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SWITCHING SIDES: COALITION WARFARE IN RECENT AFGHAN HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complex nature of coalition warfare in recent Afghan history to better understand the practice of switching sides. It considers the application of international relations theory to sub-national conflict; the importance of 'power' in Afghanistan; and the acceptance of the practice of switching sides in Afghan conflicts. Using these concepts, historical examples of switching sides during the anti-Communist *Jihad*, the Afghan Civil War, and the current struggle under Operation ENDURING FREEDOM are described and analyzed to provide conclusions and recommendations to inform future military planning efforts relative to coalition warfare in Afghanistan. Recommendations are offered in two parts - undermining the anti-government coalition and sustaining the pro-Afghan government coalition – including: understanding the factional vulnerabilities within the anti-government coalition, setting conditions to allow anti-government factional leaders to switch sides, and understanding and managing the strategic and operational balance of power to enable eventual success in Afghanistan.

SWITCHING SIDES: COALITION WARFARE IN RECENT AFGHAN HISTORY

The complex Afghan cultural milieu can be bewildering to any outsider. Determining the core grievances and drivers of conflict in Afghanistan has received analytical attention, but the predictive value of such analysis is questionable without a sound understanding of the underlying societal norms. One of these norms concerns the Afghan approach to coalition warfare, specifically views as to the expected durability of coalitions. This paper examines the complexities of coalition warfare in recent Afghan history to better understand an apparently well-accepted practice of switching sides. It applies international relations theory to sub-national conflict; describes and analyzes the importance of 'power' in Afghanistan; and evaluates the historical acceptance of switching sides in Afghan conflicts to provide foundation for examination of recent examples of flexible allegiance. These recent examples of switching sides between coalitions are drawn from the anti-Communist *Jihad*, the post-*jihad* Afghan Civil War, and the more recent American-Afghan war under Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. The conclusions and recommendations are meant to inform future military planning efforts relative to coalition warfare in Afghanistan.

The discussion in this paper reinforces and expands on previous research conducted at Harvard University and is further founded on three inter-related and key assumptions. The primary source for this effort is *The Closest of Enemies: Alliance Formation in the Afghan and Bosnian Civil Wars*, the doctoral dissertation of Fotini Christia submitted to Harvard University in May 2008.[1] Her work documented Afghan warfare among competing coalitions during the Afghan Civil War from 1992 to 1998. Those coalitions consisted of a number of independent factions that would switch sides

based on changing conditions. Her work further examined and explained the conditions that influenced coalition formation. To expand upon her work, this paper postulates three assumptions. The first is that international relations theory can provide a useful tool in understanding recent conflict in Afghanistan. Second, that "power" is an important factor in Afghan culture. And finally, that "switching sides" is an accepted practice in the Afghan way of war. This paper is not intended as an in-depth defense of these ideas, but will use them to describe recent Afghan conflict and their potential implications for strategic and operational planners as they seek out a way-ahead, toward political reconciliation and reintegration, in the complex labyrinth that is warfare in Afghanistan.

This subject has clear and current relevancy for strategic and operational planning efforts in Afghanistan. The practice of "Switching Sides" has an obvious potential to affect the balance of power between competing coalitions in Afghanistan. The ability to successfully affect the balance of power in favor of pro-government coalition forces in Afghanistan could facilitate political reconciliation between the principal combatants. Recent statements on reconciliation by senior United States government, Afghan government, Taliban, and Taliban-Affiliated officials indicate the significance of efforts to bring the two sides together. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates emphasized the importance of the eventual political resolution of differences among Afghans when he said, "I think we've felt all along that reintegration and reconciliation are critical to a resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan."[2] Fracturing the pro-Taliban coalition and sustaining the pro-Afghan government coalition are important enablers to eventual resolution of the current Afghan conflict.

In the following sections each of the three postulated assumptions will be developed. Again, there is no intent to fully defend these ideas. However, each assumption will be described, and its relevance will be identified in addition to its relationship to the other assumptions. Finally, a brief discussion will be offered to validate the use of these assumptions.

<u>Utility of International Relations Theory</u>

The first critical assumption is that international relations theories can provide a useful lens through which to analyze coalition conflict in Afghanistan and inform decisions about how best to engage in it. While international relations theories offer us a contextual foundation for the examination of inter-state relations, it appears those theories may also be useful in considering the continual establishment and then realignment among sub-state factions in Afghanistan. Noted international relations scholars Kenneth Waltz and Stephen Walt offer theories that describe how states interact in the international system; their works will be briefly outlined to provide a potential theoretical framework for describing how Afghan factions interact.

States in the anarchical international system choose to act alone or with other actors. When acting in concert with others, states form political or military alliances or coalitions. Christia, in her research, defines an alliance as "a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more groups, which involves commitment and exchange of benefits for both sides."[3] This paper will consider an alliance to be a formal and enduring security agreement between two or more states with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization serving as an example. Alternatively, this paper will consider a coalition to be a less formal and less enduring security agreement.

An example of a coalition, in this context, is the international military force that formed in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, that expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait, and which soon thereafter disbanded.

