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AMIN SAIKAL

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The Afghanistan Conflict: Gorbachev's Options

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AMIN SAIKAL

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The Afghanistan conflict has become a lingering major crisis in world politics. The Soviet invasion of the country in late December 1979 marked the first direct Soviet military action since World War Two against any state outside the Warsaw Pact zone. The invasion has had far reaching consequences not only for the Soviet Union's foreign relations, but also for regional security and international order. Since the Soviets have thus far failed to pacify the Afghan people and make their military presence in Afghanistan, in support of a totally incompetent and unpopular communist regime, acceptable to the world community, the younger Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev has lately found it expedient to opt for a political solution of the Afghan problem. Gorbachev's efforts in this respect, however, have thus far produced few tangible results.

Dr Saikal examines the roots of this conflict and the possible motives behind the original Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan. He also evaluates the Soviet strategy for pacifying the country and the failure of this strategy in the context of the growth of the Afghan resistance and international support for it. Further, he looks at changes in Soviet strategy under Gorbachev, with a view to identifying what type of political solution the Gorbachev leadership has unsuccessfully so far sought, and what options are available to it in the event that it is genuinely interested in a solution which would enable the Soviets to disentangle themselves from this increasingly costly conflict.

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Amin Saikal,
Canberra,
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INTRODUCTION

The Soviet Union is now fighting in Afghanistan the longest and most humiliating war in its history. Presently in its eighth year, the war found its proximate trigger in the seizure of power in Kabul in a bloody coup on 26 April 1978 carried out by a small cluster of pro-Soviet elements, who proclaimed the rule of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), and declared Afghanistan a 'Democratic Republic', with 'fraternal ties' with the Soviet Union. It really began, however, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 to sustain the PDPA's rule in the face of nationwide opposition, headed by the Afghan Islamic resistance forces, the Mujahedin, who have been locked in fierce fighting with the Soviets ever since. It is a war in which the Soviets now evidently wish they had never become involved. This is mainly due to the fact that despite mounting human and material losses, as well as damage to Soviet international prestige, the Soviets' massive military efforts to consolidate PDPA rule and to pacify the opposition have produced few tangible results.

The PDPA has remained extremely factionalised and unpopular, with virtually no prospect of being able to rule Afghanistan on its own in the foreseeable future. By contrast, although lacking the sophistication and firepower of the Soviets, and like the rest of the Afghan people suffering horrendous losses, the opposition has managed with increased effectiveness to sustain and enlarge its struggle against 'the Godless communist imposition'. It has remained firm in its demand for the immediate, unconditional withdrawal of all Soviet troops and the right of the Afghan people to 'self-determination'. This demand has had the support of the international community, a great majority of whose member states have annually, in the United Nations General Assembly, condemned the Soviet invasion and called for a prompt Soviet troop pullout to allow

the Afghans to determine their own future. In recognition of this and their own varying individual political and strategic interests, several such member states have actively supported the Afghan resistance. Pakistan - a frontline state, which hosts about three million Afghan refugees, has given crucial logistic support for the Mujahedin and acted as the conduit for the supply of outside arms to them. Similarly, certain other regional Islamic countries, most notably Iran, where almost two million Afghans have sought refuge, and Saudi Arabia, have made some material contribution to the resistance, as have China, the United States and Britain. Although the Mujahedin have thus far salvaged most of their arms from the Soviet and Afghan troops and proved that their Islamic struggle is popularly self-generating and self-propelling, the limited outside material aid has been important in helping them to maximise the costs of the war for the Soviets. It is important to recognise that, contrary to Soviet allegations, this assistance commenced after the Soviet invasion, not before it.

As a result, the Soviet Union has increasingly been bogged down and confronted with an unprecedented political and military stalemate in Afghanistan. This, together with the growing unpopularity of the war with the Soviet public¹, has rendered the Afghan problem a lingering major difficulty for the Kremlin. Previous Soviet leaders, most importantly Leonid Brezhnev, may have been prepared to weather the crisis for the sake of long-term gains and Soviet prestige as a global power. However, since his assumption of power from an aged leadership generation in March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev has found the crisis out of place in the scheme of his priorities. Given his policy of *glasnost* ('publicity') and evident eagerness

¹See *The Soviet Public and the War in Afghanistan: Perceptions, Prognoses, Information sources* (AR 4-85, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Munich, June 1985), and Taras Kuzio, 'Opposition in the USSR to the Occupation of Afghanistan', *Central Asian Survey*, vol.6, no.1, 1987.

to revitalise Soviet society, to promote the USSR's international image as that of a constructive world power and, by the same token, to make a break with the Brezhnev era, he has increasingly voiced profound unhappiness about the Afghan situation, with an apparent tendency to question the wisdom of the Soviets' original military involvement. Indeed, the invasion was recently described by a Soviet academic as a 'tragedy',² and by a UN-based Soviet diplomat as a 'mistake'.³ It is therefore no surprise that Gorbachev has expressed a willingness to find a political solution to the problem as a prelude to a withdrawal of Soviet troops.

