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Ulrich Pilster

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Afghanistan: Peace through Power-Sharing?

After forty years of war, peace may finally be possible in Afghanistan. As of February 2020, US-Taliban talks are at the verge of a breakthrough. In those negotiations, the United States is seeking assurances that Afghanistan will not become a platform for international terrorism again. The Taliban, in turn, are after a withdrawal of international forces. A significant reduction in violence and intra-Afghan negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government would be the critical enablers of such a deal.

Still, while a US agreement with the Taliban is an important step toward peace, such a deal will not be enough by itself. The more difficult part still lies ahead: the Taliban and the current Afghan political elites need to negotiate a peace through power-sharing, a political arrangement in which both parties can take part in government together.¹ The Afghan government has not yet been part of the US-Taliban talks, due to a concession the Trump administration made to the Taliban, who consider themselves—rather than what they deride as the “Kabul administration”—as the legitimate rulers of an “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.” But ultimately, the road to peace must pass through Kabul. Just like the Taliban, the government headed by President Ashraf Ghani is unlikely to go anywhere anytime soon. With a decisive military victory for either party unlikely, the two sides will have to learn to live with each other.

As important as a US-Taliban agreement is, hope for a peaceful Afghanistan thus rests on successful intra-Afghan negotiations. The two warring sides need to find a power-sharing agreement. But can the Afghan government and the

Ulrich Pilster is a fellow of the University of Essex’s Michael Nicholson Centre for Conflict and Cooperation. He previously spent more than two years in Afghanistan working as an advisor to NATO and the German governmental development cooperation. Ulrich can be reached at ulrich.pilster@gmail.com. The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of his employer.

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Taliban get together at the cabinet table, or will they continue to settle their differences on the battlefield? And what will happen as the United States prepares to draw down in Afghanistan?

Answers to these questions range from cautiously optimistic² to strongly pessimistic.³ However, most existing analyses either draw upon single historical analogies—Vietnam being the most prominent one—or extrapolate from current trends. This paper, on the contrary, aims to provide a historically informed answer from a comparative perspective. I first identify 23 instances since 1945 that are comparable to the current situation in Afghanistan where foreign troops supported an allied government battling rebels and then narrow in on three instances that are particularly helpful for the current dilemma: Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Angola after the Cuban intervention ended in 1991, and Cambodia after the Vietnamese departed in 1989. In the end, I aim to answer three questions based on my analysis of those three cases: is a peace through power-sharing possible in Afghanistan? What would the road toward such a peace look like? And what can the international community do to help the power-sharing process?

Peace through Power-sharing? Three Historical Cases

To find historical cases, I drew upon the research of Patricia Sullivan and Johannes Karreth, who created the “first comprehensive data collection on the use of a variety of strategies and tactics by governments and foreign interveners in ... [197] internal armed conflicts from 1945 to 2013.”⁴ Within these 197 cases, I identified 23 historical episodes of completed foreign regime maintenance interventions where governments sent at least 2,000 combat troops to another country to assist the incumbent government there. (This list of 23 excludes two cases identified by Sullivan and Karreth: the British intervention in Indonesia, then still a Dutch colony, after World War II and the Russian intervention in Chechnya in the 1990s, as neither case fully fits my notion of a government sending troops abroad to assist the incumbent government there in battling a rebellion.)

Sullivan and Karreth define the end of these historical episodes in three ways from the intervener’s perspective: unilateral or calendar-driven withdrawals without definitive mission success; a deal with the insurgents; or mission success, with the rebel threat to the existing government averted. They also categorize how the conflict ended for government and rebels. Specifically, Sullivan and Karreth look at “[w]ho was in control of the central government at the end of the conflict” with these options: government (defined as the previous incumbent government or politicians associated with the previous

regime), rebels, power-sharing, unclear (defined as a failed or failing state), or the intervening power itself.

I recoded the outcome for three of the conflicts. Because neither the Dominican Republic nor Chad were directly ruled by the United States and France, respectively, I labeled those cases as government victories—as opposed to the researchers' coding as the only two cases where the intervening power held control. The episode in Laos also warranted recoding from power-sharing to rebel victory, given the short time period in which the power-sharing agreement between the government and Pathet Lao lasted. [Table 1](#) lists these 23 historical cases of intervention, categorized by how the intervening power ended its engagement and who was in charge at the end of the conflict.

I chose three historical episodes from [Table 1](#) for further study. First, I picked the two of these 23 interventions that resulted in a power-sharing agreement between government and rebels: Angola after the Cuban intervention (1975–91) and Cambodia after the Vietnamese retreated (1978–89). I then chose Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal (1979–89), because it offers an interesting negative case—the Soviet Union did negotiate its withdrawal with the Afghan mujahedeen's major external backers, Pakistan and the United States, but failed in its attempt to include former rebels into the Afghan government. Moreover, Afghanistan after the Soviets is worth discussing in its own merit: the legacy of the 1980s continues to cast a shadow on today's peace efforts in Afghanistan.