Kenneth Waltz, adjunct professor of International Relations at Columbia University, described his theory on the interaction of states within an anarchical international system in his *Theory of International Politics* in 1979. A very important idea that Waltz provides to the study of international relations is the concept of an ordering principal for the international system based on anarchy or "self-help." The anarchical international system that Waltz describes is a competitive system with the absence of central authority over the states in the system which motivates them to interact in a way that maximizes the chances of state survival; said differently, "the uncertainty of each about the other's future intentions and actions works against their cooperation."[4] These conditions cause states to seek autonomy from others and to seek alliances to achieve their goals only when necessary and only for as long as necessary.

Stephen Walt, professor of International affairs at John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, provided a new and nuanced view of the international relations of states in his *The Origins of Alliances* in 1987. The principal idea offered by Walt's work is the balance of threats theory,[5] a derivation from the balance of power theory, that suggesting that states ally with other states to balance against the *threats* posed by states rather than against the *power* of the state alone. The essential difference between *power* and *threat* is that state-based power translates to capability and a state-based threat is the capability of the state along with an

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associated negative intent.   In response to threats, states will generally tend to ally with others to balance against a threatening actor in the international community. The greater the capability, proximity, and perceived malign intentions of the threat the more urgent the need to respond, either by balancing or bandwagoning. States will balance - join together against a threat - if faced with an aggressor state that is of lesser or equal strength. Faced with a threat of significantly greater capability, a state may choose to bandwagon – join with the stronger state – to ensure its survival in the international community.

Arguably these constructs for the examination of international relations are applicable to any multi-polar competitive environment and therefore have some utility in the review of sub-state conflict, and in particular, Afghan conflicts. Balance of power dynamics promote a tendency towards a stable, if unequal, division of power in the international system. Certain actors in the Afghan system seek to dominate the power dynamic and therefore threaten other actors. This factor has led to the frequent shifting of coalitions in Afghan conflict and near continual war for more than three decades. Afghanistan, wracked by decades of conflict, is a fragmented state with multiple competing traditional (formal state governance and local tribal governance) and non-traditional (factional leaders, war lords and drug lords) power structures. These structures have evolved from ethno-religious division and conflict; historical primacy of local authority over national authority; growth of criminal non-traditional authority structures associated with opium production; and the proliferation of competing politico-military factions during the anti-Soviet *Jihad* complete with external support that served to reinforce factional differences. Over the last several decades, these factions have

formed coalitions that changed over time often finding combatants who were once allied with each other fighting against one another. Fotini Christia found that coalitions, during the 1992-1998 Afghan Civil War tended to be "motivated by a desire for victory and the maximization of wartime political returns."[6] This suggests that, at least during that period, factions acted in their own interest like states in the international system. With this conceptual framework guiding the evolution of sub-state coalitions, we must now consider the idea of power and how it influences coalition development in Afghan conflict.

Power in Afghan Conflict

The second critical assumption is that power and the distribution of power are important ideas that have influenced recent Afghan conflict. The concept of power is important to understanding the motivations of actors within Afghan coalitions and how those motivations can be manipulated to reinforce or disrupt coalitions. First, to define power, Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines it as the ability to act or produce an effect; the possession of control, authority, or influence over others; or physical might. Power – the influence of one over another – comes in many forms. Power is contextual and can be found in a number of different settings including the political, the social, and the religious context. The relative importance of *power* in society can be measured. To measure the relevance of power in society, noted Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede developed his Power-Distance Index.

Hofstede developed four dimensions of national cultures that describe and categorize behavior within a number of different studied societies. He conducted detailed research studying 40 countries over 5 years and correlated his data with data

from previous studies ultimately publishing his fifth book on the subject.[7] While none of the studies were specific to Afghanistan, some useful comparisons can be made using Hofstede's index for the "Arab World" and an independently derived index for "Predominately Muslim Countries"[8] to inform an assumption about the importance of power in Afghan society. The four dimensions of national culture in the Hofstede model are Power-Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, and Uncertainty Avoidance. For brevity's sake, this paper will only briefly describe Hofstede's Power Distance Index and its potential significance in Afghan society.

The Power Distance Index (PDI) expresses the degree to which less powerful members of society, organizations, and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unevenly.[9] A high PDI ranking indicates a high degree of inequality in power and wealth within the society. A low PDI ranking, on the other hand, indicates a low degree of inequality in power and wealth within the society, or said differently, a greater degree of equality. Populations with high PDI rankings accept that leaders will separate themselves from their associated groups and direct activity. Hofstede suggests that these conditions are not necessarily imposed upon the people of studied societies, but are actually accepted by the society as an element of their culture.

Hofstede's research provides composite rankings for the "Arab World" that reflects a high PDI (80) and a high Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)(68).[10] Further research also produced a correlation between nations with large Muslim populations and a high PDI and UAI rankings. The Uncertainty Avoidance Index measures the extent to which "members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations."[11] When a high Power-Distance Index and a high Uncertainty Avoidance

Index are combined, as they are in the ranking above, it produces conditions where "leaders have virtually ultimate power and authority, and the rules, laws and regulations developed by those in power reinforce their own leadership and control."[12] Hostede's work provides valuable insights as to why unit defection – switching sides – is so prevalent. Under High PDI and high UAI, subordinates are likely to accept any decision – including defection – of their leaders. Interestingly, that combination also suggests "it is not unusual for new leadership to arise from armed insurrection – the ultimate power, rather than from diplomatic or democratic change."[13]