To this end, in the wake of Gorbachev's description of the problem on 25 February 1986 as a 'bleeding wound'⁴, the Soviets have pursued a vigorous campaign of political initiatives. Against the background of intensified military operations, they have sought to achieve a political settlement on the basis of three main objectives. They are: (1) to overhaul the PDPA's rule; (2) to harmonise relations between the PDPA and at least some, if not all, of the opposition elements; and (3) to reach a political settlement, involving most significantly a 'non-interference' agreement between the PDPA regime and Pakistan. They have pressed for these objectives by introducing certain changes in the PDPA leadership, so as to make it more acceptable to the Afghan people and the outside world; and by promoting a process of 'national reconciliation', up to the point of inviting Majaheedeen leaders and prominent figures of former Afghan regimes, now living abroad, to enter dialogue with the PDPA leadership for the creation of a 'coalition government of

²Dr Nodari Simoniya voiced this view in an interview published in *The Times of India*, 26 May 1987.

³Mr Roland Timberbayev used this term in an address at Columbia University: see *The Canberra Times*, 23 March 1987.

⁴Mikhail Gorbachev, *Political Report of the CPSU Central Committee to the 27th Party Congress* (Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, Moscow, 1986) p.86.

national unity' and a constitution respecting Islam as the national religion, as well as salient Afghan traditional values.

Furthermore, they have combined this with moves politically to seduce and militarily to pressure Pakistan to conclude a negotiated settlement, in the knowledge that such a settlement would not only undermine the resistance, but also the overall outside aid to it. They have preferred that a settlement be reached within the framework of the UN-sponsored indirect-proximity Geneva peace talks, which have been conducted between Kabul and Islamabad since mid-1982. Lately, Gorbachev has signalled a clear willingness for the ex-King of Afghanistan, Mohammed Zahir Shah, who since his overthrow in the republican coup of 1973 has been living in exile in Rome, to play a central role in the creation of a government of national unity.⁵ Moreover, it is speculated that Moscow would not be averse to a 'round-table conference' with the Mujahedin leaders for this purpose.⁶

However, so far Moscow's peace initiatives, like its military efforts, have not yielded any concrete results. Maintaining their long-standing demands, the Mujahedin have rejected the initiatives as a 'fraud', designed to split the resistance and undermine international support for it. They have regarded any concept of power-sharing with the PDPA and close, organic links with the Soviet Union as anathema to their struggle for freedom and the establishment of an Islamic government. Similarly, King Zahir Shah has declined any coalition with the PDPA. It is clear that as long as the Soviets continue to insist on a governing role for the PDPA in any settlement arrangement, the chances of a *viable* solution to the Afghan problem in the near future are very slim. This raises a number of fundamental questions. Why did the Soviets invade Afghanistan in the first place? What has gone wrong with the Soviet strategy of

⁵See *Pravda*, 20 May 1987.

⁶See Lawrence Lifschultz, 'Towards a round-table conference', *The Times of India*, 21 May 1987.

consolidating the PDPA's rule and pacifying the opposition? Is the Gorbachev leadership after a settlement which could enable the Soviets to achieve politically what they have thus far failed to do militarily? What are the real options open to the involved parties in the conflict?

For two main reasons, there are difficulties in answering these questions. First, we have little direct access to the process of Soviet policy formulation. Second, Afghan politics have traditionally been practised largely through undocumented informal networks, which are difficult to explore. However, these obstacles are not insuperable, and one can refer to both Soviet pronouncements and actions, and reliable inside accounts of Afghan political and social interactions, in order to build up a picture of the situation as accurately as possible.

BACKGROUND

While there is no single causal explanation of the Afghan conflict, one fact remains central to any study of the problem: that it came against the backdrop of long-standing Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. This involvement actually began in the mid-1950s in the climate of global cold war and on the basis not of any ideological affinity, but of a mutually convenient 'aid agreement' between Moscow and Kabul.

It is implied in the memoirs of N.S. Khrushchev that the Soviets were motivated by growing concern about the intensified anti-Soviet global stance of the United States, and the American penetration of the Southwest Asian region in particular.¹ As the US policy of containment of the USSR became ever more concrete, Iran and the newly founded Pakistan, together with Turkey, drifted rapidly into the Western camp. The entry of these states into the Western-sponsored Baghdad Pact (1955) and its successor, the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), which came into existence following the successful Arab nationalist coup in Iraq and Iraq's withdrawal from the Pact in 1958, as well as their concurrent bilateral military agreements with the United States entrenched them in an anti-Soviet alliance.

Fearing American encirclement, the post-Stalin leadership perceived this development as a major challenge in a region, which the Soviets traditionally regarded as their 'southern-flank zone of security and interests'² for two main reasons. First, it is a proximate region with which the USSR shares not only long

¹See N.S. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament* (edited by Strobe Talbott, André Deutsch, London, 1974) pp.298-300.

