The Future of Islamic Afghanistan

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1. Introduction

Talleyrand remarked of the death of Napoleon that it was no longer an event, only a piece of news. This epigram might equally have been attached to the collapse of Afghan Communism in April 1992. By the time President Najibullah sought asylum in a UN office in Kabul after an abortive attempt to flee his country, the eyes of the international community had long since strayed to other scenes, and the dramatic reports from the Afghan capital rapidly made way for stories of turmoil in other parts of the world. In a real sense, however, the fall of Najibullah and his replacement by an Islamic government marked a milestone in world affairs. In the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union, it opened the way for attempts to build a cohesive new bloc of Islamic states in Central Asia. It marked both the termination of a hideous attempt at the enforced transformation of a traditional Third World polity along Soviet lines, and a final and crushing blow to the Soviet model of rule. And it opened the way for members of the world’s largest single refugee population to return freely to their homeland – which they proceeded to do in vast numbers.

Afghanistan nevertheless faces dire problems of political, social and economic disorder. Together they make the future of Islamic Afghanistan appear far from promising. The new rulers confront the daunting task of fashioning state institutions capable of helping to rescue Afghanistan from the near-chaos which the collapse of the Communist regime produced. They must attempt this, furthermore, in circumstances of elite fragmentation and of unparalleled social turmoil, marked by the substantial devolution of power and authority to well-armed groups founded on distinct bases of identity. Finally, even before the Communist coup of 27 April 1978, Afghanistan was one of the world’s poorest countries. It is now in a much graver position, not only because of falls in agricultural output, but also because traditional mechanisms of production...
and distribution have been disrupted and skills have been lost. Few revolutionaries have ever won such a depressing victory.

2. **The Physiognomy of the Afghan State**

The new Afghan regime has inherited tottering state structures. Only with the 1978 coup did Afghanistan witness any decisive attempt to extend the power—as opposed to the presence—of the state into the rural areas where the bulk of the population lived; and the attempt proved catastrophic. First, the radical policies of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan succeeded in alienating the bulk of rural dwellers, whom earlier rulers had learned to treat with considerable caution. Second, the regime lacked skilled cadres trained to implement its policies, and was itself severely divided on ideological and sociocultural grounds between its Fanonist *Khalq* ('Masses') and Leninist *Parcham* ('Banner') factions. Third, familiar symbols associated with the Islamic faith, and with the personalities of the Musahiban family who ruled Afghanistan in various guises from 1929 to 1978, were replaced by Marxist-Leninist slogans and icons, fuelling the suspicion that the regime consisted of atheistic surrogates of Moscow. This ill-fated attempt to subordinate civil society to the state caused revolts in many different parts of the country; the gradual expansion of revolt into insurgency was a key factor leading to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

In the wake of the invasion, the activities of the Afghan resistance effectively denied the Soviet-backed regime headed by Babrak Karmal any permanent presence beyond the larger cities and towns. Even Karmal has since conceded that in the period following the invasion, Soviet advisers played the central role in the running of Afghan ministries, while Soviet resources kept them afloat. Karmal's inability to win generalized normative support and reduce his dependence on external subventions prompted the Soviet leadership to replace him in May 1986 with Dr Najibullah, who had headed the regime's secret police from 1980 to 1985. Showing rather more political dexterity than Karmal had ever displayed, Najibullah used Soviet aid to purchase the loyalty of rural militias which maintained a nominal commitment to his regime. He even survived the withdrawal of Soviet combat forces from Afghanistan pursuant to the 1988 Geneva Accords, a set of agreements which the resistance had denounced for allowing extensive Soviet support for the Kabul regime to continue. The failed August 1991 coup attempt in the Soviet Union, however, prompted the cessation of Soviet aid, and within a matter of months it became clear that Najibullah had no more claim to normative support than had Karmal. The collapse of his regime inexorably followed. Most of the Afghan state apparatus collapsed with it, leaving the countryside under the control of regional power-holders and a diverse collection of resistance commanders and other notables.