Throughout its history, Afghanistan has had numerous and significant challenges with peaceful transitions of political power. More often than not, transitions in power were preceded by violence. Coming to power in Afghanistan has been easier than staying in power. Additionally, traditional Afghan authority structures and non-traditional authority structures appear to reinforce the ideas presented above and support the use of this assumption relative to Afghan society. Finally, from her field research, Christia found that perceptions of relative power were influential factors in determining factional alliances in the Afghan Civil War. To measure relative power, Afghan coalition actors "looked at territorial gains or losses, at the size of population available for recruitment, and at intelligence on the availability of arms and logistics as a way to assess their power as well as that of their allies and opponents."[14] With an understanding of how and why coalitions form in Afghan conflict, the next section will consider the concept of switching sides and what it means in the Afghan context.

Switching Sides – What it means in Afghan Conflict

The third critical assumption is that switching sides is an accepted practice in the conduct of warfare in Afghanistan. This idea is important because it describes a view of conduct on the battlefield that is acceptable to Afghans, and which may be encouraged among them, while at the same time being generally unacceptable in western culture. These competing views can, and likely do, create tension among the leaders of pro-Afghan government forces in Afghanistan on approaches to breaking the bonds of anti-government coalition factions facing them. In his review of the conduct of US military operations in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2002, Stephen Biddle found that "not only do most Afghans consider it normal and acceptable to switch sides in war, but most of their senior commanders know one another personally from their service against the Soviets."[15] Additional examples of switching sides will be provided in the next section of this paper, but first some consideration must be given to the activity under examination.

A number of different words have been used to describe the act of switching sides by Afghan combatants. Those include the words "surrender" or "defection" among others. Neither word adequately describes the Afghan dynamic. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "surrender" as follows - "to yield to the power, control, or possession of another upon compulsion or demand" while the Oxford English Dictionary defines the same word in a slightly different way - "stop resisting an opponent and submit to their authority." Neither definition sufficiently conveys the willingness of Afghan factions to (1) switch sides in the absence of coercion and (2) to vow allegiance to a new authority and, indeed, to fight with them against their former allies. The use of the word "defection" is equally dissatisfying. "Defection" is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as the "conscious abandonment of allegiance or duty". Oxford English

Dictionary describes the verb "defect" as follows - "abandon one's country or cause in favor of an opposing one." Both definitions convey the negative western connotation associated with abandoning allegiance and convey the sense that allegiances should be fixed. A cursory examination of European history demonstrates this to be untrue and that nation-states change allegiances based on their national interests. Likewise, sub-state groups in Afghanistan make pragmatic decisions about their allegiances based on their own considerations.   Fotini Christia's field work studying this dynamic in recent Afghan history found that "once a warring group determined that it had a chance of higher returns with another alliance, it proceeded to switch sides."[16] To reinforce this idea and demonstrate its deeper historical roots, Ludwig Adamec describes the dynamic relative to conflict during the Anglo-Afghan Wars of the 19th Century:

> "Defections were common in the wars of the Afghan princes, as well as in wars of Afghan ghazis with British-supported Afghan troops. To avoid bloodshed and destruction, forces facing defeat deserted to the superior enemy."[17]

The acceptability of switching sides, the Afghan conception of power, and the flexibility of coalitions to realign based on interests has resulted in a uniquely Afghan way of war marked by shifting alliances and allegiances.

Switching Sides: Examples from Recent Afghan History

Switching sides has been an influential factor in modern Afghan conflict. Sometimes referred to as defection, it is perhaps a more deeply ingrained component of the Afghan way of war than is currently appreciated. This examination will only consider more recent historical examples of this tactic. It will specifically review examples from the following recent periods: The anti-Communist *Jihad* (1978-1992), the Afghan Civil

War (1992-1998), and the initial phases of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (2001-2002).

  The anti-Communist Jihad (1978-1992). On April 27, 1978, Communist sympathizers within the Afghan Army and Air Force officer corps supported a coup d'état – the Saur Revolution – against the nationalist government of Mohammed Daoud. With Daoud's death, and with few exceptions, the remainder of the military apparatus quickly transferred allegiance to the newly renamed People's Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Ironically, many of the same officers supporting the coup had supported Daoud's own 1973 coup against King Zahir Shah.[18] The communist government of the new People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), under its Secretary-General Nur Mohammed Taraki, quickly adopted policies regarding land, credit, marriage, and education that challenged existing rural tribal and family socio-economic authority structures.[19] Rebellion soon developed in the North and West among the minority communities of Afghanistan and it later developed across the Pashtun dominated south of the country. On September 16, 1979, a failed purge attempt led to the death of Taraki and the assumption of power by Hafizullah Amin. The Army shifted allegiance to a second leader in less than two years.[20] The Soviet Union, in response to the growing unrest, invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 to stabilize conditions and to support their fledgling communist neighbor, murdering Amin and installing Babrak Karmal. Again, the Army quickly backed its newly installed leader.