²See Amin Saikal, 'The Method of Soviet Intervention: The Cases of Poland and Afghanistan', in R.F. Miller (ed.) *Poland in the Eighties: Social Revolution Against 'Real Socialism'* (Occasional Paper no.18, Department of Political Science, Research School of Social Science, Australian National University, Canberra, 1984).

frontiers but also common Islamic ethno-linguistic groups. Second, it is strategically located between the Soviet Union, and the internationally important Indian Ocean and the oil-rich Persian Gulf, where the Soviets, like their Tsarist predecessors, have always been interested in securing a leverage against the traditional dominance of their adversaries. They have consequently seen it as imperative to be constantly alert to developments in the region and key constituent states. By the same token, they have viewed it as legitimate and desirable to do whatever is feasible to secure at least friendly governments, and neutralise and, if possible, negate the advances of their adversaries in the region. Indeed, if Stalin had had his way he would probably not in 1946 have withdrawn Soviet troops from northern Iran, where during the post-1941 Allied occupation of Iran Moscow had found the national Iranian and global environment conducive to establishing two pro-Soviet socialist republics.³

Meanwhile, as one of the central constituents of the region, Afghanistan declined to join the pro-Western regional schemes. Although presiding over a predominantly traditional, Islamic-tribal, illiterate and poor neutral country, where historically people distrusted Russians and few had more than a rudimentary knowledge of Marxism-Leninism, the autocratic Afghan monarchy under Zahir Shah (1933-1973) deemed it in the best interest of the nation to pursue the traditional Afghan policy of neutrality in world politics. Two important factors accounted for this. One was Afghanistan's sensitive geo-political position, given that it shared with the USSR a common border and Islamic ethnic groups, many of whose members had fled the horrors of the Bolshevik revolution and its aftermath. The other was the country's border disputes with Pakistan, which led to a grave deterioration in relations between the two sides in the

³Amin Saikal, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980) pp.32-34.

1950s and the early 1960s; and less importantly with Iran. Hence, the objective of the Afghan leadership was, on the one hand, not unduly to antagonise the Soviet Union, and, on the other, not to be disadvantaged in what Kabul perceived as its legitimate claims against its Western-allied neighbours, especially Pakistan.

At the same time, the Afghan Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud (a brother-in-law and cousin of the King, who held the reins of power from 1953 to 1963, but subsequently overthrew his cousin's monarchy in the coup of July 1973 and served as the first republican president of Afghanistan until the communist takeover of April 1978) urgently desired to accelerate the process of modernisation and strengthen the central authority against the tribal powers and Pakistan.⁴ For this, he needed extensive foreign aid. Although authoritarian and centralist in his politics and approach to nation-building, because of his and his people's aversion to communism, Daoud initially requested such aid from Washington. However, the latter's refusal to provide military aid and play an impartial, active role in resolving the worsening Afghan-Pakistan dispute on the grounds that the land-locked and underdeveloped Afghanistan, with little economic potential, was strategically less important than its American-allied neighbours, made Daoud vulnerable to the Soviet Union.⁵ Consequently, while the post-Stalin Soviet leadership, stressing 'peaceful coexistence' and 'mutual non-interference and respect' among nations, was searching for friends in Third World countries, especially those neighbouring the USSR, Daoud turned to Moscow for all-round assistance. He saw little danger in this in view of his policy of neutrality, Afghanistan's natural unreceptiveness to communism, and his

⁴Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980) Chapter 23.

⁵Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag Over Afghanistan* (Westview Press, Boulder, 1984) pp.23-28.

resolve to press on with his efforts also to obtain aid from other sources.

Moscow's immediate objectives in responding positively and generously to the Afghan request were clear. They were: to prevent Afghanistan from succumbing to Western and regional pressures to join pro-Western regional schemes; to discourage wider Western-backed regional cooperation; and consequently to counterbalance the American penetration of the region. Thus, in 1955, it commenced a generous programme of economic and military aid to Afghanistan, amounting to \$2.5 billion to 1979⁶; and also openly supported the country in its dispute with Pakistan, as it did with non-aligned India - another regional state embroiled in serious disputes with Pakistan. Although this prompted Washington to increase its economic aid, its efforts nonetheless proved to be too little and too late. Its total aid of \$ 532 million during the same period⁷ could not hope to match, in terms of either volume or effect, that given by the Soviet Union.

The Soviet aid resulted in two important, interconnected, developments over the next one and a half decades. It enabled the Soviets rapidly to penetrate Afghanistan's armed forces (the most important single agent of change in a developing country like Afghanistan), which became mostly Soviet trained and equipped⁸; and to gain considerable influence over its economic planning and development⁹, and some of its administrative and social infrastructure. On this basis, Afghanistan became increasingly dependent on and vulnerable to the Soviet Union.

⁶Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* (Duke University Press, Durham, 1985) pp.24-25.

⁷*Ibid.*, p.24.

⁸See Muhammad R. Azmi, 'Soviet Politico-Military Penetration in Afghanistan, 1955 to 1979', *Armed Forces and Society*, vol.12, no.3, Spring 1986.

⁹See M.S.Noorzoy, 'Long-Term Economic Relations Between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union: An Interpretive Study', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol.17, no.2, May 1985.

