

RETHINKING THE PRINCIPAL AND PROXY RELATIONSHIP: The West, Afghanistan, and the Attainment of Foreign Policy Objectives

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The Uncomfortable Reality¹

Within a month after the 9/11 terror attacks, a coalition of Western and allied states descended upon Afghanistan in support of the global 'War on Terror'. Rapidly toppling the Taliban regime and nearly extinguishing their presence in Afghanistan, the coalition momentarily held the initiative in determining the state's political future.² Distracted by the concurrent war in Iraq, weak commitments to state rehabilitation, and ill-defined objectives, the fragmented Taliban regrouped and returned as a salient threat to Afghan stability. As the initial success buckled to the Taliban resurgence, it became increasingly evident that the seemingly quick war had become the very quagmire that haunted invaders from Alexander of Macedon to the Soviets.

Already forced into a precarious position by recent Taliban offences, the flight of coalition states seeking to untangle themselves from the Afghan morass, declare 'victory', and withdraw further undermined the ailing Afghan government. The botched American-Taliban peace negotiations represent the latest attempt at Western disengagement. Deceptively, it is not in the principal's (the West) best interests to abandon their ailing proxy (the Afghan government) and seek a deal to terminate the War with their enemy (the Taliban). While a withdrawal would mitigate the haemorrhaging of taxpayer's dollars in seemingly endless foreign wars, amongst other considerations, it does not outweigh the costs of its long-term implications.

Besides the moral compunctions of consigning a struggling ally and their people to an uncertain fate with a ferocious

foe, withdrawal exposes the West's fragile commitment to their allies, undermining their attractiveness as a future principle.³ Doubting the Afghan government's ability to maintain the political status quo after the withdrawal, it is foreseeable that to avoid a civil-war reminiscent of the 1990s Afghanistan's political future could feature a power-sharing agreement with the Taliban. This uncomfortable reality poses additional, hidden costs for the West.

As this latest iteration in Afghanistan's decades-long saga of violence entered its 18th year this past October, it is evident that the state's political future is in flux more now than ever as the national government struggles to control the security situation, the West flirts with complete withdrawal, and the once-moribund Taliban are stronger than ever. Where did the relationship between the principal and the proxy break down to the point where abandoning an ally is deemed a desirable option? How will the withdrawal be perceived by future proxies; what repercussions will this have on their willingness to accept a Western principal and promote their agenda with the memory of an abandoned Afghanistan?

Understanding that the use of proxies is a central instrument in foreign policy, the purpose of this policy brief is to highlight the shortcomings of the West's principal-proxy relationship with the Afghan national government as to guide policymakers in their future use of third-party states to attain foreign policy objectives.⁴ This brief proposes a simple prescription: the West must rethink how they engage and manage proxies in the pursuit of foreign policy objectives. Understanding the fundamentals in managing proxies, the West will be in a

stronger, long-term position to protect and pursue their international objectives in the face of this evolving world order.

Deconstructing the Relationship

Put simply; a principal only seeks to achieve their foreign policy objectives indirectly through a proxy when they deem it cost-effective vice getting involved directly.⁵ Inversely, the proxy accepts such a relationship as per a cost-benefit calculation of the perceived benefits attained by working towards the principal's aim(s). Naturally, the relationship's success is directly proportional to the degree of alignment between the principal and the proxy's objectives. Noting the improbability of two states' interests perfectly aligning and remaining so for the duration of the relationship, the support of a bespoke incentive regime acts as a mitigating tool to manage and direct the proxy's efforts in attaining the principal's objective(s).⁶ Executed coherently, wherein an appropriate reward/punishment regime complements the alignment of interests, the relationship can be mutually beneficial for both actors. Executed poorly, wherein the factors are misaligned or improperly supported, the relationship may have dangerous outcomes.

Perhaps the Afghan anthropologist Thomas Barfield best captured the nature of Afghan politics: it, by and large, is a practical/realist cost-benefit calculation which rationalises decisions on perceived tangible rewards for one's clan, rather than intangible ones as in other societies.⁷ Alternatively, as a Wakhi friend of mine once dryly remarked: "everything is open to negotiation if the price is right; it is just business". This is not to suggest that Afghan leaders are without scruples. Instead, it is to highlight that many perceive and behave in this realist manner. Applied, this translates to a decision-making process that favours supporting the party which they perceive can best satisfy their group's long-term needs and ambitions. Convenient institutions such as religion and ethnicity are co-opted as to smooth over antagonism between partners temporarily.⁸ Accordingly, it is common for enemies to shelve their differences and support one another in the pursuit of an objective and then later return to being adversaries once their use for one another has ended.⁹ Naturally, the Afghan government and Afghans' behaviour is best captured through this lens and is a salient factor in understanding the failures of the principle-proxy relationship in the Afghan War.