  A brief review of the growth of Afghan resistance groups after the 1978 coup and the subsequent Soviet invasion is useful in demonstrating coalition development dynamics. As indicated, the communist coup had the effect of initiating anti-government

rebellions. The Soviet Army invasion, however, had the effect of unifying Afghans for a

"political purpose that cut across tribal, ethnic, geographic, and economic lines."[21] That

unifying purpose was to oppose a foreign invader. By the end of 1983, there were

between 150 and 200 resistance factions that represented villages, groups of villages,

parts of provinces, or tribes.[22] Overtime, local factions improved their power position by

bandwagoning with seven larger Peshawar-based resistance groups. Those Peshawar-

based factions received and then distributed material and financial support from the

Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, increasing the relative prestige,

capability, and support infrastructure for the newly integrated local factions. This

amalgamation process served to increase territorial control of, the number of fighters

available to, and supporting resources available to the larger resistance group leaders –

measures previously identified as important in gauging coalition power in Afghan

conflict.

Even before the Soviet invasion, some Democratic Republic of Afghanistan

(DRA) units had already begun to switch sides to the resistance. Readers will note the

use of the words *desertion* and *defection* in this section. They are more appropriate

during this period than in subsequent ones for three reasons: (1) the intervention of an

outside power; (2) the implementation of widely unpopular social programs by the

Afghan government, and (3) the use of conscription to man the DRA Army. Detailed

historical documentation of DRA unit defections is limited, but desertions and mutinies

became more common. A number of significant examples are provided to demonstrate

this fact. Early in the political crisis, in March 1979, violent demonstrations in Herat

resulted in the mass desertion of the 17th Division.[23] Units in the Jalalabad area also

rebelled in April while Armored Units in the capital mutinied as early as June.[24] In

August, the 5th Brigade of the 9th Division revolted in Kunar province.[25] Finally, in

October of 1979, troops of the 7th Infantry Division unsuccessfully mutinied near

Kabul.[26] Conditions in Afghanistan were so unstable and morale in the Army was so

low that by the end of the year, when the Soviets invaded, the DRA Army had lost about

40,000 troops or 40% of the total strength of the service to desertions and defections.[27]

Defections from DRA forces to the resistance continued through the period of

Soviet occupation. The Army defection rate was about 10,000 soldiers per year.[28]

Incompatible ideological or religious views between the Afghans and their Soviet

backers likely affected the defection rate of Afghan troops. However, conscription

practices used to man the DRA Army almost certainly played a role. In the face of mass

desertions, the government had resorted to the use of press-gangs to round up under-

and overage conscripts for service.[29] The service commitment for conscripts was up to

four years and soldiers deserting frequently did so within the first five months of

service.[30] Unit defection appears to have rapidly tapered off after 1980 while individual

desertion and defection continued to be a significant problem. In 1981 there was only

one recorded instance of a unit defection – a battalion near Charikhar.[31] There were no

documented instances of unit defections in 1982.[32] One of the largest unit defections in

this period occurred on February 16, 1989, as the Soviet Army completed its withdrawal

from Afghanistan. Three DRA regiments defected in the northeast provinces of Takhar

and Badakhshan and much of the equipment abandoned by these units ending up with

the Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Masud.[33]

While unified in purpose, conflict among resistance factions did exist. Conflict usually arose over control of specific territory and the authority it conveyed and the fiscal and military resources it justified for the commander.   The Gulbuddin Hikmetyar faction of *Hizb-e-Islami* (HIG)[34] played a significant role in intra-factional fighting, particularly in the provinces to the east of Kabul.[35] Amstutz documented eight different factions engaged in factional in-fighting during the period 1981-1983 alone.[36] The inability of resistance factions to cooperate in the face of foreign occupation foreshadowed the Civil War that would follow once the Soviet Army left Afghanistan.

The DRA, however, also had some, albeit limited, success in attracting resistance factions to switch sides during the Soviet occupation period. One documented example was the creation of counter-guerrilla organizations called *Pader Watan* units in 1983.[37] A resistance commander described the *Pader Watan* in the following way:

> "Their men do not wear uniforms, but they earn much larger wages than the military….Their leader, Ismatullah Khan [a former mujahidin leader], commands 250 men and claims affiliation with Islam."[38]

The commander's comments suggest that some interest greater than the perception of a common threat and a unifying religious belief caused the *Pader Watan* commanders to switch sides from the anti-government coalition to the pro-government coalition. Amstutz, however, only documents two *Pader Watan* units, one in Zari and one in Pul-i-Khumri.[39] This information in addition to the description above suggests this program had limited success in attracting resistance fighter to the side of the government and that these units had limited capability and localized impacts. The failure of the combined efforts of the DRA and Soviet Armies to defeat or contain the Afghan

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resistance movement resulted in the eventual withdrawal of the Soviet Army and, subsequently, to the outbreak of Civil War in Afghanistan.

The Afghan Civil War (1992-1998). On 15 February 1989, Soviet forces completed their planned and orderly withdrawal from Afghanistan leaving military advisers, vast stocks of ammunition and equipment for the DRA Armed Forces, and the unpopular communist government of Mohammed Najibullah. The assassination of Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq and his senior military and intelligence leadership in 1988, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, left the Afghans on their own.   These factors and factional infighting among mujahedeen leaders led to a new Civil War pitting guerilla groups, who had united to fight the Soviet Army, against one another.

