

## **Afghanistan: Withdrawal Lessons**

Jack Devine and Whitney Kassel  
*World Policy Journal* 2013 30: 31  
DOI: 10.1177/0740277513506379

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://wpj.sagepub.com/content/30/3/31.1>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



**Additional services and information for *World Policy Journal* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://wpj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://wpj.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Sep 23, 2013

[What is This?](#)

# Afghanistan: Withdrawal Lessons

JACK DEVINE AND WHITNEY KASSEL



**T**he withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014 is likely to be followed by a civil war between a predominantly non-Pash-tun security apparatus and Pakistan-backed Taliban forces. As we confront this reality, we would be wise to look closely at the experience of the Soviet Union following its occupation of Afghanistan in the late 1980s. The prime lessons from that ill-fated moment are the need to provide con-

tinued economic and military support to the leadership in Kabul and to obtain the support of Pakistan, while maintaining sufficient intelligence and covert action infrastructure on both sides of the frontier the two countries share. A sustainable relationship with Pakistan is critical today because of the country's important role in any political solution in Afghanistan and the significant risks to the international community posed by Pakistan's own instability.

In the aftermath of its retreat from Afghanistan in 1989, the already crumbling Soviet Union was able to provide funding and military support to prop up President Mohammed Najibullah for three years. That level of support and more will be necessary to sustain the Karzai regime for even one year after our departure, whether that regime is led by Hamid Karzai himself or an American-aligned successor. Despite President Karzai's shortcomings, this should be precisely our short-term objective, as his continued reign will buy time for Afghan society to stabilize and to prevent the re-establishment of an Al Qaeda safe haven while the United States continues to decimate that organization around the world. Unfortunately, leaving behind a viable democratic state in Afghanistan has been and remains beyond the pale, at least until the majority of the Afghan people want it and are willing to fight for it.

#### THE WILL TO FIGHT

The Soviet Union lost the will to fight in Afghanistan in 1986, following the introduction by the CIA of the Stinger missile,

which allowed the U.S.-backed Mujahideen to shoot down Russian Hind helicopters. Soviet forces, however, lingered in place for over two years—a lengthy conflict that left their troops bruised and battered, and turned Afghanistan into what Mikhail Gorbachev called a “bleeding wound” for the USSR. It has been long forgotten, however, that even after the last Soviet soldier walked across the Afghan-Uzbek Bridge on February 15, 1989, the Kremlin was not quite ready to give up its influence in the easternmost corner of Central Asia, and thus continued to pay salaries and provide arms and funding to its client state. Between 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moscow supplied the Afghans with an estimated \$300 million per month, in addition to a vast array of weaponry, MiG-27 fighter jets, and the majority of the military material they had brought into the country as part of their own effort against the Mujahideen.

Mohammed Najibullah, the former head of the Afghan intelligence service, Khadamat-e Aetla'at-e Dawlati (KHAD), was far from a popular president and met what was broadly considered an appropriately horrific end—a brutal castration and public hanging by Taliban soldiers in 1996, following four years of refuge in the United Nations compound in Kabul. Much of the public dislike of Najibullah came from his ties to the KHAD, which was known for its use of torture and for seeding distrust and fear throughout the country during the Soviet period. Nevertheless, his reign was a period of relative

---

*Jack Devine is former CIA deputy director of operations and chief of the CIA Afghan Task Force, 1986-87. He is president of the Arkin Group, a private sector intelligence company based in New York. Whitney Kassel is a former foreign affairs specialist for counterterrorism policy in the Office of the Secretary of Defense who has worked in Pakistan and Afghanistan. She is a regional director at the Arkin Group.*

stability compared with the civil war that began in the wake of his ouster.

It was only after Soviet support dried up in 1991 that Najibullah's regime began to unravel, with the Taliban finally sweeping to power in April 1994. While Najibullah had lost his Kremlin sponsors, the Mujahideen and their Taliban allies continued to enjoy support from Saudi Arabia through the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), including weaponry and funding, eventually allowing them to topple the weakened Marxist regime. At the time, this was, of course, a victory for the United States since Najibullah was still on the wrong side of the Cold War. But in retrospect it seems plausible that, had the Soviet Union or any other external power continued to fund Najibullah and keep his forces adequately armed, the Taliban takeover and emergence of an Al Qaeda safe haven could have been postponed for years.

