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Gambling on the Districts:

All-In at the GIROA Casino

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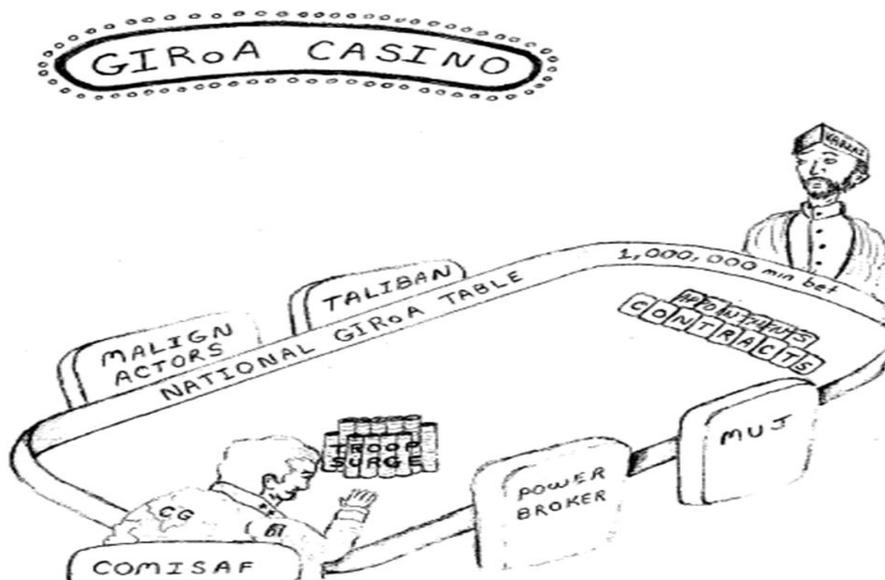


Setting the Scene

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan is gambling in the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) Casino at a table with a crooked dealer. ISAF is preparing to go all-in at the National GIROA table, betting that National GIROA reform initiatives and the recent troop surge will extend accountable, responsive government to the population. At the same time, National GIROA's dealer is dealing from the bottom of the deck to former Mujahedeen powerbrokers (and possibly the Taliban) to distribute the table's winnings (international funding and key districts) for his own benefit. ISAF needs to diversify its gamble by moving some of its chips from the National GIROA table to the Local GIROA table, which has a more legitimate dealer and better odds of winning.

Gambling at the GIRoA Casino

In the GIRoA Casino stand two tables, an active, high dollar one, National GIRoA, and an unnoticed, cheap one, Local GIRoA. At the National GIRoA table sit a number of players: Commander International Security Assistance Forces (COMISAF), former Mujahedeen, Taliban, and a few other shadowy figures. The dealer, Hamid, has but one goal – to remain dealer. Hamid has created a system to achieve this goal by brokering deals with the players at the table. All the players, except COMISAF, have agreed to keep him in his role so long as they continue to win. The only question is how long each player wants Hamid to deal.



The House Wins: Hamid's Political Strategy

President Karzai is solidifying his powerbase for the post-American political system in Afghanistan. He wants to remain president beyond the 2014 elections and is creating the political environment to achieve this goal. He is accomplishing this through a series of initiatives that individually appear benign. However, when viewed holistically from his perspective, Karzai's intent is clear. These initiatives include: appointing corrupt individuals to key positions within GIRoA, manipulating election results, creating executive bodies like the High Peace Council (HPC) and the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP), and steadily handing Afghanistan's districts back to the Mujahedeen-era powerbrokers upon whom he relies for support. To solidify his position, Hamid deals cards (lucrative contracts and international funding) from the bottom of the deck to the players that can ensure the house wins.