For each case, I answer the same set of questions:

- *Getting out*: How did the foreign power withdraw? What did the security situation look like? Which diplomatic initiatives supported the withdrawal?
- *Getting to peace*: How did the combatants try to share power? What obligations did they lay out in a peace treaty? Did the combatants live up to those obligations? What role did the international community play in the peace process?
- *The outcome*: How did the conflict end? Did the combatants find a sustainable compromise to share power peacefully?

Afghanistan: Too Little, Too Late

It was a communist coup d'état that brought the Soviet army to Afghanistan. Shortly after the coup in April 1978, large-scale unrest engulfed the newly founded Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. While factions of the communist party were vying for power, ambitious socio-economic reforms alienated Afghanistan's deeply conservative rural population. Fearing that the United States might exploit the instability, the Soviet Union decided to intervene in December 1979.⁵

Table I: Pro-Government Interventions in Internal Conflicts by Termination and Outcome, 1945–2013

	Who was in control at the end of the conflict?				
		Government	Power-Sharing	Rebels	Unclear
How did the intervention end?	Unilateral/ Calendar-based withdrawal	India in Sri Lanka (1987–88) UK in Yemen (1963–67)		Russia in Azerbaijan/Nagorno Karabakh (1990–93) Libya in Uganda (1979) USSR in Afghanistan (1979–89) France in Morocco (1952–56)	United States in Lebanon (1982–84)
	Agreement with the rebels	Nigeria in Sierra Leone (1991–2000)	Vietnam in Cambodia (1978–89) Cuba in Angola (1975–91)	Nigeria in Liberia (1990–97) United States in South Vietnam (1965–73) United States in Cambodia (1971–73) United States in Laos (1965–73)	
	Mission Success	Russia in Hungary (1956–57) Russia in Iraq (1973–75) United Kingdom in Malaysia (1948–60) United Kingdom in Brunei (1962) Russia in Czechoslovakia (1968) United Kingdom in Malaysia (1963–66) United States in Dominican Republic (1965–66) France in Chad (1968–71) Iran in Oman (1973–77)			

Up to 115,000 Soviet troops stabilized the communist regime and secured major population centers and roads, but several hundred insurgent groups came to dominate the Afghan countryside. The insurgents could rely on sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan, where the Pakistani military regime recognized seven parties (“Peshawar Seven”) as their official representatives. The seven included most prominently Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hizb-e Islami party and Jamiat-e Islami (whose major commander was Ahmed Shah Massoud). Pakistan strictly controlled the “Peshawar Seven,” planned their operations, and decided who would get weapons and other support provided by the United States, Saudi Arabia, China, and others.⁶

By late 1981, the Soviet leadership realized that they were stuck in a military stalemate. They could not clear the countryside of the insurgents or seal the border to Pakistan, and Soviet casualties were staggeringly high.⁷ Diplomacy began to look like an attractive option. Under UN mediation, two rounds of talks took place in Geneva in summer 1982 between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The talks established the key issues for future negotiations: non-interference in Afghan affairs and the withdrawal of foreign forces.⁸ Still, the conflict was not yet ripe for resolution. With a rapid succession of leaders between 1982 and 1985, the Soviet Union would lack decisive leadership on the Afghan file for several years. US-Soviet relations were also at a low in the first half of the 1980s, leaving Washington with little appetite to help the Soviets extricate themselves from the Afghan quagmire.⁹

It would take the election of Mikhail Gorbachev as Chairman of the Communist Party in 1985 to break the diplomatic impasse. Gorbachev was well aware of the toll of the war in Afghanistan. He also aimed to end proxy conflicts in places like Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Angola to improve US-Soviet relations. In the coming years, Gorbachev promoted peace through power-sharing in Afghanistan, flanked by an international agreement.