At the same time, Soviet aid was of marked help to Daoud in his power-centralisation and social-economic modernisation drive. His reforms fostered the growth of a small but diverse, largely urban-based, intelligentsia, voicing demands for structural political reforms leading to a parliamentary democracy.

However, Daoud did not stay in power long enough to face the most serious of these demands. Afghan-Soviet ties expanded far beyond initial expectations, while Afghan-Pakistan relations deteriorated, resulting in the closure in 1961 of the border between the two sides, with Afghan transit traffic coming to a halt - which caused a damaging economic crisis in Afghanistan. This prompted a split between Daoud and the King over the future direction of Afghanistan. Daoud finally found it necessary to resign after ten years' premiership, but only on the expectation that at some time in the future he would be able to reassume power through the type of political reforms which the King was by now set to introduce. The King, who for the first time appointed a non-member of the royal family to succeed Daoud, not only sought an immediate improvement of relations with Pakistan, resulting in the prompt opening of the border, but also launched in 1964 a phase of limited 'experiment with democracy'. This enabled different political groups, despite the king's failure ever to ratify the political parties bill, to become informally active in the Afghan political scene.¹⁰

These developments provided the Soviets, who could neither feel comfortable about Daoud's resignation nor view the Afghan democratic experiment as unchallengable, with leverage and opportunity, and prompted them to take a longer view of their interests and investments in Afghanistan. In the climate of the new Afghan democratic freedoms, as is now evident from direct eyewitness accounts of several key figures involved in the process of democratisation, the Soviets, acting through their embassy (the largest foreign mission in Kabul) supported the

¹⁰For details, see Dupree, *Afghanistan*, Chapters 23-24.

development in the second half of the 1960s of two pro-Moscow communist groups, the *Parcham* ('Banner') and the *Khalq* ('Masses').¹¹ They possibly did so not because they envisaged a communist takeover of Afghanistan in the immediate future - for they must have known that prevailing national conditions could in no way favour such a takeover - but because they wanted to counterbalance the emergence of other ideological groups and to safeguard themselves against possible adverse eventualities which the Afghan democratic changes might produce. Among other ideological groups, the Soviets may have perceived three as especially threatening. One was the potentially influential *Jami'at-i Islam-i Afghanistan* (Islamic Society of Afghanistan), founded by a group of Islamist instructors of the Faculty of Theology of Kabul University, demanding a radical reorganisation of Afghan society along Islamic lines. It was to this society that several Mujahedin leaders of the future belonged. Another was *Shuli Javid* (The Eternal Flame), a small but very active Maoist organisation. Although violently opposed to one another, the two tapped a common chord in their anti-Soviet communism. The third one was the ultra-nationalist *Afghan Millat* (The Afghan Nation), which among other things called for the return of the Afghan territories that Tsarist Russia had annexed in the late nineteenth century.

Initially, because of its ideological affinity and the reliability of its leadership, the Soviets preferred the urban-centred *Parcham*, led by Babrak Karmal, to the rural based *Khalq*, which was headed by Noor Mohammed Taraki and Hafizullah Amin. Nonetheless they pushed for the unity of the two within the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). But to their total dismay, they soon found out that the rivalry between

¹¹Also confirmed in Sabahuddin Kushkaki, *Daha-i Qanun Asasi: Ghaflet Zadagi Afghanha wa Fursat Talabi Rusha* [The Constitutional Decade: The Neglect of Afghans and the Russian Quest for Opportunity] (Shurai-saqafati Jihad-i Afghanistan, Peshawar, 1986) pp.142-150.

the two groups was intense. This was due to deep-seated differences along personality and tactical lines, and more importantly, linguistic division. The *Khalq* was mainly composed of rural Pushtu speakers, who made up the largest ethno-linguistic group in Afghanistan, whose support has historically been crucial to the survival of any Afghan government. The *Parcham* was made up largely of Kabul-based Dari speakers, the second largest ethno-linguistic group in the country. The initial unity of the two groups survived only from 1965 to 1967, and the PDPA did not revive until 1977.¹²

Of course, certain Afghan government figures, and Washington, were increasingly aware of the Soviet backing for these groups, and indeed the growth of Soviet influence in Afghanistan. The Afghan leaders ignored the possibility of the *Parchamis* and *Khalqis* being able to play any substantial role in Afghan politics. They judged them too small to cause any harm, especially in the hostile climate of Afghan society; and recognised that to move against them could unnecessarily antagonise the Soviets. As for the United States, one top Afghan official of the time has privately revealed that the Americans constantly encouraged Afghan leaders to keep up good relations with the Soviets, so that Washington could use Afghanistan as a projector, through which it could send signals to Moscow in its desire for improved relations with the USSR.¹³

Meanwhile, the Afghan monarchy's mishandling of the 'experiment with democracy', and its inability to cope with emerging problems normally associated with modernisation, landed it in serious political difficulties, particularly against the background of severe drought which beset Afghanistan at the

¹²For a detailed discussion of the formative years of *Parcham* and *Khalq*, see Anthony Arnold, *Afghanistan's Two-Party Communism: Parcham and Khalq* (Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, 1983) Chapters 1-6.