The wretched condition of the state in Afghanistan has very serious implications for political reconstruction. Organizational continuity can be a key stabi-
lizing factor when revolutions take place, permitting new rulers to move at their own pace to replace existing laws and institutions with ones more to their taste. The new Afghan rulers have been denied this luxury. Instead of securing control of cohesive bureaucratic hierarchies structured to undertake tasks of policy formulation and implementation, they find themselves for the most part responsible for debilitated ministries with no significant executive capacities. The one effective instrumentality of the former regime, the secret police, was officially abolished by the new rulers – indeed, it is inconceivable that they could have acted otherwise. In recent years the Afghan state has been more a source of fear than of support for the bulk of the Afghan population; but, as the recent example of Somalia has shown, without a framework of rules for the practice of politics, and institutions to ensure that those rules are observed, the results can be gruesome. For this reason, the reconstruction of the basic instrumentalities of the state, most notably a professional standing army to prevent a war of all against all, is a matter of great urgency.
This problem is compounded by an acute lack of consensus within Afghanistan’s Islamic elites about the proper organizational forms and policy priorities of a new system of government. A high level of elite cohesion has historically been a crucial feature of almost any stable pattern of rule, whether democratic or not. Furthermore, it has always been central to the legitimacy of the Afghan state. The overthrow of the Musahiban family resulted from the emergence of a deep schism within the Kabul-based urban intelligentsia. Similarly, the division between the Khalq and Parcham factions proved an insurmountable obstacle to the establishment of a legitimate regime following the 1978 coup.

The Afghan resistance was at no point a homogeneous social movement: it embraced a diverse range of political parties, commanders, combat units and sympathizers, fragmented on the basis of ethnic identity, segmentary lineage or locality. As long as a common enemy provided a focus for popular mobilization, this problem of fragmentation was to an extent kept under control, although it accounted in some measure for the unexpected survival of Najibullah’s regime in the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal of Soviet combat forces in February 1989. The circumstances surrounding the establishment of Islamic rule in Kabul have brought this issue to the forefront of concern.

Following the 1978 coup, a number of Afghan individuals and groups promptly signalled their repudiation of Communism. The movement of huge waves of refugees to Pakistan and Iran provided them with fertile ground in which to plant their ideas and develop support networks. While members of Kabul’s traditional and commercial elites such as Sibghatullah Mojadiddi and Pir Sayid Ahmed Gailani drew on the loyalty of the Sufi brotherhoods with which they were associated, Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani of the Jamiat-i Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Society of Afghanistan) and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of the Hezb-i Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Party of Afghanistan) were among the first to stake a claim to leadership of an anti-Communist Islamic movement. Rabbani, a respected religious scholar with extensive contacts in the Arab world, was an ethnic Tadzhik, renowned for his patience and committed to building a broad coalition of forces opposed to the Khalqis and Parchamis. His party, while Tadzhik-dominated, was avowedly supra-ethnic and embraced a range of ideological tendencies. Hekmatyar, a member of the dominant Pushtun ethnic group, was ambitious to an extreme degree. While capable of making tactical compromises with his foes, he proved to be an extraordinarily obstreperous colleague. He headed a tightly-organized party structured to maximize his control, and made a point of cultivating militant youth in refugee camps in Pakistan. The main factors uniting Rabbani and Hekmatyar were a commitment to the establishment of a state committed to Islamic values rather than simply Islamic rituals, and a denial of any special role in a future Islamic state for surviving Musahiban dignitaries.
These exile parties drew support from a range of different sources. It was from the affiliation of significant resistance commanders within Afghanistan that Rabbani derived his power. The most important jamiat commanders were Ahmed Shah Masoud, a brilliant strategist of Tadzhik background who managed to bring much of northern Afghanistan under the control of his Shura-i Nazar (Council of the North); and Ismael Khan, who became the pre-eminent commander in the west of the country. By contrast, Hekmatyar had limited following within Afghanistan and depended largely upon external patronage. He was especially favoured by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), and from 1985 received a large proportion of US-funded military support for the resistance. He also secured considerable support at different times from Saudi Arabia – and from Arab extremists whose pilgrimages to Hezb-i Islami camps were quietly welcomed by their home governments, which were glad to be rid of them. His dependence on outside support prompted some Afghans to view him as a modern version of Shah Shuja, the British puppet murdered by his subjects in 1842. Many suspected that the weapons he received were more often directed against other resistance parties than against Soviet and Afghan communists.