DESCENT INTO CHAOS

We are now facing a dangerously similar predicament with President Karzai. Should we prove unwilling to forego the necessary resources to keep him or his allies in Kabul, we will likely see a swift descent into chaos. President Karzai is widely despised for a range of failings—corruption but also poor governance, vote-rigging, and, from the U.S. point of view, a continued unwillingness to cooperate fully on key issues such as detainees, counter narcotics, and the make-up of a residual NATO presence, if any. These problems must be remedied over time if Afghanistan is to move slowly toward a more stable and representative system with a better standard of living for its people. Should the country find itself in the midst of a civil war, however, these improvements cannot be accomplished.

What would likely follow a defeated Karzai regime is almost certain to be worse than what we have today. It is unlikely that the Taliban will be able to quickly overpower the Afghan military even if the United States and NATO were to withdraw support. But if adequate arrangements are not made, a successor government could easily include Taliban-affiliated leaders, some willing to harbor Al Qaeda and its adherents. These types of leaders, should they be allowed to return to power, are also likely to subject the Afghan people to brutality and oppression at pre-2001 levels. The withdrawal of support from Najibullah led him to fall in a matter of months. There is no reason to think this would not happen to President Karzai as well. Should this take place, the United States and its allies can consider the last 12 years and our approximately 2,200 casualties a costly failure.

This is not to say there is not some role for groups or individuals affiliated in some fashion with the Taliban in a post-withdrawal Afghan government. It is inevitable that some elements of what is currently considered "the enemy" will have to be drawn into the fold to achieve something resembling order in the country. But as President Barack Obama observed in a 2009 white paper, they must be willing to "lay down their arms, reject Al Qaeda, and accept the Afghan constitution." Anything short of these terms should be

---

WE SHOULD  
ALSO CONSIDER  
LEAVING BEHIND  
A SUBSTANTIAL  
AMOUNT OF THE  
EQUIPMENT WE  
HAVE MOVED INTO  
THE COUNTRY  
DURING THE  
COURSE OF THE  
WAR.

Should this take place, the United States and its allies can consider the last 12 years and our approximately 2,200 casualties a costly failure.

This is not to say there is not some role for groups or individuals affiliated in some fashion with the Taliban in a post-withdrawal Afghan government. It is inevitable that some elements of what is currently considered "the enemy" will have to be drawn into the fold to achieve something resembling order in the country. But as President Barack Obama observed in a 2009 white paper, they must be willing to "lay down their arms, reject Al Qaeda, and accept the Afghan constitution." Anything short of these terms should be

considered unacceptable for the United States and NATO, not to mention the Afghan government, which has already demonstrated its red lines by pulling out of tentative talks with Taliban representatives in Doha in June.

Fortunately, Karzai may be able to negotiate these terms if the international community provides him with the necessary resources. Afghanistan is a land where money goes far. Just as Najibullah was able to use cash to keep his opponents at bay, Karzai

---

**IT IS CRITICAL  
WE MAINTAIN OUR  
RELATIONSHIP  
WITH PAKISTAN  
DESPITE WHAT  
TODAY MAY  
APPEAR TO BE  
DIVERGENT  
INTERESTS.**

could similarly use such funding to keep the various elements working against him from toppling his regime, even if some of it is diverted to other less worthy projects. The military equipment we have and likely will continue to provide will, in addition, allow the Afghan military to fend off any groups who choose not to negotiate. We should also consider leaving behind a substantial amount of the equipment we have moved into the country during the course of the war, as the Soviets did in 1989, allowing that certain technology may be too sensitive or incompatible with Afghan supplies.

**AND THEN THERE'S PAKISTAN**

The Haqqani network is a key example of a group that has not been quashed by 11 years of extensive military action by U.S., NATO, and Afghan forces. They have, however, proven themselves to be amenable to financial incentives, as the ISI has found in its own negotiations with the group. Throughout the Afghan War, the Haqqani

networks have proved willing to cooperate with Pakistan, executing attacks in Afghanistan on its behalf in exchange for safe haven and resources. In fact, in September 2011, this Pakistan-Haqqani alliance had become so apparent that then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen publicly described the Haqqanis as, "a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency." Should President Karzai or his successors offer sufficient financial incentives, and particularly if Pakistan could be convinced to get on board, it is possible that a tentative truce may be reached between the Haqqanis and the government of Afghanistan that meets the requirements from President Obama's 2009 policy paper.