¹³Amin Saikal, 'The USSR in Afghanistan: Regional Implications', in International Peace Academy (ed.), *The Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace* (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 1986) pp.64-65.

turn of the 1970s. In a final attempt to resolve some of these difficulties, the King in 1972 appointed as Prime Minister Musa Shafiq, one of his young and ambitious advisors, who had proved influential in encouraging him to adopt his democratic path. Shafiq was a law graduate of the orthodox Islamic Al-Azhar University (Egypt) and of Columbia University. To strengthen his own position and mute some of the demands of the potentially powerful Islamists, he immediately sought an Islamic power base for his government. He did so with a resolve not only to strengthen democracy, but also to rationalise Afghanistan's relations with the Soviet Union through seeking more strictly to limit the activities of communists, to enlist greater foreign aid from sources other than the Soviet Union, and to settle Afghanistan's differences with Pakistan and Iran.¹⁴ This inevitably brought the democratisation and modernisation drive into direct conflict with the needs of the country's relationship with the Soviet Union - a relationship which by now could have been characterised as one of dependence.

The conflict proved fatal to the Afghan monarchy, as the Soviets must have viewed the possible success of Shafiq's policies as a major step towards shifting Afghanistan away from the Soviet Union and eventually depriving Moscow of a foundation of influence upon which it had rested its West Asian power game vis-à-vis its main adversaries, which had now also come to include China. Yet, the Soviets were well positioned in Afghanistan to subvert such an eventuality. By now, they had in place not only over one thousand advisers, but also many Afghan agents and sympathisers in strategic positions in the Afghan administration and, more importantly, armed forces.¹⁵ This was to the extent that no major Afghan governmental

¹⁴Kushkaki, *Daha-i Qanun Asasi: Ghaflat Zadagi Afghanha wa Fursat Talabi Rusha*, pp.80-97.

¹⁵See J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation* (National Defense University Press, Washington D.C., 1986) pp.19-27.

decision or military operation from the main bases could be implemented without the prior knowledge of the Soviets. Meanwhile, Daoud had become deeply discontented with the King, who under the 1964 constitution had disqualified members of the royal house from ever again gaining top government positions, and he consequently forged an expedient alliance with the *Parchamis*. This aided the Soviets immensely in their desire to prevent adverse changes in Afghanistan.

Again according to reliable eyewitness accounts, while helped indirectly by Soviet advisers and directly by the *Parchamis* and their sympathisers in the armed forces, Daoud toppled his cousin's monarchy in an almost bloodless coup in July 1973. He declared Afghanistan a republic, with 'unshakable' friendship with the Soviet Union, which was first to recognise the Daoud regime. He also included several closet *Parchamis* in his cabinet. Daoud's republicanism, and his prompt banning of all political groups and suppression of Islamists and Maoists as well as renewal of hostilities with Pakistan must have originally pleased Moscow. However, after consolidating his rule by the mid-1970s, Daoud emerged as untrustworthy from Moscow's perspective. It discovered that Daoud above everything else was a self-seeking nationalist, that his alliance with the *Parchamis* was one of political convenience, and that he desired to balance his relationship with Moscow. Daoud instituted a non-communist one-party system, resolved to rid his administration of communists, pressed for quasi-capitalistic changes, and invited Western, Japanese and Indian companies rather than the Soviet Union to participate in several major mining, economic-industrial and communications projects, including the first Afghan railway network. He also sought economic aid from alternative sources. He not only reached a rapprochement with Pakistan, but also sought close ties with the Heads of regional oil-rich states, most notably the Shah of Iran and King Khalid of Saudi Arabia, as well as President Sadat of Egypt, whom the Soviets regarded as their

adversaries. Further, he launched a vigorous campaign to strengthen Afghanistan's position in the non-aligned movement, with his acting foreign minister calling for the expulsion of Cuba from the movement.

Daoud's policies were not intended either to offend the Soviets or to cause Afghanistan to drift into the Western camp, but they were devised and conducted in haste, shortsightedness and in neglect of the fact that Moscow might perceive them as threatening to its interests. Consequently, as is evident from accounts provided by some prominent *Parchami* figures during their subsequent jailing by Amin, the Soviet embassy in Kabul directly urged the *Parcham* and *Khalq* in 1977 to forego their past rivalry and reunite within the PDPA in self-defence against Daoud. This led to the bloody coup of April 1978, enabling the PDPA to seize state power, eliminating Daoud and most of his colleagues, who were immediately denounced by the PDPA and Moscow as 'the enemies of the Afghan people'. Although in the aftermath of the coup, Amin contended that the coup plan was drawn up by him and implemented by his supporters, subsequent information provided by eyewitnesses suggests that the Soviets had a hand in the formulation and implementation of the coup plan. The PDPA's proclamation of Afghanistan as a 'Democratic Republic' with 'fraternal ties' with its 'great and selfless northern neighbour', the Soviet Union, and of a 'national democratic revolution' in Afghanistan, and Moscow's declaration of full support for this development opened a new but very dangerous phase in Afghan politics and in Afghan-Soviet relations.¹⁶ It exposed Afghanistan to the risk of Soviet intervention under the rubric of 'socialist internationalism' and the 'Brezhnev doctrine', which in the aftermath of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechslovakia stressed the international duty of the Soviet Union to protect the rule of the fraternal socialist parties.

