghanistan will continue to be left with a corrupt, incapable, and illegitimate political order and underdeveloped economy. After a decade of papering over the contradictions in America's war effort in Afghanistan this may be the best of a series of bad options available to the Obama administration even if it is unlikely to be the optimal choice for the people of Afghanistan. As recent events in the Middle East have demonstrated, however, relying on personalist regimes as allies rather than trying to build modern liberal democracies in allied states, can come back to haunt US policymakers in unexpected ways.

## Notes

1. Schmitt and Shanker, 'General Calls for More U.S. Troops'.
2. White House, 'Overview of the Afghanistan and Pakistan Annual Review'.
3. UN, *Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan*.
4. Afghanistan Compact, 6.
5. Afghanistan Compact, 7.
6. Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms*; Paris, *At War's End*; Doyle and Sambanis, *Making War*.
7. See, for example, Jones, 'The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency'; Zoellick, 'What We Can Achieve in Afghanistan'.
8. Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*.
9. Rubin, 'Road to Ruin'.
10. Tavernise and Cooper, 'Afghan Leader'.
11. Loyd, 'Corruption, Bribes and Trafficking'.
12. IMF, World Economic Outlook Database.
13. Schroen, *First In*.
14. Woodward, *Bush at War*.
15. O'Hanlon, 'A Flawed Masterpiece', 63.
16. Andres et al., 'Winning with Allies', 157.
17. Woodward, *Plan of Attack*.
18. Schroen, *First In*, 18.
19. Ibid., 91.
20. O'Hanlon, 'A Flawed Masterpiece', 57.
21. Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue*, 43–62, 76–83, 159–71, 178–85.
22. Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*.
23. Erlanger, 'With Many Absent From Talks'.
24. Rashid, 'Hamid Karzai Moves'.
25. Marten, 'Warlordism in Comparative Perspective', 56–7.
26. Secor, 'The Pragmatist'.
27. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, 15–21.
28. Delesgues and Torabi, *Reconstruction National Integrity System Survey*, 28.
29. Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*.
30. Schweich, 'Is Afghanistan a Narco-State?'.
31. Marten, 'Warlordism in Comparative Perspective', 69–71.
32. Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue*, 288–97.
33. Ibid., 227–8.
34. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*.
35. Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*, 175.



36. Ibid., 258–62.
37. Filkins et al., ‘Brother of Afghan Leader’.
38. Marten, ‘Warlordism in Comparative Perspective’, 71–2.
39. Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, 251.
40. ‘Obama’s Address on the War in Afghanistan’.
41. Exum, ‘CNAS Policy Brief – Afghanistan 2011: Three Scenarios’; Biddle et al., ‘Defining Success in Afghanistan’.
42. Biddle et al., ‘Defining Success in Afghanistan’.
43. Petraeus, ‘Commander’s Remarks’.
44. Lanchin and Mahmoud, ‘Iraq Signs Up To Awakening Movement’.
45. ‘Obama’s Interview’.

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