When the Communist regime unravelled, it was Masoud who stood poised to move his forces into Kabul. On 18 March 1992, the vital northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif had fallen to a coalition composed of Masoud's forces and an Uzbek militia led by General Abdul Rashid Dostam which had turned against the Kabul regime in January. This cleared the way for a direct move on the capital, and prompted the panic in the midst of which Najibullah made his unsuccessful escape attempt. Wary of taking any steps that smacked of nascent praetorianism, Masoud urged the party leaders in Peshawar to agree on the form of a government to replace the Communist regime, and offered to stay his hand while discussions took place. At this point Hekmatyar's smouldering resentment of Masoud came strikingly into play. Spurning an agreement reached on 24 April by the other Sunni leaders – 'Hekmatyar can’t agree to anything that includes Ahmed Shah Masoud' his spokesman had candidly admitted – he began a clumsy attempt to seize Kabul, in concert with Pushtun members of the hardline Khalq Communist faction. This was swiftly thwarted by the forces of Masoud and Dostam, acting with the approval of the other leaders, and on 28 April the transfer of authority to the new Islamic regime was formally completed.

It was not long before the flaws in the 24 April agreement surfaced. It provided that Mojadid'i would head a transitional administration for two months; after which power would be transferred for a further four months to a small council of party leaders (Shura-i Qiyadi) chaired by Rabbani; after which a large Council of Supreme Popular Settlement (Shura-i Ahl-i Hal va Aqd) would be convoked to form an interim government to pave the way for general elections within eighteen months. Unfortunately, the effect of these arrangements was to create uncertainty about the location of ultimate sovereignty
within the new political system, prompting a breakdown of order in the capital which exposed some of those suspected of collaborating with the Communist regime to terrible acts of private revenge. The arrangements also aggravated the already potent elite disharmony. As disgruntled Hezb-i Islami forces mounted periodic assaults on Kabul in protest at the alleged domination of the new regime by Communists, Mojadiddi attempted to augment his own slender power-base in the hope of continuing as Head of State once his two-month period of office had expired. This option, not surprisingly, carried no weight with Rabbani, and when Mojadiddi was forced to relinquish his position, he did so with obvious annoyance. Following Rabbani's installation, Hekmatyar escalated his attacks on Kabul, prompting Rabbani to describe him as a dangerous terrorist who should be expelled from Afghanistan. Rabbani, after serving as transitional Head of State for six months, was sworn in as President of Afghanistan in January 1993 following the meeting of the Shura-i Akl-i Hal va Aqd. However, he remained in office in the face of hostility from a number of his Shura-i Qiyadi colleagues, who challenged the integrity and representativeness of the larger assembly. Hekmatyar's immediate response to the Shura-i Akl-i Hal va Aqd was to launch another barrage of rockets against residential areas in the capital.

4. Elite Settlements

With civilian casualties mounting, and no prospect of support from significant outside powers, Rabbani's government faced an agonizing dilemma. On the one hand, it could continue to strike at Hekmatyar's forces. On the other, it could seek some sort of accommodation with him. While Defence Minister Masoud doubtless spoke for many of his colleagues in forthrightly labelling Hekmatyar a dictator, dependent on Arabs and Punjabis, and interested only in power by whatever means possible, the government came under intense pressure from its neighbours to compromise. As a result, on 7 March 1993, an agreement was signed in Islamabad by Rabbani, Hekmatyar, and the representatives of five other resistance groups: this provided for Hekmatyar to assume the office of Prime Minister and form a Cabinet in consultation with the President, and leaders of Mujahideen parties.