The Afghan Civil War was a period of conflict marked by continually shifting coalitions formed around the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance and the opposing Pashtun-dominated HIG, and later the Pashtun-based Taliban movement. The early fighting, from 1992 to 1994, revolved around the conquest of Kabul. The appearance of the Taliban in 1994 marked a significant transformation of the conflict. Support for the Taliban quickly spread through the Pashtuns of the south and Kandahar fell in November of the same year. The Taliban quickly surpassed Gulbuddin Hikmetyar's *Hizb-e-Islami* (HIG) as the leading Pashtun-based group reaching 25,000 fighters in 1996. On 4 April of 1996, in front of 1200 Pashtun religious leaders, Mullah Omar declared himself *Amir-ul Momineen* or Commander of the Faithful and Emir of Afghanistan.   The effect Mullah Omar's action was to add legitimacy to the Taliban movement and to broaden his base of support among the Pashtun tribes in the south.[40]

Kabul fell to the Taliban five months later after years of stalemate. The Tajik-Hazara-Uzbek coalition reformed to balance against the growing power of the Taliban, but could not stop the Taliban from capturing Mazar-e-Sharif in August of 1998 and the Hazarajat – the home of the Hazaras in the central mountains of Afghanistan – in September. By the end of 1998, 90% of Afghanistan was in Taliban hands - only Takhar and Badakhshan provinces in the Northeast and the Panjshir Valley north of Kabul remained under the control of the Northern Alliance. During this Civil War period, three particular examples of shifting alliances illustrate the dynamics of key ethnic factions and their leaders – many of whom retain significant political/military importance – switching sides.

At the end of the Soviet-Afghan war, Gulbuddin Hikmetyar was the most powerful and influential mujaheddin leader among the Pashtun-based factions. Hikmetyar led the *Hizb-e-Islami* (HIG) faction and over the course of the Afghan Civil War switched sides twice. From 1992 to 1994, the HIG challenged the Northern Alliance for control over Kabul repeatedly attacking but failing to gain effective control over the city. The appearance of the Taliban in 1994 fractured the HIG as "ethnic bandwagoning"[41] drew off Hikmetyar's fighters, equipment, and territory to Taliban control. With his power diminished, Hikmetyar joined the Tajiks in April of 1996 and entered Kabul, in June, for the first time in 15 years as the Prime Minister to Tajik President Burhanuddin Rabbani.[42] HIG's stay in the capital was short-lived as the Taliban would take Kabul three months later and force Hikmetyar to withdraw to the north with Masud and his Tajik fighters. Hikmetyar eventually fled to Iran where he stayed for 6 years, until February 2002, when he returned to Afghanistan to fight, in loose support of his former Taliban allies, the Americans and the newly formed Afghan Transitional Government.

The second example is General Abdul Rashid Dostum and his Uzbek faction. General Dostum was the principal Uzbek warlord in Afghanistan. He and his followers switched sides three times, and his faction also split once, during the Afghan Civil War. At the end of the anti-communist *Jihad*, and what proved to be the outset of the Civil War, Dostum and his Uzbek militia, which had been a key and highly effective striking force of the Communist government, suddenly joined with Ahmad Shah Masud's Tajiks and the Hazaras led by Abdul Mazari to form the Northern Alliance. They quickly seized and occupied the capital of Kabul on 25 April 1992. Increasingly dissatisfied with the Tajik leadership and denied a formal role in government - despite his assessment that his defection had been the necessary and sufficient cause of the Communist's fall - Dostum switched allegiances and joined with Hikmetyar's *Hizb-e-Islami* faction to oppose the new Islamic Republican government.[43] Dostum allegedly cooperated with Taliban leading to their take over of Western Afghanistan including the city of Heart, but after the Taliban takeover of Kabul, in September of 1996, Dostum rejoined the Tajik-Hazara alliance. The combination of internal factional intrigue, bribes and the promise of power in the Taliban-based coalition caused a split in the Uzbek faction in 1997 forcing Dostum to flee to Turkey as the Taliban captured Mazar-e-Sharif. Malik Pahlawan, the Uzbek commander who broke with Dostum and sided with the Taliban, quickly flipped back to the Tajik-based coalition as a promised power-sharing agreement with the Taliban broke down. Dostum, returned from Turkey in 2001 to rejoin Masud and the Northern Alliance in their fight against the Taliban.

Finally, Abdul Mazari led the *Hizb-e-Wahadat* party of Shi'a Hazaras. He and his faction switched sides three times, and split twice, in the course of the Afghan Civil War.

In 1992, the Hazaras allied with the Tajiks and Uzbeks occupied Kabul. As Tajik power continued to grow, Hazara dissatisfaction increased as it had with the Uzbeks. Soon, the Hazaras were in open conflict with the Tajiks inside Kabul. Tensions remained high for 6 months until the Hazaras left the Tajik-based coalition to join with Hikmetyar and the HIG despite a long history of Hazara repression by the Pashtuns.[44] In May 1994 the Hazaras split with a faction, led by Islam Akbari, re-joining the Tajiks and the remnants of the *Wahadat* faction of Mazari remaining in the coalition with the Pashtuns of the HIG and the Uzbeks. Mazari, seeing the growing power of the Taliban, switched sides and joined their coalition in 1995, but was killed by the Taliban in a dispute following their defeat in the continuing battle for Kabul. Mazari was succeeded by Karim Khalili. The Hazaras reunited, both the Khalili and Akbari factions, and rejoined the Tajik-Uzbek coalition following the September 1996 seizure of Kabul by the Taliban. Finally, as the Taliban seized Mazar-e-Sharif and advanced on the Hazarajat , Akbari split again from the Hazara Wahadat faction and joined the Taliban coalition. The Afghan Civil War set conditions for the introduction of external extremist forces that would eventually use Afghan territory as a launching pad for international terrorism and bring yet another superpower into conflict in Afghanistan.

Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (2001-2002). The Taliban gained control over much of Afghanistan by 1996 with Northern Alliance forces holding only a small enclave in the north eastern corner of the country. The leadership of the Al-Qaeda network made its home in Afghanistan and supported the Taliban efforts to defeat the Northern Alliance. They also used the nation as a base from which to plan and execute a series of attacks against western and American interests. The Al-Qaeda attacks culminated in

the September 11, 2001 attack on New York City, Washington D.C., and Shanksville, Pennsylvania. In Afghanistan, these events were preceded, on September 10, 2001, by the killing of Ahmad Shah Masud – the commander of Northern Alliance forces opposing the Taliban.

On the 20th of September 2001, President George W. Bush, before a joint session of Congress, conveyed the following ultimatum to the Taliban government of Afghanistan:

> "By aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing murder. And tonight the United States of America makes the following demands on the Taliban: (1) Deliver to United States authorities all of the leaders of Al Qaeda who hide in your land; (2) Release all foreign nationals, including American citizens you have unjustly imprisoned; (3) Protect foreign journalists, diplomats and aid workers in your country; (4) Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan. And hand over every terrorist and every person and their support structure to appropriate authorities; and (5) Give the United States full access to terrorist training camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating. These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. The Taliban must act and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists or they will share in their fate."[45]

The Taliban refused, setting in motion Operation ENDURING FREEDOM.

The United States quickly deployed military Special Operations Forces (SOF) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) para-military teams to advise and support Afghan Northern Alliance forces in the conduct of operations to remove the Taliban from power and to destroy Al-Qaeda. The SOF and CIA teams assisted with operational planning, intelligence development, logistics support, and the coordination of overwhelming US airpower in support of Northern Alliance ground maneuver forces. The initial operational focus was to secure the northern operational enclave. Mazar-e-Sharif was captured on November 10 and Taloqan followed on November 11. With the North

generally secure, the newly formed coalition turned its attention to taking the capital – Kabul.

On the Shomali plains, north of Kabul, thousands of Northern Alliance and Taliban soldiers faced each other in a virtual stalemate. The Northern Alliance commander, General Bismullah Khan, waited impatiently for American airpower to support his planned offensive. On 7 November 2001, a mid-level Taliban Commander named Mohammed and 730 of his troops walked out of their position and headed north to switch sides and join forces with General Khan.[46] To facilitate his departure, Commander Mohammed's troops killed their twenty man Arab al-Qaeda detachment, who certainly would have opposed by force any attempt to switch sides by their Afghan Taliban allies, and with the promise of $500,000 to Commander Mohammed, crossed over to the Northern Alliance to fight against their former Taliban brothers. Shifting allegiance was nothing new to Commander Mohammed; as one Northern Alliance officer noted, "He used to be one of our commanders and he defected to the Taliban when he thought they were going to win."[47] His second defection, or return, and the arrival of US airpower, were important in changing the balance of power on the Shomali front and led to the fall of capital to coalition troops seven days later on 14 November 2001.

The US had few allies with which to confront the Taliban in the south and would take time to find a viable Afghan leader. Hamid Karzai, an Afghan Popalzai tribal chief, living in Quetta was one such ally. Despite his initial support for the Taliban, his concern about the path of Taliban governance once they were in power grew into open opposition. At about the same time as the fall of Kabul, US SOF troops were linking up

with Karzai to support operations against Tarinkot and later against Kandahar, the spiritual capital of the Taliban. Less than a month later Kandahar fell to forces organized by the future Afghan President. Significant in this example is the role that tribal authority structures played in the fall of, arguably, the most important city in the country. Again, switching sides was important to enabling the success of anti-Taliban forces. Karzai quickly built up a coalition of Durrani tribal leaders to challenge Taliban control of Kandahar. He organized his own Popalzai tribesmen and secured the support of Gul Agha Sherzai and his reconstituted Barakzai militia. More importantly, Karzai was able to secure the support of formerly pro-Taliban Alokozai tribal leader Mullah Naqib and Bashir Noorzai of the Noorzai tribe.[48] The support of Mullah Naqib and Bashir Noorzai had previously been instrumental in the seizure of Kandahar by the Taliban seven years earlier in November 1994.