Just as we saw in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal and the subsequent rise of the Taliban with Pakistani support, as long as Pakistan continues to fund Afghan insurgents, violence will continue to plague any effort to govern the country. Arriving at a clear-eyed understanding with Pakistan is crucial to ensuring the United States and its allies are able to keep a stable, non-hostile government in Kabul. And in turn, most importantly, it will be critical to achieving the long-term U.S. objective of an Afghanistan largely free of Al Qaeda. Such an understanding is also important to our continued ability to conduct counterterrorism operations in the region, including in Pakistan itself, where most of Al Qaeda continues to hide.

Pakistan President Nawaz Sharif's recent overtures toward Afghanistan do present a more hopeful picture than we have seen in the past. Still, Pakistan's current position appears only nominally willing to play into a negotiated outcome, while cross-border attacks and funding of groups operating in Afghanistan continue. Thus, in addition to maintaining lines of support



to Karzai or his successor, the United States and its allies must find a way to convince Pakistan that a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan is in its genuine long-term interests. Of course, this has been an objective of American policy in Pakistan since the Afghan war began in 2001, and one that has long eluded even the most capable U.S. diplomats. Despite our frustration, we cannot afford to walk away from the region. Fortunately, our withdrawal from Afghanistan may afford us a better negotiating position than we have enjoyed in the past, namely because it will remove several of Pakistan's current leverage points.

Pakistan has demonstrated through its continued support of insurgent groups operating in Afghanistan a concerted desire to see both continued unrest in Afghanistan, to prevent a powerful Afghan government from aligning against it with India, and a resurgence of a Pashtun-dominated, Taliban-aligned center of power in Kabul. Neither of these objectives suggests Pakistan directly supports the reestablishment of a Taliban government in Afghanistan, though it is possible some elements of its government may. Nevertheless, it is clear that many Pakistani leaders view key Taliban affiliates, such as the Haqqani network,

as their advocates in Afghanistan against a potentially anti-Pakistan alliance between non-Pashtun elements in the North and their most feared adversary, India. Ensuring those elements are offered key roles in a post-withdrawal government in Kabul, including potentially in the defense and intelligence apparatus, appears to be Pakistan's ultimate goal.

On one side, there is what Pakistan views as an optimal outcome in Afghanistan and then there's the Taliban-dominated worst case scenario for the United States and NATO, namely, a potential Al Qaeda safe haven. Only in the narrow space between them is there any chance for a negotiated settlement that can prevent another civil war following NATO's withdrawal. Pakistan may be willing to advocate for such a settlement with its insurgent proxies if the United States and its allies can make it worth their while—one reason it is critical we maintain our relationship with Pakistan despite what today may appear to be divergent interests.

#### CUTTING A DEAL

The other reason we will need to cut a deal with Pakistan is the fact that its stability is of critical interest to the United States,

from a counterterrorism perspective and for regional stability—specifically a tense and nuclear-armed competition with India. With respect to counterterrorism, it is widely agreed that most of Al Qaeda’s remaining senior leadership resides in Pakistan, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The extent the Pakistani

---

THE ROLE FOR  
COVERT ACTION  
WILL BE EVEN  
MORE ESSENTIAL  
IN THE REGION  
AS MILITARY  
OPERATIONS IN  
AFGHANISTAN  
END.

government can exercise some control over those currently lawless territories is of great interest to the United States. This is not only to reduce and eventually remove what is currently a safe haven for Al Qaeda and Afghan Taliban groups like the Haqqanis, but also to prevent Pakistan’s own domestic insurgency, dominated by Pakistani Taliban groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban, from destabilizing the country. Historically, the Afghan Taliban has shied away from attacking the Pakistani state, presumably due to Pakistan’s ongoing support for their movement. The Pakistani Taliban, on the other hand, specifically targets the Pakistani government, which it views as its foremost enemy, in addition to the NATO presence in Afghanistan. In recent years we have seen Pakistani Taliban groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban expand their vision beyond the Pakistani state to international targets, including the United States. Faizal Shahzad, the man who attempted to detonate a car bomb in Times Square on May 10, 2010, was affiliated primarily with Pakistani Taliban groups, not Al Qaeda.

