

Security Transitions*

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January 21, 2020

Abstract

How do foreign powers disengage from a conflict? We study the recent large-scale security transition from international troops to local forces in the context of the ongoing civil conflict in Afghanistan. We construct a new dataset that combines information on this transition process with declassified conflict outcomes and previously unreleased quarterly survey data. Our empirical design leverages the staggered roll-out of the transition onset, together with a novel instrumental variables approach to estimate the impact of the two-phase security transition. We find that the initial security transfer to Afghan forces is marked by a significant, sharp and timely decline in insurgent violence. This effect reverses with the actual physical withdrawal of foreign troops. We argue that this pattern is consistent with a signaling model, in which the insurgents reduce violence strategically to facilitate the foreign military withdrawal. Our findings clarify the destabilizing consequences of withdrawal in one of the costliest conflicts in modern history and yield potentially actionable insights for designing future security transitions.

Keywords: COUNTERINSURGENCY, CIVIL CONFLICT, PUBLIC GOODS PROVISION

JEL Classification: D72, D74, L23

*We thank Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, Wioletta Dziuda, Anthony Fowler, Hannes Mueller, Christopher Price, Jacob Shapiro, and audiences at the Chicago Harris Political Economy, ESOC Annual Conference, University of Warwick, IAE Barcelona Workshop on Prediction for Prevention, HiCN conference, CREST Political Economy Workshop, and Labex OSE Aussois Days. Manh Duc Nguyen provided excellent research assistance. Support from the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Conflicts is gratefully acknowledged. We thank Phil Eles, ANQAR technical lead at NATO, for granting access to the platform and providing technical feedback. Any errors remain our own.

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