President Karzai's governing strategy relies on powerbroker support, not popular legitimacy. Power in Afghanistan, in turn, depends on powerbrokers' ability to extract wealth from the ground (agriculture and minerals), the government bureaucracy (taxes, fees,

checkpoints, and duties), or the international community (lucrative contracts, corruption, and graft). In the end, power emanates from controlling the population, especially in the absence of legitimate government and international resources. If ISAF and the international community follow through on their intent to support Karzai only through the 2014 elections, he will need alternate sources of support from the domestic power structure.

This support is achieved by Hamid steadily divesting power (districts and government positions) to the players at the table, thereby re-establishing the feudal system that existed during the 1990s. These players are not statesmen or politicians; they are extractors of wealth and power. They have no interest in GIROA reform or serving the population, only in expanding their influence and wealth through their positions of influence.

Afghanistan's pervasive government corruption and graft are not symptoms of "poor governance" as many contend. Instead, they are part of a calculated strategy to re-establish the Mujahedeen era feudal system. President Karzai continues to construct a political system of dependencies within GIROA ministries and the Wolesi Jirga (Afghan parliament) that benefit the players so long as he remains the dealer of the cards. The players at the table are, therefore, both empowered by and dependent upon him and could be amenable to a constitutional referendum overturning the limits on executive terms.

How Hamid Manipulates the Game: Creating and Marginalizing Institutions within GIROA

To achieve his political objectives, President Karzai establishes and marginalizes executive institutions within the GIROA structure. The Afghan Constitution, for example, calls for district elections, but Karzai has not followed through on this mandate. Yet, he saw fit to create the Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG) in response to international pressure to generate local governance. The IDLG was established in 2007 to link National GIROA to the people by establishing elements of provincial and district governance. Now that Karzai doubts ISAF's willingness to support him, he is marginalizing the IDLG because it impedes his power sharing strategy. He has also created executive bodies, such as the HPC and the APRP, to engage the Taliban on reconciliation and reintegration, respectively.

By manipulating ministries and executive agencies supported by international funding, Karzai structures ISAF's hand to his own interests, rather than the population's. This makes COMISAF's hand difficult to play in that the house has the ability to influence the game. In other words, whatever reforms ISAF implements, Karzai has the ability to shape or direct those initiatives to his benefit, either via legitimate or illegitimate means.

The Wild Card: Taliban Reconciliation

To reinforce his strategy, President Karzai has stacked a joker in the deck of cards in the form of Taliban Reconciliation. Taliban reconciliation will require Karzai to appoint Taliban leaders to GIROA positions and allow them to compete for seats in the Wolesi Jirga. Additionally, playing the reconciliation joker means handing dozens of Afghan districts directly over to the Taliban by installing its members as district governors. This would further solidify Karzai's ability to expand his influence, create additional



dependencies within GIRoA, and extend his sphere of influence over the population. By playing the joker, he can change the entire outcome of the game, particularly for COMISAF.

The River Card: Betting on the Districts

Afghanistan's districts are the conduit between National GIRoA and the population. Karzai's power sharing governing strategy hinges on powerbroker control of key positions within GIRoA and control over the districts. By placing his players in these critical locations, he solidifies his power base and political strategy. If Afghanistan's districts are overtly handed back to Afghanistan's malign actors, ISAF's odds of winning disappear because security, governance and development are not in the interest of these individuals.

By playing only at the National GIRoA table, ISAF and its international supporters have to work through the national government, which means international resources are passed on to malign actors and possibly the Taliban. As it stands now, COMISAF is directing the preponderance of the effort toward expanding the capacity of National GIRoA, hoping the troop surge creates the space for reforms to take hold. ISAF's goal to meet the population's needs at the district level will be mitigated by the corrupt players working in or with National GIRoA. Hamid's wildcard makes COMISAF's exclusive play at the National GIRoA table especially dangerous. COMISAF will lose all his chips if his strategy of playing only at the National GIRoA table is wrong.