The siege of Kunduz is useful in reinforcing the previously discussed idea that the presence of foreign fighters can undermine Afghan efforts to switch sides. Subsequent to the fall of Taloqan in November 2001, the city of Kunduz was occupied by Afghan Taliban troops reinforced with foreign volunteers and elements of Al-Qaeda. Northern Alliance forces surrounded the city and sought to negotiate a settlement. On 13 November, Tajik Northern Alliance troops approached the city to accept the surrender of a group of Afghan Pashtun Taliban, but were fired upon by foreign fighter who had discovered the plan.[49] The Northern Alliance entrenched and US SOF personnel coordinated airstrikes over the next eleven days to force a Taliban surrender or to set conditions for an offensive against the city. The airstrikes took a heavy toll on the city's defenders and led to their capitulation on the November 24, 2001. Western

journalists, who witnessed the surrender, described "seven hundred Afghan Taliban emerging from the city waving and smiling in response to Northern Alliance cheers, even shaking hands with their besiegers."[50] Their foreign comrades were not treated similarly; they were taken prisoner and transferred to Qala Jangi fortress in Mazar-e-Sharif.[51] While Afghans are prepared to switch sides, when conditions suit them, their foreign partners – with different cultures and ideological beliefs – seem less inclined to do so.

Analysis and Recommendations

Previous sections of this paper provide context for subsequent analysis and recommendations relative to the practice of switching sides. These recommendations are intended to provide planners with a number of considerations that can enable successful employment of this tactic while engaged in conflict in Afghanistan. The acceptance of the assumptions related to how and why coalitions form; the relative importance of power to Afghan combatants; and the acceptability of switching sides in Afghan conflict will facilitate this discussion. Recommendations will be provided in two parts – those recommendations that help to undermine anti-government coalitions and those that help to sustain pro-government coalitions.

Undermining Anti-Government (Taliban) Coalitions. The ultimate objective in Afghanistan is to weaken the Anti-government coalition to a point where political reconciliation becomes the only alternative to outright destruction. Pro-government political and military planners, in their effort to build the balance of power in favor of the government, must act to undermine the power of the anti-government coalition to make this possible. Planners must accept that switching sides is an option that can be

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employed; they must understand factional vulnerabilities within the anti-government coalition; they must understand the vulnerabilities of factional leaders; and they must set conditions to allow anti-government factional leaders to switch sides.

Planners must, first, understand that switching Sides is an accepted tactic in Afghan conflict. While it is contrary to accepted western military practices, switching sides must be recognized as an option and be considered in planning. It should be considered in operations were Afghan Army units are in the lead. Failure to understand the cultural context or the practice of mirror-imaging could prevent its consideration. Planners must guard against this danger.

Next, planners must understand and identify potential vulnerabilities in the broader anti-government (Taliban) coalition that can be exploited. Understanding that coalitions require physical and virtual links between physically separated factions, these links offer opportunity for exploitation. These links are established based on the need to plan and coordinate action within subordinate factions and the larger Taliban-based coalition. Factions, like those of Hikmetyar and Haqqani, have their own interests that may be temporarily similar, converging, or diverging from those of the Taliban. Those interests influence factional willingness to share operational capabilities, intelligence, and logistics infrastructure. Interests are the rationale for cooperation while the links are the means to facilitate cooperation. Understanding factional interests the means used by the coalition and factional leadership will help to identify vulnerabilities to exploit both within and between factions.

Planners must understand and identify potential vulnerabilities among Taliban and Taliban-affiliated factional commanders that can be exploited. A number of factors

can facilitate or inhibit the possibility of commanders switching sides. Switching sides is facilitated by two factors – a perception of relative power imbalance favoring their opponent and sufficient incentive for the factional commander to switch sides. Incentives can vary, but three worthy of initial consideration include: an offer of a comparable position of authority in society; a security guarantee for those switching sides and their families; and some level of cash incentive. A number of factors can also undermine efforts. This is an Afghan dynamic and can be undermined, for example, by the presence of foreign fighters who don't share the Afghan cultural acceptance of switching sides. Additionally, other personal factors can affect this inherently personal decision to switch sides. Some additional factors could include the degree of personal religious or ideological intensity, perceptions about future treatment, commitments to subordinates, and the past mistreatment or death of family members.

Pro-government planners must, finally, target vulnerable commanders and set conditions for them to switch sides. A combination of military pressure and incentives can bring vulnerable commanders to switch sides. Pressure can be applied both on factions and on the broader coalition itself. Pressure, in this context, includes placing the anti-government coalition in an inferior balance of power position compared to their adversary in addition to targeted military action. The intended effect of these combined actions is to build a perception of imminent defeat among the anti-government factional leaders. Targeted military action should include appropriate combinations of conventional action as well planned campaigns to exploit fissures in the anti-government coalition. Such a campaign could include employing combinations of strategic communications, psychological warfare, electronic warfare, aerial attack, and

SOF direct action. The intent of these actions would be to place wedges between anti-government factions and sow discontent, distrust, and dissent and undermine the strength of the coalition by splitting off weaker partners. Some specific examples of action might include implying leaders of factions are talking with the government about reintegration or reconciliation; suggesting that the deaths of factional leaders or soldiers were caused by the action or inaction of other factions; or actually killing members of one faction and leaving evidence implicating another faction. Effective planning must be enabled by effective intelligence collection efforts, particularly human intelligence with local agents and actionable signals intelligence.

Planners must also understand that there is a level of tactical or operational risk associated with implementing this approach. Planners and commanders must be aware of the potential of Afghans to feign switching sides as a ruse, ploy, or deception. It can be employed to gain tactical advantage by buying time or reducing the opponent's tactical advantage by repositioning forces, reconstituting fighting capabilities, or reinforcing anti-government forces.