Moscow began pushing for a broad-based government in Afghanistan. A first step was to put a capable leader in place: Mohammad Najibullah, a former head of the Afghan intelligence agency. In early 1987, Najibullah proclaimed a policy of national reconciliation that involved mujahedeen leaders in the government, a new constitution, multiparty politics, and elections.¹⁰ On the diplomatic front, Gorbachev sought to leverage the promise of a Soviet withdrawal to get the United States and Pakistan to end their support for the Afghan rebels. In February 1988, the Soviet authorities announced that their withdrawal would begin in May of that year if a diplomatic breakthrough was

**Gorbachev
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Afghanistan.**

reached. The UN-led negotiations in Geneva, at a stalemate since the early 1980s, took on new life.¹¹

What the Soviet Union ended up getting was more of a leave than a comprehensive peace deal. Wanting a diplomatic success to further his reform agenda, Gorbachev needed an agreement. The April 1988 Geneva Accords—signed by the Najibullah government, Pakistan, the United States, and the Soviet Union—reflected this. The Accords stipulated non-intervention and non-interference and a Soviet troop withdrawal. However, the Reagan administration refused to recognize the Najibullah government and retained its right to supply arms to the mujahedeen—a move widely popular in US conservative circles. Monitoring and enforcement were weak: the United Nations Good Offices Mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan had merely 50 observers. As the mujahedeen were not part of the negotiations, the question of power-sharing and future governing arrangements were not covered. Najibullah only acquiesced to the Accords after a promise of large-scale Soviet economic and military aid.¹²

The Geneva Accords, the policy of national reconciliation, and the Soviet withdrawal did not end the war, but they did make Afghanistan temporarily more peaceful. Najibullah, an astute politician, doled out Soviet aid in exchange for support. He coopted local leaders into a system now portrayed as Islamic and democratic and levied ethnically based pro-government militias—the most famous example was Rashid Dostum's several 10,000 men-strong force of ethnic Uzbeks in Northern Afghanistan. By one count, around 20 percent of former mujahedeen groupings in Afghanistan joined the government, with another 40 percent entering into cease-fire agreements during that period.¹³

However, there was no comprehensive quest for peace through power-sharing by the time the last Soviet troops left in February 1989. The major mujahedeen commanders refused to join the government. Keen on maintaining his grip over the Afghan security apparatus, Najibullah himself spoiled Soviet attempts to woo powerful mujahedeen commanders such as Ahmed Shah Massoud.¹⁴ The United States and Pakistan remained focused on enabling a mujahedeen victory. Both supported a mujahedeen attack on Jalalabad—a major hub in Eastern Afghanistan and close to the border with Pakistan—in 1989.¹⁵

But when the Jalalabad offensive failed amid stiff governmental resistance and infighting among the mujahedeen, a new opening for international diplomacy gradually came about. The battle of Jalalabad proved that the conflict remained stalemated, even after the Soviet withdrawal. Moreover, with the end of the Cold War, there was now less reason for the United States to bring down a government aligned with the Soviet Union. The United States also grew increasingly concerned about religious extremism among the mujahedeen. After setbacks associated with power struggles in the Soviet Union, a US-Soviet

dialogue finally cumulated in a joint statement in September 1991. Both sides committed to end their weapons supplies to the warring parties, while an intra-Afghan dialogue under UN sponsorship tried to pave the way toward a transition mechanism and elections.¹⁶

However, those international efforts turned out to be too little and too late. Too little, because the United Nations lost leverage when it did not want to put peacekeepers inside Afghanistan to facilitate demobilization or elections because the situation was deemed too fragile¹⁷; too late, because Afghanistan began to disintegrate as the Soviet Union dissolved. The new Russian government under Boris Yeltsin was unwilling to continue Soviet support, so Najibullah could no longer keep his government afloat. As the then-Russian ambassador to Kabul put it: “By early 1992, the regime had outlived its time. We Russians had nothing to do with it.”¹⁸

Uzbek militia commander Rashid Dostum was among the first to break with Najibullah and align with the Northern mujahedeen in a bid to take Kabul.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s force marched toward Kabul from the South. Najibullah lost the war and resigned in April 1992. The modest efforts to get Najibullah and the mujahideen to share power in one government had failed, and the stage for the next phase of the Afghan conflict had been set. Fought in various constellations but mostly along ethnic lines, this conflict would ultimately lead to the rise of the Taliban.

Angola: Between War and Peace

After its independence from Portugal in 1974, Angola became another key battleground of the Cold War. The “Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola” (MPLA), led by José Eduardo dos Santos since 1979, took power with the help of Cuban advisers and Soviet weapons. Defeated in the race for power in Luanda, the “União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola” (UNITA) took up arms. Led by the charismatic Jonas Savimbi, the group was supported by South Africa, the United States, and Zaire in an attempt to counter communist expansion in Africa. For South Africa, the military engagement in Angola also served to preserve its control in neighboring Namibia.²⁰

The conflict escalated over the course of the 1980s. By 1987, UNITA, helped by several thousand South African troops, contested the MPLA government, which was backed by 50,000 Cuban troops, throughout Angola. The United States and Soviet Union provided billions in war equipment. The heavy but inconclusive fighting showed a military solution was not going to work.²¹ An opening for diplomacy existed, helped by the thawing of the Cold War. Under US mediation, the Angolan, Cuban, and South African governments resolved

the conflict's external dimension in the December 1988 Tripartite Accord: Cuba would withdraw its forces from Angola until 1991, while South Africa would allow for Namibian independence. Seventy military observers of the United Nations Angola Verification Mission I were to oversee the withdrawal of Cuban forces.