¹⁶See Saikal, 'The USSR in Afghanistan: Regional Implications', pp.65-66.

THE RULE OF THE PDPA

The PDPA's seizure of state power was well planned, but premature, dramatic and, in many ways, unexpected. The coup, spearheaded largely by Kabul-based groups of Soviet-trained airforce and tank brigade officers under Colonel Abdul Qadir and Aslam Watanjar respectively, was executed with exceptional accuracy and sophistication, but the PDPA as a political force was in no way really equipped to rule effectively. It lacked cohesion, popular support and historical legitimacy in a country whose population could neither accept a ruling force which arose from outside the established traditional norms of authority, nor approve of its alien ideology, most of all 'Godless communism'. Neither faction of the PDPA ever managed to attract more than a few hundred committed members in a country of about 17 million people. It was clear from the start to both the PDPA leadership (which now included Taraki as President and Prime Minister, Karmal as First Deputy Prime Minister, Amin as Foreign Minister and Second Deputy Prime Minister, and Colonels Qadir and Watanjar as Defence and Communications ministers respectively) and the Kremlin that the PDPA rule could not survive for very long without massive Soviet political, economic and military support. This obliged the PDPA leadership to express its full loyalty to Moscow, and plead for all-round assistance; and led the Kremlin to commit itself deeply to the survival of the PDPA - one of the few parties in the Third World to seize power in the name of Moscow's brand of communism. Shortly after the coup, Amin had no hesitation in remarking that their 'revolution' was essentially an 'extension of the [Soviets'] Great October revolution' of 1917.¹

¹See Amin Saikal, 'The USSR in Afghanistan: Regional Implications', in International Peace Academy (ed.), *The Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace* (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 1986) p.66.

Nonetheless, as subsequent events showed, neither side really understood adequately the other's position and expectations, and the inherent dangers in their mutual commitment. Both sides perceived it to be reciprocally beneficial and rewarding in the long run. The PDPA leaders, who rose overnight from political insignificance to positions of power and became excited at the prospect of what they could achieve for themselves and Afghanistan under their rule, soon proved to be very naive, dogmatic, insecure and self-seeking. The Soviets, who for the first time found themselves in a position to use the PDPA as a bridgehead for building effective 'internal mechanisms' of Soviet control in Afghanistan and transforming the country into a 'Soviet periphery', acted in haste and short-sightedness. On the one hand, they overestimated the ability of the PDPA leaders to strengthen their party unity and control over the state machinery, and to initiate policies which could popularise the PDPA's rule by making it appear a nationalist rather than communist force. On the other, they overlooked the nature of the Afghan people: individualistic, ethno-tribal and pluralistic in their social values and attitudes; and at the same time, fiercely Islamic, patriotic and historically proud and therefore capable of mounting collective ideological and physical opposition to any foreign, particularly communist, imposition. They also did not attach sufficient weight to the effects of Afghanistan's rough terrain and permeable borders with the non-communist world which make it extremely difficult for any central government, let alone a weak one, to impose its rule throughout the land.

Consequently, the Soviets were unable to prevent the PDPA from tearing itself into pieces shortly after its seizure of power. While Taraki's 'revolutionary' role was emphasised by the regime, Amin quickly emerged as its most cunning and powerful figure, and secured key positions for his Pushtun protégés in the traditionally Pushtun-dominated armed and security forces. In this way, the *Khalqis* rapidly gained the upper hand. Within

three months of the coup, they imprisoned many *Parchamis*, and exiled Karmal and his top colleagues, who all eventually ended up in the protective custody of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. The Soviets were also unable to prevent Taraki and Amin from instituting what can be best described as a Stalinist PDPA-*Khalqi* clique rule.

While lacking the necessary manpower to enforce their rule in any substantial respect, the *Khalqis* used *terror* as a means of *governance*. They sought to eliminate systematically all political alternatives (except the *Parchamis* who were protected by Moscow), to declare war on Islamic orthodoxy and to press for certain ill-conceived, largely symbolic, socialist policies, most notably 'land reform'.² They either executed, or imprisoned, or forced into exile whomsoever they suspected of potential or actual opposition, including a considerable proportion of the tiny Afghan intelligentsia.³ Ideological purity, personal reliability, political expediency and nepotistic considerations figured centrally in their mass terror, personnel transfer and dislocation - all at the cost of thousands of lives. A number of officials of former regimes, including Musa Shafiq, were among the first group of people to be summarily executed.