The problem of divided elites can sometimes be surmounted by elite settlements, marked by compromises which permit elites to escape from a situation where all have suffered heavy losses and where the resumption of widespread violence appears imminent. Elite settlements are typically encapsulated in formal agreements, and reached quickly through direct secret negotiations amongst experienced elite leaders who can sell compromises to their followers. Yet while the March 1993 Agreement produced some reduction in scale of the attacks on Kabul, it failed to address the root causes of political instability. On five distinct grounds it was and is markedly defective.

First, nothing in Hekmatyar's record suggests the slightest disposition to make substantive compromises. His craving for power is widely seen as the
major obstacle to political order in post-Communist Afghanistan, and he is perfectly capable of holding high office while at the same time using the threat of renewed carnage to force his will on other political actors. Only by eliminating the Hezb-i Islami as a military force could one hope to establish stable rule in the vicinity of the capital. Yet the task is a complex one, which the Islamabad Agreement did not address in any serious fashion. Hekmatyar's forces are a tiny target to hit. His ability to mount assaults on Kabul derives not from significant support within Afghan society, but from the sheer abundance of the highly destructive weaponry at his disposal, carefully stockpiled while other resistance groups fought the Soviet occupiers. Moderate Afghans are understandably distraught at the way in which this has soured their historic victory over Communism, and past US policy is one target of their anguish. The USA, by bolstering Hekmatyar's position at Pakistan's behest, played a significant if inadvertent role in creating a monster.

Second, the fragmentation at the elite level in Afghanistan reflects in part the splintering of Afghan society along fault lines exposed by the upheavals of the last fifteen years. The most important divisions are along ethno-linguistic, sectarian and spatial lines. The Pushtun ethnic group, numerically the single largest in Afghanistan, historically provided a large proportion of the Kabul-based elite. However, the tribal structure of Pushtun society proved an insuperable barrier to the development amongst Pushtuns of a coherent strategic plan for overthrowing the Communist regime. This task fell to Masoud, who had recognised that a force structured along the lines of a regular army would be required to occupy the capital. Push tun resentment of the role played by Afghanistan’s ethnic minorities in removing the communists may be cynically exploited by groups such as the Hezb-i Islami to mobilise opposition to the new regime: this remains a very real risk. The schism between Pushtuns and non-Pushtuns is accentuated by the division between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. These antagonisms may help to explain the otherwise bizarre alignment between Hekmatyar and the Shiite Hezb-i Wahdat which crystallized in February 1993. Finally, the retreat of the state to urban strongholds during the Communist period, together with the disintegration of the Afghan regular army in 1992, strengthened already-strong local and regional leaderships, both personal or collective, many of which are uninterested in the reconstruction of instrumentalities of the state and wish mainly to be left alone by Kabul. By adding to the number and strength of Afghan political actors, these processes have greatly complicated the prospects of securing a workable elite settlement.

Third, the March 1993 agreement was the product not of consensus amongst Afghanistan’s elites, but of external pressure, especially from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Afghanistan has never been more vulnerable to political penetration by external parties than at present. The clashes between the Hezb-i Wahdat and the Ittehad-i Islami in 1992 were largely a result of the machinations of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both Tehran and Riyadh saw it as in their interest to prevent
Afghanistan from falling under the influence of the other, and were willing to manipulate proxies in order to ensure that this did not happen. This strategy of denial was hauntingly reminiscent of the Anglo-Russian rivalry which proved so devastating for Afghan political order and national integrity in the last century. Post-Communist Afghanistan has much more to fear from friends than from enemies.

Fourth, the March 1993 agreement failed to delineate the contours of a workable set of interim political arrangements. By creating two potentially strong executive offices, it set the scene for institutional incoherence of the kind that had plagued states as far away as the Congo or as near at hand as Pakistan. It assumed the existence of consensus when in fact there was none. Within weeks of the signing of the agreement, a dispute over its terms broke out, with Rabbani resisting Hekmatyar’s attempt to marginalize Masoud in a nominal if not effective sense by putting the Defence Ministry under collegial control. No one should have been surprised that by mid-April, Hezb-i Islami rockets were again falling on Kabul and Hekmatyar was again threatening war if his wishes were not granted. Rabbani finally capitulated on 20 May, when a compromise reached in Jalalabad provided for the Defence and Interior ministries to be placed for two months under the control of commissions, after which ministers would be elected by a gathering of resistance commanders. This simply papered over the chasm separating the parties, and the deadline passed without such elections being held.