However, international diplomacy was still needed to end the intra-Angolan conflict. The government (oil sales) and the UNITA rebels (diamond smuggling) had the resources to fight on, but neither could win militarily. Portugal, the United States, and the Soviet Union took the lead in mediating. Negotiations culminated in signing a peace agreement in Portugal in May 1991, the same month the last Cuban troops left Angola.²² The Bicesse Accords

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stipulated a cease-fire, demobilization, the merger of government and UNITA forces into a unified military, and parliamentary and presidential elections. However, the Accords also had a number of weaknesses. They did not contain provisions on how power would be shared between the government and UNITA after elections. The United Nations was called in to oversee the implementation of an agreement it had little role in

negotiating. And as the UN Security Council aimed to keep the UN engagement small, the new United Nations Angola Verification Mission II would comprise only about 350 unarmed military personnel and 400 electoral observers—too small, given the challenges it was about to face.²³

The Bicesse Accords triggered a political process, but they proved insufficient to build peace. Demobilization advanced staggeringly slowly under mutual distrust and ultimately favored UNITA. Weeks before the September 1992 elections, only 41 percent of the troops scheduled to demobilize had done so: 45 percent of the government's troops and 24 percent of UNITA's. The build-up of an integrated national army lagged even further behind. Still, presidential and legislative elections went ahead. Much to its own surprise, UNITA only came second in the legislative elections. Savimbi himself trailed behind dos Santos in the first round of the presidential elections. With no power-sharing formula foreseen for the aftermath, the elections had taken on a winner-take-all character. Savimbi's men took up arms again, this time without the support of the United States.²⁴

The ensuing "War of the Cities" from October 1992 to 1994 killed more than 300,000 Angolans. After a series of initial setbacks, dos Santos' government eventually managed to turn the tide with international support in late 1993. Militarily, government forces were strengthened through foreign training and mercenaries. At a political level, the United States recognized the dos Santos

government, and the UN Security Council adopted an arms and petroleum embargo against UNITA.²⁵

With UNITA under pressure, the ground for diplomacy had once more been set. A year-long effort under the UN Special Representative resulted in a deal in November 1994. Named after the Zambian capital where it was signed, the Lusaka Protocol acknowledged the Bicesse Accords and the outcome of the 1992 elections. It did, however, aim to correct previous omissions. In addition to laying out how the opposing military forces would demobilize and integrate, the Protocol included a detailed road map for power-sharing. UNITA would transform into a political party, its already elected parliamentarians would take up their work, and it would receive ministries and provincial governorships. The new United Nations Angola Verification Mission III would be stronger and have a more clearly defined mandate than its predecessor. The mission comprised more than 7,000 military personnel and observers, about 300 civilian police, and more than 400 international civilian staff.²⁶

The Lusaka Protocol included a detailed road map for power-sharing.

The three years following the Lusaka Protocol were marked by uneven progress and UNITA acting as a spoiler. Two issues proved to be particularly thorny: Savimbi vacillated between different political positions before settling in 1997 for a vaguely defined special status conferred to him by parliament. Part of the reason why Savimbi hesitated was his political grand-standing, but another was his very real fear of being assassinated by UNITAS's enemies. Meanwhile, UNITA dragged its feet when it came to handing over municipalities to the central government, citing, sometimes correctly, the government's heavy-handed tactics in asserting control.²⁷

Still, important steps were made toward peace through power-sharing between 1994 and 1998. The large-scale bloodshed witnessed from 1992 to 1994 was over; the integration of UNITA forces into the Angolan Army advanced; and years of patient UN diplomacy paved the way for a Government of National Unity and Reconciliation, composed of both UNITA and MPLA leaders, in April 1997. The United Nations ended UNAVEM III and replaced it with the much smaller United Nations Observer Mission in Angola, hoping that momentum toward peace would prove irreversible.²⁸

Such hopes proved premature. Larger-scale fighting broke out again in 1998, precipitated by a series of international and regional developments. At the international level, the governments in Zaire and Congo-Brazzaville that had supported Savimbi were overthrown with the help of Angolan government forces in May and October 1997, respectively. To make matters worse for Savimbi, the UN Security Council, frustrated by UNITA's sluggish pace in

allowing the Angolan government to extend administrative control, imposed new sanctions in July 1998. UNITA's diamond trade, its main source of income, was hit significantly.²⁹

The Angolan government trusted that it could now break a politically and militarily weakened UNITA, while Savimbi decided to fight on with the residual forces he had retained after the Lusaka Accords. With no peace to keep and its personnel becoming a target, the United Nations mission withdrew in 1999. UNITA's political wing split into factions supportive of the continued fight and those openly rejecting Savimbi. The government waged a brutal counterinsurgency campaign and pursued Jonas Savimbi to his death in February 2002.³⁰

The demise of Savimbi reopened the door to talks. Negotiations led to memoranda between both sides' military forces in April 2002 and between the political wings in December 2002, reaffirming the 1994 Lusaka Protocol. UNITA received the promised ministries and provincial governorships. Its fighters reintegrated into civilian life or found employment with the Angolan armed forces and police.³¹

The attempt to reach peace through power-sharing in Angola was decidedly mixed.