As the *Khalqis* increasingly revealed their allegiance to the Soviets, and their rule became bloodier, the people in general could not help but come to detest them and their Soviet backers. Predictably, the population sought refuge in Islam as an ideology of resistance. Certain prominent members of the *Jami'at-i Islami Afghanistan*, who had fled to Pakistan as a result of Daoud's repression, set up the first Mujahedin groups.⁴ The people under local and tribal leaders began what

²See Michael Barry, 'Afghanistan - Another Cambodia?', *Commentary*, vol.74, no.2, August 1982.

³Anthony Hyman, 'Afghan Intelligentsia 1978-1981', *Index on Censorship*, no.2, 1982.

⁴See Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986) pp.74-76.

soon developed into a nationwide armed and civil resistance in support of the Mujahedin in order to defend their religion, life, land, national-tribal honour and traditions. This, together with the PDPA's internal factional fighting, rapidly undermined the PDPA-*Khalqi* rule. It prevented the *Khalq* from establishing firm control over the state machinery and particularly the armed forces, whose pre-PDPA coup strength of 90,000 troops quickly dwindled to about half, largely due to mass desertions, which boosted the Mujahedin ranks and provided them with the necessary arms to wage their Islamic *Jihad* or 'Holy War' effectively.⁵

The Soviet response to all this was two-fold. It not only stepped up its economic and military aid to the regime, but also increased its commitment of civilian and military personnel from a pre-1978 strength of about 1,000 to about 8,000.⁶ These began actively participating from mid-1978 in all major administrative and security operations. Meanwhile, Moscow joined Taraki and Amin in labelling the growing Mujahedin-led national resistance as an 'imperialist-backed', 'counter-revolutionary' reaction by 'bandits', although at the time the resistance was receiving no more than limited verbal sympathy from the outside world. In December 1978, when the *Khalqi* rule was already shaky, the Kremlin signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Amin and Taraki in Moscow, paving the way for the Soviets to intervene militarily, if necessary. The signing of the Treaty with the leaders of a collapsing government could only signal that probably as early as late 1978, the Kremlin was coming to view invasion as a possible option.

⁵K. Wafadar, 'Afghanistan in 1980: The Struggle Continues', *Asian Survey*, vol.21, no.2, February 1981, p.176.

⁶J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation* (National Defense University Press, Washington, 1986) p.38. For a more conservative estimate, see Anthony Hyman, *Afghanistan Under Soviet Domination 1964-1983* (Macmillan, London, 1984) p.105.

The only major *political* rescue operation that Moscow mounted to save the PDPA rule was in September 1979, when it asked Taraki to remove Amin, who early in the year had assumed the posts of the Prime Minister and Defence Minister, and put Karmal in his place.⁷ Amin, however, learned of the plot, killed Taraki and took over the PDPA leadership, at the same time blaming Taraki for all previous shortcomings. Although the Kremlin promptly recognised his leadership with an expression of full support, he called on Moscow to replace its ambassador, A.M. Puzanov, who was a participant in the plot.⁸ As Amin could no longer trust the Soviets as he had in the past, he also started sending friendly signals to Washington, and to at least one group of the Mujaheddin, as a way of gaining some leverage against the Soviets. These moves, together with the fact that Amin's rule was on the verge of collapse at the hands of the opposition (whose success could have delivered a perceivably hostile Islamic alternative) confronted Soviet policy makers with a very serious crisis in Afghanistan. While they had clearly failed to achieve their political objectives of building effective 'mechanisms of Soviet control', it now became all too clear that they had no hope of achieving such objectives as long as Amin headed the PDPA.

⁷See Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag Over Afghanistan* (Westview Press, Boulder, 1984) p.82.

⁸This was a more serious slight to the Soviets than it might at first appear. Puzanov was a very senior diplomat, a member of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, and had indeed served briefly as a Candidate member of the Party Presidium before the death of Stalin.

THE SOVIET INVASION

Having exhausted its political options with Taraki and Amin, the Kremlin elected to take military action. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan aimed to achieve the very political objectives which the Soviets had failed to secure through the PDPA-*Khalqi* rule. The Kremlin did not reach its invasion decision in a vacuum and in neglect of its possible consequences, as some Western scholars have implied.¹ It had nearly four months from Amin's takeover of the PDPA leadership to examine the costs and benefits of all options open to it. It had already sent several investigative missions to Kabul (one headed by the Commander of the Soviet Ground Forces, Pavlovskii, who had undertaken a similar mission to Prague before the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia) for two main purposes: to assess very closely the situation on the ground in Afghanistan; and to activate all the necessary infrastructural and logistic mechanisms of support the Soviets had secured before and after the PDPA's assumption of power. The Soviets carried out these missions on the pretence that they were there to help the Amin regime.

In fact, from the Kremlin's perspective the invasion decision was a rational and measured one. Brezhnev subsequently stated: '... the time had come when we could no longer fail to respond to the request of the government of friendly Afghanistan. Failure to do so would mean abandoning Afghanistan [to] the aggressive [imperialist-backed] forces... [and] looking on passively while a seat of serious danger to the security of the Soviet Union arose on our southern border'.² He also said that the invasion decision 'was not a simple' one. '...