Fifth, and perhaps most importantly of all, the symbolism of the March 1993 agreement was lamentable. The message it conveyed was that the straightest path to the Afghan premiership was through pools of civilian blood. With other ambitious power-holders on the horizon, this message may haunt Afghan politics for years to come.

5. The Countryside

In the Afghan countryside the picture is not quite so grim. Despite all the distress that Kabul has experienced, it is still true that the fall of the Communist regime has dramatically reduced the overall level of suffering in Afghanistan. Following the April 1978 coup, Afghanistan witnessed, on average, over 240 war-related deaths every day for ten years straight, as the technology of total war was ruthlessly deployed against defenceless civilians. This unspeakable era has now been consigned to history. Since the overthrow of the Communist regime, the countryside no longer falls victim to heavy aerial bombardments, and SCUD missiles no longer threaten towns and villages.

However, the massive spontaneous repatriation of Afghan refugees is creating an exceedingly dangerous situation, which could result in a humanitarian catastrophe. While millions of Afghans sought refuge in Pakistan and Iran during the war in their homeland, millions more remained in Afghanistan. While some parts of the country were fiercely bombarded by Communist forces, others escaped virtually untouched, and the populations in those areas...
remained largely in place, continuing their traditional sedentary agricultural activities. Total agricultural output fell substantially, but it remained at a level sufficient to prevent significant food shortages – although without Soviet supplies flown in to feed the population of Kabul, swollen over the years by internal refugee movements, this might not have been the case.

The fall of the Communist regime upset this delicate balance. Within three months, refugees were pouring back into Afghanistan at the rate of fifteen thousand a day. As winter approached this fell to ten to fifteen thousand a week, and in 1993 it dropped still further. Yet the absolute numbers are still staggering: in late July 1993, the UN reported that 1,361,243 refugees had returned to Afghanistan since the beginning of 1992; and an Iranian official stated that a further 752,000 had returned from Iran. Furthermore, since the spontaneous repatriation of Afghans unhappily coincided with major refugee crises in the Horn of Africa and the Balkans, international agencies found themselves severely overstretched as the repatriation gathered pace. While the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees offered USD 132 to returning families to cover travel expenses, it warned in a statement that money for the encashment program was quickly running out and that this cash, along with the 300 kilograms of wheat provided by the World Food Program was probably the only help most of the returning Afghans would ever receive from the international community to restart their lives. The winter of 1993–1994 may prove to be among the most difficult in Afghanistan’s modern history. The spectre of hunger is haunting the country.

Much of Afghanistan’s infrastructure lies in ruins. The Soviet armed forces inflicted incalculable damage upon housing, crops, orchards, irrigation systems and animal flocks in rural areas, to say nothing of the civilian population. This damage is a major barrier to the revival of productive economic activity, and it is compounded by a number of other factors. The de-skilling of the refugee population during the years of exile means that many young Afghans are returning to a home they have never seen, painfully ill-equipped to look after themselves. And they face worrying risks of disease, as public health problems such as malaria and tuberculosis, previously brought under control in Afghanistan, are now once again rampant. Furthermore, the countryside is booby-trapped with up to ten million mines left over from fourteen years of bitter conflict. These will continue to claim lives and limbs for decades to come. There is no doubt that the Afghan people have proved themselves outstandingly resourceful in the face of adversity, but to expect them, substantially on their own, to confront problems as awesome as these is simply to expect too much.

6. What Is To Be Done?

When the history of this century is written, the Afghan War may well stand out as the trigger for one of the three most important changes in the international system since the Congress of Berlin. It accomplished this in two quite distinct
ways. According to Samuel P. Huntington, 'the large costs of the war and the inability of the Soviet military to bring it to a successful conclusion contributed to the political liberalization Gorbachev brought to the Soviet Union.' And in the words of Richard M. Nixon, 'the triumph of the Afghan resistance over the Red Army shook the Soviet empire to its core by refuting the myth of Soviet invincibility.' If there is indeed a peace dividend from the termination of the Cold War, the Afghans are surely entitled to claim a share. Yet since the fall of the communist regime, very little assistance has come their way. By mid-December 1992, less than half of the funds sought in a UN emergency appeal for USD 180 million had been pledged. Support, in a number of specific forms, is urgently required.