The record of the attempt to reach peace through power-sharing in Angola is decidedly mixed. Some have described the international effort as a "failure," with the conflict ultimately brought to an end through UNITA's defeat.³² Angola's walk between war and peace was indeed long and bloody. It took more than a decade, three peace accords, and hundreds of thousands killed before UNITA joined Angolan politics. At the same time, it was only through continuous international

community engagement in support of the Lusaka Protocol that there was, as a former US Special Representative for the Angolan Peace Process put it, "a life board on which all could climb aboard after Savimbi was killed."³³

Since the 2002 agreements, an imperfect peace through power-sharing has prevailed in Angola. UNITA has become Angola's major opposition party, represented in parliament and governing at the sub-national level. It competes, though, in a decidedly uneven playing field. Awash in oil money and deeply embedded in the state apparatus, the MPLA continues to dominate Angolan politics.

Cambodia: A Little Help from Friends

Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978, overthrowing the genocidal and increasingly anti-Vietnamese regime of its former communist allies, the

Khmer Rouge. Bankrolled by the Soviet Union, the Vietnamese installed the People's Republic of Kampuchea (under Prime Minister Hun Sen since 1985). In response, an insurgent movement formed that included the Khmer Rouge, still led by the infamous Pol Pot; the former Cambodian monarch Prince Sihanouk's "Front Uni National pour une Cambodge Independent, Neutre, Pacifique et Cooperatif" (FUNCINPEC); and a smaller republican grouping, the Khmer People's National Liberation Front. United as a "Coalition Government" under the popular Sihanouk, the insurgents had sanctuaries in Thailand and support from China. Much to the dismay of Hanoi and Phnom Penh, they also kept Cambodia's seat in the United Nations.³⁴

The military situation in Cambodia grew increasingly stalemated during the 1980s. More than 150,000 Vietnamese troops supported the new Cambodian army in an inconclusive cat and mouse game: the insurgents conducted raids deep into Northwestern Cambodia and achieved some spectacular successes, such as when they captured two provincial capitals in 1984. Those gains were, however, always temporary in nature. Large-scale clearance operations drove the insurgents and their supporters across the Thai border again and again.³⁵

On the diplomatic front, the stalemate started to break with the thawing of the Cold War. As elsewhere, Mikhail Gorbachev's reform policies provided the necessary impetus. Gorbachev wanted to reduce military aid to Vietnam and improve relations with China. A Chinese-Soviet understanding developed: outside military assistance to Cambodian rebels would be reduced in synch with the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops.³⁶ At the same time, the Asian economic miracle meant that Cambodia's neighbors, to include Thailand, increasingly saw the war as a development obstacle.³⁷ Efforts toward peace consequently intensified, starting in 1987. In subsequent years, the international community threw its full weight behind the peace effort, as "an unusual array of statesmen and civil servants from neighboring states, great powers, and the UN secretariat devoted energy and imagination to this end."³⁸

When the last batch of Vietnamese forces left Cambodia in autumn 1989, the ground for serious negotiations had been set. Informal meetings of government and insurgents in Jakarta were followed by a summer 1989 peace conference in Paris and a framework document in August 1990. In September 1990, the warring parties established a "Supreme National Council" headed by Prince Sihanouk and manned by insurgents and government as the highest Cambodian authority. Finally, a little over a year later in October 1991, the four conflict parties and 16 states, including Vietnam, signed a peace agreement in Paris.