How ISAF is Playing its Hand: All-In at a Crooked Table

ISAF's gamble is that a moderately capable National GIRoA and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) will create security and deliver services that will trickle down to the population. In ISAF's view, the key to stability is to clear areas of insurgents and establish "government in a box" at the district level. The troop surge – the decision to go all-in – seeks to give National GIRoA the ability to assert itself in areas where it is currently denied. Under these conditions, COMISAF's gamble to reach the population – even through a district focus – is likely to fail because Karzai gets to choose who governs the districts.

Instead of looking for a new table or a different dealer, ISAF continues to play Hamid's poorly dealt hands. COMISAF's (and the US Department of State's) implementation of counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine in Afghanistan demands building a national government with the hope that National GIRoA will, in turn, develop Local GIRoA. This creates doctrinal blinders that prevent ISAF from comprehending President Karzai's governing strategy and its impact on ISAF's COIN implementation. ISAF's doctrinal blinders are so strong that ISAF (and the Department of State) cannot recognize the Local GIRoA table as a viable alternative. Despite President Karzai's overt power plays and the negative effects they have on meeting the population's needs, ISAF continues to interpret his moves in terms of bad governance, not in terms of his overall governing strategy.

Does ISAF have any other gambling options? Yes, and it has the ability to hedge its bets.

How to Hedge ISAF's Bet: Move Chips to the Local GIRoA Table

The Local GIRoA table has been almost completely ignored at the GIRoA Casino aside from some Special Forces operations and non-governmental organization (NGO) initiatives. However, the Taliban continue to play at the local GIRoA table and increase their influence.

ISAF can hedge its bets with National GIRoA by directing resources straight to the village and district levels. In so doing, ISAF can create more politically legitimate institutions that are accountable to the population. By building up the resources and governance capacity of villages and districts, malign actors lose their ability to subjugate the population and extort revenue through contracts and international assistance. These effects align with true COIN doctrine and ISAF's stated population-centric strategy, which seeks to separate the population from the insurgents.

What is often misunderstood, though, is that segments of the population join the insurgency because of National GIRoA's corruption, patronage, and wealth extraction, not for any particular affinity for the Taliban. Working through and extending the reach of an illegitimate National GIRoA only reinforces many tribes' and villages' perceptions of oppression. The Taliban has utility because it provides organized, resourced resistance to GIRoA and its inability to deliver justice, governance, basic utilities, and development.

Augmenting village and district governance capacity removes the utility of the Taliban from the justice and governance equation. Additionally, Local GIRoA at the village and district levels will have significantly more accountability and legitimacy than National GIRoA due to the community obligations inherent in Afghan political culture.

Conclusion

The keys to success in Afghanistan are the villages and districts. ISAF's gamble, applying the majority of its resources through National GIRoA, is an unnecessary risk. National GIRoA has proved incapable of delivering security, justice, or development at the village and district levels, the central elements of ISAF's COIN strategy.

Karzai's governing strategy demands that the districts be divested to the powerbrokers committed to his presidency. Manipulating appointments to the districts, provinces, and executive agencies is his principal means of extending the patronage that supports him. ISAF perceives these moves as poor governance. From Karzai's perspective, this is a simple and elegant means of maintaining his power. ISAF fails to recognize Karzai's power sharing strategy due to its COIN doctrine blinders. As a result, ISAF and its international partners continue to fund the very power structure that impedes effective government services to the population.

What is unsettling is that ISAF and its partners continue to play at National GIRoA's crooked table. ISAF can mitigate the consequences of Karzai's governing strategy by directly building the capacity of villages and districts, i.e. Local GIRoA. By placing a small bet with a different, more honest and accountable dealer at a table with better odds, ISAF can mitigate its losses in the event its bets at the National GIRoA table fail to pay off. ISAF needs to diversify its risk by moving a portion of its chips from the National GIRoA table to the Local GIRoA table. It's a better bet.

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The views of the authors do not necessarily reflect the official policies and positions of the Department of Defense, U.S. Army, ISAF or the U.S. Government.

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