First, medical supplies should be transported to those areas where continuing conflict is inflicting traumatic injuries upon the civilian population. The attacks on Kabul in August 1992 destroyed the pharmacy and sterilization center at the hospital run by the International Committee of the Red Cross, resulting in many needless deaths, particularly among women and children. More generally, steps to commence the rehabilitation of Afghanistan's health system must be taken without delay: a cholera outbreak in Kabul in July 1993 claimed many victims, and the vulnerability of the population to communicable disease can hardly be exaggerated.

Second, the international community should stand ready to respond swiftly if pre-famine conditions emerge in Afghanistan. A punishing famine struck the country in 1971, and disturbing examples of malnutrition surfaced in various provinces in the early 1980s. It would be a tragedy if these conditions were to recur. Should such assistance become necessary, the appropriate form of response would depend upon the specific conditions which had given rise to food shortages: it is now widely appreciated that starvation results from a much more complex concatenation of circumstances than simply an absolute shortage of food. In some circumstances, it might be necessary to rush foodstocks to particular areas. In others, it might be more efficient to seek to eliminate entitlement inequities.

Third, the rehabilitation of sectors of Afghanistan's infrastructure is essential if the country is not to remain dependent upon emergency supplies of food and medicine. An immediate priority is to rebuild an efficient system of telecommunications, the lack of which greatly hampers the conduct of postwar reconstruction. Of course, it would be a great mistake to attempt to centralize the entire process of postwar reconstruction. The prospects of success would be negligible, due to the scarcity of relevant information for planning agencies, and to the obstacles to implementation which the substantial diffusion of political authority has created. A grassroots approach to the regeneration of Afghan economic and social structures has much to commend it. However, some elements of the reconstruction process are almost impossible to accomplish locally in a society as fragmented and traumatized as Afghanistan, since they depend on the sophisticated coordination of human and material resources. These include the
repair of land and air transport facilities, the provision of more complex medical services, the generation of electricity on a large scale, and the restoration of water supplies and sewerage services in urban areas. At the same time, urban infrastructure should not be emphasized to the detriment of services in rural areas. Gross disparities of access to basic services would simply prompt population movements to urban centres such as Kabul and create an underclass of marginalized slum-dwellers — which would contribute nothing to either social or political stability.

That said, the delivery of such assistance, once approved by the Afghan government, will require a considerable degree of sensitivity. There is no shortage of political opportunists poised to accuse Afghan moderates of compromising Afghanistan’s sovereignty and integrity as an Islamic state by accepting aid from colonialist conspirators. To blunt this charge, it would be preferable if emergency aid were channelled to the Afghan people through the World Food Program, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and established NGOs, rather than directly from Western states. Similarly, assistance in rebuilding Afghanistan’s infrastructure would be more palatable coming from consortia of states committed to the repair of particular sectors of the economy, rather than from single states who could be maliciously depicted as seeking to penetrate and dominate Afghanistan, as the Soviet Union attempted to do surreptitiously in the decades before the Communist coup.

7. The Regional Context

With the emergence of new states in Central Asia, Pakistan’s ambitions to become the dominant party in a regional power bloc which would serve to counterbalance Indian influence have soared, and a compliant Afghanistan is a central element of Pakistan’s strategic vision. It would be idle to suppose that Pakistan’s motives in pushing for Hekmatyar’s incorporation into the Afghan Government were altruistic: on the contrary, they were clearly an extension of Pakistan’s long-term strategy. Even some of the new Central Asian republics have an interest in ongoing developments in Afghanistan. Dostam, an ethnic Uzbek, has argued strongly for the adoption of a federal system in Afghanistan, and would like to see Uzbekistan support his claims.