Alignment of Interests

Undoubtedly paramount in the relationship is the alignment of the principal and the proxy's interests. It is unsurprising that if there is a vast divergence of interests, the cost for the principal to apply an adequate incentive regime to ensure the proxy's compliance would be as enormous as self-defeating for valuable the material and training would likely be appropriated by the proxy to other pursuits. In this scenario, the principal would be better off to pursue direct action or disengage. Logically, the converse has inverse implications.

Comprised of leaders selected by the principal, benefiting from the destruction of Taliban and other extremist networks, and a public longing for a sense of peace and stability not enjoyed in decades, the Afghan government ought to have had little compunctions with implementing their principal's agenda. Suitably, in the War's early stages, the close alignment of the principal and proxy's strategic interests and relationship meant that once the proxy government had consolidated itself and was capable of inheriting a greater share of the war effort, the required incentives to manage their efforts would have been minimal.¹⁰ However, as this early-war honeymoon period soured in the ensuing insurgency, the West's lack of comprehension of the evolving situation's effect on the Afghan government's priorities, and by extension, its will and ability to effectively commit to their objectives, became abundantly clear. Believing that their interests were still closely aligned as in the honeymoon period, the West mistakenly chose a strategy of capacity building.¹¹ If they had noticed the shift, they would have built up an adequate incentive regime as they drew down their forces to manage their proxy.

The Reward Structure

Appropriating Bermen et al.'s findings from their study on principal-proxy relationships, the West, in their relationship with the Afghan government, ought to have noted positive compliance from their proxy had they implemented an incentive regime predicated on the following three points:

- Principals use a rewards/punishment regime tailored to the proxy;
- The size of rewards and punishments are proportional to the saliency of the principal's disturbance and the proxy's cost of effort (interest divergence); and

- Because indirect control is effective under limited conditions, alternative control methods such as semi-indirect may prove more appropriate.¹²

Using these elements as the basis on which the two actors could establish a principal-proxy contract, they two could clearly outline each other's rights and responsibilities. The implications being the possible mitigation of ambiguity regarding the expectations of the two actors and enhancement of trust between the two. Thus, enabling freer communication when the proxy's effort cost, the principal's cost of incentives, and the importance of the principal's goal changes so that the proper adjustments to the incentive regime can be made to support the relationship.¹³

The Afghan Context

Arguably the greatest challenge to the relationship is the West's difficulty in accurately assessing the cost for the Afghan government to sustain their commitments. While it is not the purpose of this policy brief to explore a list of hypotheticals on how the War could have gone differently had the West understood the principal-proxy relationship, it is essential however to contextualise Berman et al.'s model and its potential implications on the War's outcome in the two following examples:

Influencing the Mullahs – Any cursory examination of Afghanistan would indicate that religion is a fundamental element of Afghan life; particularly so after its radicalisation during the *jihad* against the Soviet Union.¹⁴ Recognising religion's potential for increasing public support for the War and easing the government's effort cost, the West incentivised moderate mullahs in Kandahar to disseminate pro-coalition and government messages in their sermons.¹⁵ The short-term benefits of the arrangement spoiled when details leaked to the Afghan public that these mullahs were on the foreigner's payroll. Exploiting the West's lacking appreciation for religion's saliency in Afghanistan, the Taliban manipulated the incident to support their narrative that these mullahs, and the Afghan government, are apostates supporting the satanic West in establishing *jāhiliyah* in Afghanistan.¹⁶ Had the West correctly understood Islam's role in Afghanistan and the potentially damaging consequences of co-opting the mullahs, they, as per Bermans et al.'s model, would have concluded that the negative long-term implications on

their proxy's cost of effort far exceeded any perceived gains.

Imposing Modernity – Aside from the West's inability to adequately address the festering issues of social stagnation and general state failure, the attitude that it needed to save Afghanistan from its medieval state, vis-à-vis imposing the fixtures of Western liberal democracy, dangerously neglected the sentiment of "Westoxication" in the Islamic world.¹⁷ The conflation of post-war reconstruction with an ambitious modernisation agenda stimulated the tensions associated with rapid social change. The West's prominent role in dictating and directing this project became a liability for it radically altered their proxy's effort costs.¹⁸ Manipulating Afghan nationalism, one characterised by the pride of resisting foreign domination, the Taliban used the West's overstepping to turn public sentiment against the Afghan government. The West, were they to have understood Berman et al.'s model, ought to have delegated the objectives and execution of modernisation project to the Afghan government, or at the very least 'indigenised' it, as to ensure a measure of 'face-saving' for their proxy which would lessen their cost in supporting the principal's goals by reducing citizen alienation.¹⁹

Astutely capturing the sentiment of the Afghan people is the notion that Afghans desire the peace which has proven elusive for decades, regardless of who is in power in Kabul.²⁰ Accordingly, the people will back those whom they believe to be winning that war. Naturally, if the Taliban are perceived to have a better chance of attaining it then the cost for the Afghan government to achieve the West's goals will increase, thus necessitating a dynamic incentive structure to support this greater cost.²¹

Conclusion

In short, this policy brief has surveyed the West's relationship with the Afghan government during the Afghan War, highlighting it as an example of how not to use a third-party power to attain one's foreign policy imperatives indirectly. Using the principal-proxy framework to deconstruct the relationship, it is apparent that while the two parties shared similar strategic interests for the future of Afghanistan, the West's inability to adequately support and manage the Afghan government's adherence to these interests as the War worsened through a bespoke incentives regime proved to be the relationship's undoing.