Sustaining Pro-Afghan Government Coalitions. Sustaining the relative power advantage of the pro-government coalition is just as important, or more important, than reducing the power of the anti-government coalition. Switching sides is a possible enabler for tactical and operational success but it is, by itself, insufficient to secure strategic victory. As indicated earlier, political reconciliation is the ultimate objective and switching sides is only one potential means to that end. The pro-government coalition must maintain or improve their power position relative to the anti-government coalition in order to enable reconciliation. To do this, planners must understand and manage the

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strategic and operational balance of power; they must actively manage institutional

programs that feed or sustain capabilities into the balance of power equation; they must

actively manage the reintegration of combatants who have switched sides; and they

must be cautious in their approach to reconciliation.

Planners must understand and manage the strategic and operational balance of

power. As previously indicated, an Afghan view of relative power includes a

combination of territory controlled, population controlled, and availability of arms and

supporting resources. This view of power would suggest that a counter-insurgency

strategy focused on the security of the population is a logical approach if the pro-

government coalition has sufficient staying power and flexibility. Staying power and

flexibility are required to control territory and rapidly reposition forces to areas assumed

to be safe or where risk has been assumed. Increased availability of forces is a logical

enabler to provide the required staying power and flexibility. Surging forces into the

areas currently controlled by the Hikmetyar and Haqqani factions, in addition to targeted

attacks, could alter the local balance of power and help to facilitate fracturing those

factions off of the anti-government coalition. Conversely, localized power balances

between pro-government and anti-government coalitions should be monitored to

understand where pro-government Afghan commanders might be at risk.

Next, the pro-government coalition must actively manage institutional programs

that feed or sustain capabilities into the balance of power equation. Capable security

forces must be generated at a rate that sustains or improves the balance of power in

favor of the pro-government coalition. Those forces must be organized, manned,

trained, equipped, sustained, and employed in a way that builds sustainable capacity

overtime. Appropriate organizations and processes must also be developed to sustain pro-government coalition security forces.

Active management of the reintegration of deserting or defecting combatants into society is another important consideration. In addition to maintaining Afghan commanders in the pro-government coalition, serious consideration should be given to the process of retaining commanders and soldiers who have recently switched sides. Planners cannot be short sighted in their approach to encouraging their adversaries to switching sides. Since Afghan commander are inclined to switch sides in a pragmatic way, some effort must be made to secure their continued membership in the pro-government coalition. Failure to do so could result in the loss of recently arrived commanders. Here military planning may coincide or overlap with civil planning efforts focused on combatant reintegration. The following definition of "reintegration" is found in the United Nations Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS):

> "Reintegration is the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income. Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time-frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level. It is part of the general development of a country and a national responsibility, and often necessitates long-term external assistance."[52]

Pro-government leaders must allow the defecting commander to retain his position of authority or to grant him an equal or greater position in the pro-government coalition security force, political, or social structure. The government must also be prepared to pay a short-term stipend to bridge between switching sides and subsequent reintegration. Reintegration efforts need to be actively managed because of the potential impact on balance of power and its associated security implications. Some

consideration should be given to the establishment of a combatant reintegration tracking database and district case officers to monitor the reintegration status of reintegrated combatants over time.

Finally, the pro-government coalition must be cautious in their approach to reconciliation. More precisely, western planners must be cautious about how they react to the evolving Afghan approach to reconciliation. Afghan leaders will have to secure sufficient support from a number of factions to build a sustainable coalition base from which to govern. That coalition base will include a wide variety of political, social, religious, and militia leaders. Given that Afghanistan has been at war for more than thirty years, many mid-level or senior commanders will be of questionable moral and ethical background. Some will have blood on their hands, whether directly or indirectly. As British Major-General Paul Newton put it, "There's no point in talking to people who don't have blood on their hands."[53]   This may smack of moral relativism, but it is in reality a necessary and pragmatic approach to bringing anti-government factional commanders into the government and diminishing the military capability and influence of the Taliban over the people. Retaining some of those leaders in positions of authority, may be required to maintain the pro-government coalition. While political reconciliation and efforts to counter the negative influences of narcotics and corruption are not incompatible objectives, attempts to implement reform too quickly could undermine efforts at reconciliation. Strategic patience is necessary to allow for the dual objectives of reconciliation and countering the negative influences of narcotics and corruption to be achieved in a way that avoids driving reintegrated commanders back to the Taliban.

This paper examined the complex nature of coalition warfare in recent Afghan history to better understand the influential practice of switching sides. Warfare in Afghanistan occurs within the context of Afghan culture and history and switching sides has been an accepted part of both. The application of international relations theory to sub-national conflict; the importance of 'power' in Afghanistan; and the acceptance of the practice of switching sides in Afghan conflict have been found to be useful to providing analytical context.   Historical examples of switching sides drawn from the anti-communist *Jihad*, the Afghan Civil War, and the early phase of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM demonstrate application of the practice. Understanding the practice of switching sides, the vulnerabilities of the Taliban coalition, and its subordinate commanders can facilitate successful application of this practice to achieve political and military ends. Prudent planning requires we consider this Afghan practice and exploit it wherever possible both to undermine Anti-government coalitions and to sustain the pro-government coalition in order to bring about an end to conflict in Afghanistan.

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