According to these Paris Accords, the warring parties were to observe a ceasefire, canton their forces, demobilize at least 70 percent of them ahead of elections, and make the remainder available to a newly elected government. Meanwhile, Cambodians were to elect an assembly that would draft a

constitution and then become Cambodia's new parliament. The Accords, however, did not contain provisions on how power would be shared between Hun Sen's partisans and the three former insurgent groups after the elections.³⁹ A United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) would supervise the demobilization process, organize elections, and oversee the administration. UNTAC was to be the UN's biggest peacekeeping mission since the 1960s. At its height in June 1993, UNTAC would comprise almost 16,000 troops, more than 3,000 police advisers, and 5,800 Cambodian and international civilians.⁴⁰

Instability did not end here, however. Problems began when UNTAC's major components took until summer 1992 to get up and running. The peacekeepers lost valuable momentum while spoiling behavior became entrenched.⁴¹ Hun Sen maintained an iron grip over Cambodia's administration, circumventing both the Supreme National Council and UNTAC's supervision.⁴² The Khmer Rouge violated the ceasefire and refused to demobilize or allow UNTAC peacekeepers into their territory. They pointed (somewhat justifiably) to Hun Sen's continued domination of the administration and made (much less justified) allegations about a continued Vietnamese presence in Cambodia. As a result, demobilization threatened to become one-sided. Of the more than 52,000 soldiers who had been cantoned by September 1992, only about 200 belonged to the Khmer Rouge. Demobilization was de facto halted as a consequence.⁴³

The United Nations had to change strategy. Fearful of mounting casualties and a loss of international support, peace enforcement was not an option for UN Special Representative Yasushi Akashi.⁴⁴ Instead, the UN opted for a diplomatic "departing train" strategy: the Khmer Rouge could either join the electoral process or be left in the cold. Working in both Phnom Penh and New York, the UN brought the Khmer Rouge's Thai and Chinese backers on board for this strategy. The Security Council condemned the Khmer Rouge's behavior, imposed economic sanctions, and reaffirmed elections for May 1993. UNTAC's military component reoriented its efforts accordingly: instead of supervising the by-now failed demobilization effort, the troops were to guard the electoral process in collaboration with the other Cambodian parties.⁴⁵

UNTAC's strategic pivot paved the way to successful elections in May 1993. About 90 percent of the eligible electorate cast their vote with little violence and even some Khmer Rouge participating.⁴⁶ However, the results were not what Hun Sen had expected: FUNCINPEC came ahead of the Cambodian People's Party. The way power would be shared post-elections now became an issue that the Paris Accords had not foreseen. Improvisation was needed. After some tense weeks, including threats of violence and secession, Prince Sihanouk managed to broker a deal with the support of Special Representative Akashi. Cambodia would have a first and a second prime minister, while ministerial

portfolios would be equally divided between FUNCINPEC and the Cambodian People's Party. Meanwhile, UNTAC also arranged for the integration of FUNCINPEC's and Hun Sen's forces. With elections held, a government in place, and a constitution drafted, UNTAC withdrew in September 1993.⁴⁷

For Cambodia, however, it would still take some time for peace to settle in. For one, the Khmer Rouge were not yet defeated. It would take them until 1998 to dissolve and reconcile with the internationally recognized Cambodian state. Moreover, power-sharing proved precarious. Fearing that FUNCINPEC might align with remnants of the Khmer Rouge, Hun Sen strengthened his hold on power in a coup in 1997.⁴⁸ He has remained in power ever since, also thanks to spectacular economic growth, an increasing alignment with China, and strong-handed political tactics. Political pluralism and opposition exist in Cambodia nowadays, but they have to compete against Hun Sen's well-entrenched Cambodian People's Party. Most importantly, though, with a little help from the international community, war has not returned to Cambodia.⁴⁹

Power-sharing proved precarious in Cambodia.

Insights for Afghanistan Today

What do these three cases tell us about the prospects for peace in Afghanistan? A warning is in order: the past has limits in what it can predict about the present and the future. The internal conflicts and external interventions in Afghanistan, Angola, and Cambodia were embedded in a different time, international system, and geopolitical context. Lessons cannot be mechanistically transferred from one conflict to the other. But, if treated with appropriate care, they are still useful for discussing Afghanistan's future.

Is peace through power-sharing possible in Afghanistan?

Possibly. Conflicts that are in a military stalemate but fluid at the diplomatic level are ripe for resolution. With geopolitics in South Asia evolving and the Afghan war in a gray zone of neither victory nor defeat, a "peace through power-sharing" may be viable.

Contrary to popular expectation, the withdrawal of foreign patrons does not foreordain rebel victories. Looking at [Table 1](#), rebels only took over power in a minority of historical cases (eight of 23 cases, or 35 percent). The states Vietnam and Cuba helped build and the rulers they supported withstood the departure of the foreign powers that had supported them. Cambodia and Angola also show that even decades-long conflicts can be brought to a peaceful end.

When a military stalemate coincides with a diplomatic consensus, power-sharing becomes possible.