More dramatically, in the midst of all the sorrows flowing from the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, it is ironical that Afghanistan has also been forced to play host to refugees from a neighbouring country: around 60,000 Tadzhiks who fled ferocious massacres in Tadzhikistan following the installation of the Rakhmanov regime in December 1992. As one might have expected, the Tadzhik opposition groups were sympathetically received by their co-religionists in northern Afghanistan; they mounted raids into Tadzhikistan, including one in July 1993 which killed several Russian border guards, prompting shelling across the Afghanistan-Tadzhikistan border by Russian troops. While Russian President Boris Yeltsin was plainly aware of the dangers of getting sucked into a new quagmire, and at a summit of Central Asian leaders in Moscow in early
August called on the intransigent Tadzhik regime to negotiate with its opponents, the situation on the border is likely to remain tense for a long time to come. It would be an oversimplification to see this as a clash of civilizations: rather, it is the outcome of a range of specific developments in the domestic politics of Russia, Afghanistan and the new Central Asian states. What it does demonstrate is how the disintegration of the Soviet Union has added to the complexity of Afghanistan's strategic situation.

8. THE FUTURE OF AFGHAN POLITICS

As for Afghanistan's internal political problems, it would be idle to suggest that remote outside powers can do much to influence the course of events. Those states which have nurtured surrogates within the Afghan resistance are now actively seeking to secure returns on their investments, and are unlikely to countenance attempts by the wider international community to interfere with the process. However, it is no act of compassion to leave the Afghan people at the mercy of predatory neighbours. There are two steps which the UN and the major powers can legitimately take to give substance to the Afghans' right to self-determination.

The first is to signify firm but tactful support for moderate elements within the Afghan Government, most importantly Rabbani and the able and charismatic Masoud. They have demonstrated an appreciation of the depth of Afghanistan's troubles which is essential during the transition to more orderly political arrangements. They have no desire to impose totalitarian solutions to complex problems, and stand a far better chance than do extremists of building organic relations with civil society. Furthermore, and in stark contrast to Hekmatyar, they are not viscerally anti-Western. Rabbani and Masoud are beset with difficulties, as would be any leaders with such a sad inheritance, but they have far more to commend them than have Hekmatyar or Dostam. They should be supported through the exchange of diplomatic agents; through the supply of information, expertise and resources; and through strong pressure on those states aiding their internal opponents to abandon disruptive meddling.

The second step is to give backing to the mechanisms upon which the Afghans settle for choosing rulers to replace the present regime. The selection of such mechanisms is quite properly a task for the interim government alone to carry out. Nonetheless, once the choice is made, there may be ways in which the outside world can assist. For example, free and fair elections conducted with the assistance of the UN have been specifically endorsed by several Afghan leaders. While impossible in the immediate future, such elections may be an appropriate goal in the medium to long term. The accumulated expertise of democratic countries should be made freely available to the Afghan people. Indeed, they deserve no less.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1 On the history of these factions, see Anthony Arnold, Afghanistan's Two-Party Communism: Parcham and Khalq (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1983).


4 Vladimir Snegirev, ‘On byl’ zalozhnikom kremlia: Babrak Karmal rasskazyvaet’ (‘He was a hostage of the Kremlin; Babrak Karmal narrates’), Trud, 24 October 1991, pp. 1, 4.


8 For testimony which (perhaps inadvertently) makes this clear, see Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, The Bear Trap: Afghanistan’s Untold Story (London: Leo Cooper, 1992).


12 BBC Summary of World Broadcasts; FE/1461/B/1, 17 August 1992.


17 Following the replacement of the Communist regime, Kabul witnessed periodic eruptions of fighting between Shiite supporters of the Iranian-backed Hezb-i Wahdat (Party of Unity) and Sunnis attached to a small, Saudi-funded party supporting Rabbani’s government, namely the Ittehad-i Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Union of Afghanistan) headed by Professor Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. The Afghan Shia, many of them members of the Hazara ethnic group, had long been consigned to the lowliest social stratum in the country – and it is there that at least some of the more radical Sunni Pushtuns would like them to stay.


22 BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, FE/1664/B/1, 16 April 1993.