Trillions of dollars spent, millions displaced, hundreds of thousands dead, 18 years later, and all the relationship can show for itself is a struggling proxy, a principal attempting at an ignominious peace-withdrawal settlement, and an enemy stronger than ever. If the West wishes to continue to secure its foreign policy objectives through third parties, then it is of the utmost importance to rethink how they

engage and manage their proxy(s). Failing this could have dire short-term implications affecting the future achievement of the West's objectives; in the long term, its ability or inability to learn from the Afghan experience could be the determining factor for future proxies' willingness to commit a Western agenda. Noting the changing world order, this is not an exercise that the West should take lightly.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The author would like to acknowledge the efforts of the anonymous peer reviewer for their helpful feedback
- 2 Anand Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes* (Metropolitan Books, 2014), 46-49.
- 3 Hamid Hussain, "Making Peace with Broken Pieces: Afghan Peace Process", *Defence Journal*, 22(8): <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2199166761?accountid=6180> (17 November 2019).
- 4 Eli Bermen, David A. Lake, Gerard Padró i Miquel, and Pierre Yared. "Introduction: Principals, Agents, and Indirect Foreign Actors." In *Proxy Wars* (University of California Press, San Diego, forthcoming), 2.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 6 Bermen et al., "Introduction: Principals, Agents, and Indirect Foreign Actors", 4-5.
- 7 Tangible rewards – Includes but is not limited to money, political power, and territory.
Intangible rewards – Includes but is not limited to religious and ideological imperatives
Thomas Barfield, "Ethnicity in Afghanistan" (lecture, *Serious Science*, 04 October 2015): https://youtu.be/UCVil6_9jz8 (accessed 17 November 2019) and Thomas Barfield, "Tribal and Religious Identity in Afghanistan" (lecture, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, 12 November 2012): <https://youtu.be/WF3Rkt42wPY> (accessed 17 November 2019).
- 8 Thomas Barfield, "Tribal and Religious Identity in Afghanistan".
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Strategic Interests – Summed up as the removal of the Taliban from government and extremist forces from Afghanistan and the stabilisation of the state as to deny it as a future terrorist safe-haven.
Bermen et al., "Introduction: Principals, Agents, and Indirect Foreign Actors", 4-5.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 5-7.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 24-26.

- 14 Fahim Ebrat, "Afghan Perspectives on the Afghan War (2001-present)," interview by author, notes (Embassy of Afghanistan, Ottawa, November 2019).
- 15 Mark Shepherd, "Canadian Influence Activities in the Afghan War," interview by author, notes (CFB Kingston, Kingston, November 2019).
- 16 *Jāhiliyah* (Ignorance) – Refers to the period and state of ignorance which existed before the word of Allah was revealed to man through the Prophet. Note: The Taliban took full advantage of the scandal by firstly assassinating these moderate mullahs so that the religious composition of the *ulema* (clergy) would increasingly become more conservative, and potentially radical, as those were the only mullahs who were targeted. Secondly, they would later employ this same excuse to justify the killing of other mullahs whom they deemed undesirable to reduce the impact on their public perception.
Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Cedar Rapids: Mother Mosque Foundation, 1981), 9, and Shepherd, "Canadian Influence Activities in the Afghan War".
- 17 Westoxication, alternatively Westitis or *Gharbzadegi* (Farsi) – Initially referred to the loss of Iranian cultural identity through the unchecked absorption of Western models and ideas, it has since expanded as to connote a broader sense of cultural loss in the Islamic world because of the Western imposition of modernity.
Jalal Al-i Ahmad, "*Plagued by the West (Gharbzadegi)*", trans P. Sprachman Delmar (NY: Caravan Books Modern Persian Literature Series No.4, 1982), reprint in Mansoor Moaddel and Kamran Talattof, "Westoxication", in *Contemporary Debates in Islam: An Anthology of Modernist and Fundamentalist Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), and Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The US and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (Penguin, 2008).
- 18 Astri Suhrke, "Reconstruction as Modernisation: The 'Post-Conflict' Project in Afghanistan," *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 7 (2007): www.jstor.org/stable/20454999 (accessed 20 November 2019).
- 19 Thomas Barfield, "Tribal and Religious Identity in Afghanistan".
- 20 Ashley Jackson, "Summary Perspectives on Peace from Taliban Areas of Afghanistan", *United States Institute of Peace*, no 449, May 2019, www.usip.org (accessed 29 September 2019).
- 21 *Ibid.*