Peace through power-sharing then becomes possible when a military stalemate coincides with an emerging consensus on the diplomatic front.⁵⁰ Only when

government, rebels, and external backers all realized that further fighting would prove indecisive and costly did serious negotiations take off in Afghanistan (after the Soviet withdrawal), Angola, and Cambodia. At the same time, peace negotiations tended to fail once a military victory seemed to become attainable. This failure was the case when the Najibullah government in Afghanistan and the UNITA rebels in Angola lost their external support. Diplomatically, the search for peaceful solutions in all three conflicts

became possible through a seismic shift in the geopolitical landscape, such as Mikhail Gorbachev's search for an end to the Cold War.

When we apply those insights to Afghanistan today, peace through power-sharing seems possible, but not assured. An outright defeat of the Afghan government at the hands of the Taliban is unlikely (at least as long as international support continues to bankroll the Afghan state apparatus and security forces). Rather, both sides are unable to score a decisive win, while casualties are at record levels.⁵¹ The conflict may have reached a mutually painful stalemate.

Also, the diplomatic landscape may have become favorable. In the midst of a debt crisis, Pakistan depends on foreign investment from the United States, China, and the Gulf countries. Seeking international goodwill, it has begun to pressure its allies within the Taliban to negotiate. Meanwhile, the Trump administration's intent to leave Afghanistan has made China and Russia more cooperative. Less fearful of a permanent US presence in Afghanistan, Beijing and Moscow support a diplomatic solution that averts state failure and extremism in South and Central Asia. China, in particular, has come to play a more active role, driven by its fear of Islamist extremism in its Eastern provinces and its ambition to expand the Belt and Road Initiative throughout Central Asia.⁵²

What would peace through power-sharing look like in Afghanistan?

Not too beautiful. Afghanistan's road to peace through power-sharing will be lengthy, non-linear, and littered with setbacks. It is also unlikely to end up with Kabul as Central Asia's proverbial "shining city on a hill."

Getting to peace through power-sharing is a long and fragile process. Negotiations to reach a peace agreement may take years and there is no

guarantee for success. In Cambodia, the negotiations leading to the 1991 peace agreement began in 1987. In Angola, it took from 1988 until 1991 to reach a first (and unsuccessful) intra-Angolan agreement; the combatants then spent another decade talking and fighting before the conflict ended. Those difficulties also become obvious when we look at the statistics: of 23 conflicts with large-scale pro-government interventions between 1945 and 2013, a somewhat sustainable power-sharing agreement was only reached in two: Cambodia and Angola—though there were other attempts at the same.⁵³

Getting to peace through power-sharing is a long and fragile process.

These case studies demonstrate why, instead of a clear-cut transition from war to peace, a relapse into conflict remains a clear and present danger for years: both the evil of deliberate spoiling and the tragedy of accidental escalation. Afghanistan, Angola, and Cambodia witnessed manifold attempts to deliberately spoil the peace process.⁵⁴ Combatants proved willing to opportunistically abandon negotiations when their military prospects improved or their political prospects worsened.

The transition from battlefield to cabinet table is also fraught with perils of accidental escalation; parties to a civil war face a strong security dilemma once they attempt to lay down arms and share power.⁵⁵ Each former combatant likely fears that their opponent will exploit a moment of vulnerability to annihilate them. Jonas Savimbi, who himself was eventually killed in a counterinsurgency campaign, succinctly summarized this dilemma: “What leader has given up his arms and survived?”⁵⁶

As a result of spoiling behavior and security dilemmas, the road to peaceful power-sharing is usually rocky, and the destination does not necessarily resemble Mandalay. Post-conflict politics can still for decades resemble the continuation of war with slightly different means. Both Cambodia and Angola do have electoral competition nowadays, but they face a political playing field skewed in favor of the incumbent regime, not-uncommon political violence, little regard for civil liberties, and a polarized political atmosphere.⁵⁷

Looking at Afghanistan, this means that even if the government and the Taliban negotiate in earnest, a durable peace deal or a stable democracy are far from guaranteed. For starters, the Taliban’s willingness to share power and abide by a peace deal remains shrouded in mystery. Moreover, peace through power-sharing will be inherently difficult. Ceasefires, demobilizations, and elections will all trigger fears of renewed war and outright military elimination. Lastly, even a post-peace Afghan polity will likely still stumble from political crisis to crisis, with the threat of violence looming in the background for quite some time. Already in 2014, the contenders in the presidential elections came to the

brink of taking up arms against each other.⁵⁸ More of the same is to be expected. The number of mutually antagonistic political players will only increase once the Taliban come in from the cold.

What can the international community do?

The international community is neither peripheral nor omnipotent in getting to peace through power-sharing. In Afghanistan, it should resort to proactive peace management by coordinating expectations about peace; facilitating a cease-fire, elections, and demobilization; and handling actual and potential spoilers.