Pakistan will continue to be in dire need of economic assistance, which the

United States can provide in exchange for the type of political support required in Afghanistan. While the United States has given billions of dollars to Pakistan in military and economic aid in the last 10 years, much of this was predicated on Pakistan’s continued support for the war in Afghanistan, specifically keeping air and ground lines of communication open for NATO supplies, and in the broader counterterrorism fight. With American and NATO troops withdrawing from Afghanistan, Pakistan’s leverage will quickly begin to fade. The ground and air lines of communication, while once indispensable to the delivery of supplies and weapons to troops in Afghanistan, will decline in importance as the number of troops decreases. Additionally, NATO has established alternate routes through Central Asia that become more accessible and cost-effective by the day.

Pakistan’s cooperation on counterterrorism will remain a point of leverage to some extent, since the bulk of Al Qaeda’s senior leadership remains in the FATA and, to a lesser extent, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly known as the Northwest Frontier Province). Despite the Pakistani government’s regular protests against counterterrorism actions on their soil, particularly lethal drone strikes, the United States is in a far better position to operate effectively with some level of complicity from the Pakistan military. But the United States must make clear to Pakistan that these operations will occur regardless of their cooperation. As long as Pakistan remains either unwilling or unable to remove individuals who pose a threat to the United States and its allies, the U.S. is well within its rights of self-defense to do so on its own.

Should Pakistan not choose the path of least resistance and turn down U.S. aid in

an effort to assert its sovereignty either domestically with regard to counterterrorism, or with respect to our goals in Afghanistan, we should respond with appropriate covert action. This would include paramilitary activities as well as psychological operations, propaganda, and political and economic influence. Since Pakistan is a nuclear-armed nation of 200 million, we should do everything we can to keep it stable, at least to the extent that it does not impact our foremost objective of defeating Al Qaeda. President Nawaz Sharif has indicated his interest in negotiating with domestic insurgents like Tehrik-e-Taliban, as well as the Taliban in Afghanistan. Both may turn out to be double-edged swords. Past peace deals with the Pakistani Taliban have allegedly seen settlement money flowing to Al Qaeda—but it is better that we are part of the discussions than be taken by surprise. The United States can and should assist Pakistan both financially and militarily, provided it does its part both in Afghanistan and with respect to counterterrorism.

The role for covert action will be even more essential in the region as military operations in Afghanistan end. Specifically, we should ensure we have adequate air platforms from which to conduct operations in both countries, as well as a robust capability to track both a resurgence of Al Qaeda and adverse political trends. Should Al Qaeda reemerge, we should be prepared to take rapid and aggressive action, not just through kinetic strikes but also through arming and funding tribal groups who support our interests. And finally, we need to be ready to provide financial support to friendly political forces in both countries to help them strengthen their roles in their

governments. These types of covert action will be critical to protecting U.S. interests.

The most realistic political road map would be best supported by—and in fact is unlikely to succeed without—robust covert action. Such activities would have as their goals monitoring the behavior of parties to any political settlement and reinforcing the Afghan government's efforts to gain the loyalty of a broad base of supporters. Financial support to previously hostile groups needs to be part of this program. With respect to the counterterrorism campaign in Pakistan, robust intelligence collection will remain essential to efforts at locating and unilaterally neutralizing high value targets, particularly if Pakistan becomes increasingly hostile to our actions.

Had the USSR survived after 1991 and employed these methods—providing financial and military support to Kabul, soliciting political support from Pakistan, and maintaining a robust covert action and intelligence presence in the region—they may well have prevented the violence and conflict that brought the Taliban to power in 1994. We now have a chance to avoid these mistakes, while also keeping Pakistan from falling into further disarray, thus protecting another critical interest for the United States, its allies, and the South Asian region.

The new Sharif government presents an opportunity to improve relations with Pakistan and move forward with a political solution in Afghanistan. By capitalizing on this and avoiding a sharp decline in resources flowing to a region where we have already made a huge sacrifice in life and treasure, we can shore up our gains and help prevent a future catastrophe. ●