The importance of the international community is most acutely felt in its absence. Afghanistan in the early 1990s illustrates the potentially catastrophic effects of a withdrawal absent the international community facilitating a process toward peace through power-sharing. Moreover, the failure to keep the peace in Angola in 1992 showed what can happen if the international community aims to keep its engagement at a minimum.

At the same time, the international community usually cannot enforce peace through power-sharing. Afghanistan, Angola, and Cambodia all demonstrated the need for former combatants to be committed to peace so that international intervention can be effective. Peace enforcement, on the contrary, is not only

The importance of the international community is most acutely felt in its absence.

likely to be bloody and costly, but it also risks endangering the international consensus that facilitated a peace process in the first place. The UN leadership in Cambodia reached this same conclusion when it discussed how to deal with the Khmer Rouge.

What the international community does best is help overcome spoiler problems and security dilemmas through diplomacy. First, mediators need to help combatants find a

peace agreement around which international and domestic expectations can converge. Agreements are like road maps: warring parties can easily get lost if they omit critical details.⁵⁹ In Angola, the 1991 accords also failed because they did not lay out how UNITA and the MPLA would share power. In Cambodia, peace almost failed for the same reason after the 1993 elections. Moreover, the international community, as the most impartial referee available, is usually needed to monitor and manage peace. Peacekeeping mostly works through offering former combatants material (e.g. aid), and non-material (e.g. immunity and diplomatic recognition) incentives in exchange for peace and power-sharing.⁶⁰

Controversies abound on this road to peace. Electoral processes stoke fears of political marginalization, constitutional revisions of identity-based discrimination, and ceasefires and demobilization of outright military elimination.⁶¹ Finally, spoilers will need to be managed along the road. This step means building consensus where possible, convincing former combatants and their external supporters to comply where appropriate, and taking a stance where necessary. As we saw in Cambodia and Angola, UN Special Representatives have a key role to play here.⁶²

Looking at Afghanistan, current US-led peace efforts can only be a first step toward intra-Afghan negotiations facilitated by the international community. In order to arrive at a durable peace through power-sharing, four recommendations spring from the lessons identified in this paper.

First, a withdrawal of Western forces must be conditions-based rather than calendar- or clock-based. The pre-condition for military pressure on the Taliban to be eased should be progress in the peace process. Specifically, a Western withdrawal should not be completed until an intra-Afghan peace agreement has been negotiated, a credible political process is on the way, and a new Afghan government has demonstrated its ability to suppress Daesh and other terrorist challenges. Based on historical experience, all these conditions may still take a while—possibly years.

Second, regional consensus around peace needs to be built and maintained. Afghanistan's neighboring states, and Pakistan in particular, are the key potential spoilers. Already a decade ago, the late US Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, "knew that ... the road to peace would have to go from the outside, through Afghanistan's neighbors."⁶³ Though US engagement with Iran remains diplomatically difficult as long as US-Iranian tensions escalate in the Middle East, the United States in 2019 made important progress in finding common ground with the governments of China, Russia, and Pakistan.⁶⁴ This emerging consensus could be institutionalized by bringing key nations together as a group of friends of the Afghan peace process.⁶⁵

Third, Afghans need to develop a vision of what peace through power-sharing could look like. Currently, both the government's and the Taliban's visions for a joint political future remain underdeveloped. Afghanistan's post-2003 political elites have usually been preoccupied posturing for positions, squabbling for spoils, and maneuvering for political advantage. This lack of vision does not bode well for a future peace agreement. A debate is needed on how Afghans envision the future role of the clergy in Afghan politics (a key demand of the Taliban), checks and balances for the presidency, federalism and subnational governance, women's participation in public life, and the integration of the Taliban into Afghan security forces.⁶⁶ The international community cannot substitute Afghan debate on those issues. What it can do, however, is offer fora for dialogue and institutional expertise in state-building.

Fourth, peace needs a manager, even after a peace accord. The United Nations is the most logical candidate: with its universal membership, it is, by definition, best positioned to offer impartial good offices. Also, all of the permanent five members of the UN Security Council are to some degree affected by or were involved in the Afghan conflict. And the UN already has a footprint in Afghanistan: the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. This mission would need an extended mandate focused on monitoring the process toward peace through power-sharing. And it would likely need a couple of thousand peacekeepers on the ground, a presence that could be introduced in tandem with a reduction of US and NATO forces in country.

Power-sharing in Afghanistan is Possible but Costly

A sustainable peace through power-sharing in Afghanistan will require sustained international community engagement. Such an investment may be justified to preserve regional stability, prevent terrorist havens, maintain human right gains, and forestall a migratory crisis. At the same time, continued engagement in Afghanistan will be challenging and costly. Policymakers in Washington, New York, Brussels, and Beijing will have to decide how much they are willing to commit to attempting to reach a peace through power-sharing in Afghanistan.

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