¹Malcolm Yapp, 'Soviet Relations with Countries of the Northern Tier', in Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha (eds.), *The Soviet Union in the Middle East: Politics and Perspectives* (Heinemann, London, 1982) p.42.

²Quoted in *Leonid I. Brezhnev: Pages from His Life* (The Academy of Sciences of the USSR and Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1982) p.141.

the Party, Central Committee and the Soviet government acted in full awareness of their responsibility and took all circumstances into account'.³ Of course, no capital was better informed than Washington of the Afghan developments and the Soviet preparations for invasion. President Jimmy Carter's National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, had expressed his concern as early as March 1979 over 'the Soviets' creeping intervention in Afghanistan' and had informed the president on 19 September that 'a direct Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was becoming more probable'.⁴ However, as the Soviets could have safely assumed, Washington found itself helpless. This was partly due to a conflict between Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance⁵, who refused either to quarrel too much with the Soviets from the fear that this would encourage the Congress not to ratify SALT II, or to take action which might have deterred the Soviet invasion.

Appropriately enough, the Soviets chose the period between Christmas and New Year holidays, when the state machineries in the Western world were largely inactive, to airlift to Afghanistan some 50,000 heavily equipped motorised troops, whose number within a year was boosted to the current level of about 120,000, occupying Kabul and certain other strategic places in the country. They immediately killed their former comrade, Amin, and his entourage; accused Amin of being a 'CIA agent' and 'blood sucker of the Afghan people'; and put in his place their long-standing trusted ally, the *Parcham* leader, Babrak Karmal. They declared Karmal a 'democratically elected'

³For the text of Brezhnev's statement, see F. Schulze (ed.), *Soviet Foreign Policy Today: Reports and Commentaries from the Soviet Press* (The Current Digest of the Soviet Press, Columbus, 1983) pp.97-98.

⁴Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977-1981* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York, 1983) pp.426-428.

⁵See Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag Over Afghanistan* (Westview Press, Boulder, 1984) chapter 12.

leader of the PDPA, and progressive Islamic son of the Afghan people, dedicated to the cause of Afghanistan's independence and prosperity. They also contended that the Soviet Union had dispatched a 'limited contingent' of its troops to allow the PDPA to rectify Amin's mistakes, put Afghanistan's 'national democratic revolution' on its right path, and defend the country against the 'imperialist-backed internal reaction and foreign aggression'.⁶

This they contrived to do even though Karmal with several of his top colleagues (including the PDPA leader from May 1986, Dr Najibullah) had been expelled from the party and had been exiled into Eastern Europe by Taraki and Amin. The Soviets attempted to legitimise their invasion by claiming that their forces were invited to Afghanistan under the December 1978 Afghan-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation; but never plausibly explained who exactly invited them. The *Khalqis* to this day deny any knowledge of such an invitation, as it proved to be immensely to their cost; and Karmal and his colleagues had no authority to issue any such invitation, given their status as expelled and outlawed members of the PDPA.

Nothing said so far should be taken to suggest that the Soviets planned as early as the mid-1950s an eventual takeover of Afghanistan. Rather, what the historical record suggests is that the invasion was the culmination of a conscious, long-standing, Soviet drive to secure Afghanistan as a foundation for widening Soviet interests and for successful Soviet power politics in Southwest Asia vis-à-vis major regional Soviet adversaries. Once the Soviets deemed it fruitful to exploit Afghanistan's post-war vulnerability, they thereafter rarely shrank from any action that could consolidate such a foundation. They did so with a reasonable awareness of the consequences of their actions, and a readiness to cope with such consequences

⁶See Anthony Hyman, *Afghanistan Under Soviet Domination, 1964-83* (Macmillan Press, London, 1984) pp.176-177.

whenever and in whatever way necessary. When they eventually ran out of political means to build the essential mechanisms of Soviet control, they found the application of direct military force their best option to achieve such mechanisms.

In company with various Western analysts, a noted Soviet writer on international affairs, Georgi Arbatov, has suggested that the Kremlin made its invasion decision not just in view of the situation in Afghanistan, but also in the context of Soviet perception of threats to its interests arising from a number of regional and global factors, notably: (1) an Islamic resurgence in the region, in the form of Ayatullah Khomeini's Islamic militancy in Iran and of Zia ul-Haq's Islamic policies in Pakistan, developments allegedly with implications for the Muslim population of the Soviet Central Asian Republics; (2) the growing ties between Islamabad and Beijing, which had rejected the PDPA from the outset; (3) the US naval build-up in the Persian Gulf and the 'Iranian hostage crisis'; (4) the flourishing US-China rapprochement; and (5) Washington's decision in 1979 to boost its military spending, together with NATO's decision to deploy Cruise and Pershing II missiles in Western Europe.⁷

These factors, however, could not have conceivably figured seriously in the threat perception of Soviet decision makers, given the prevailing weak regional and global conditions. Khomeini's regime was embroiled in post-revolutionary turmoil and was facing growing regional and international isolation. Zia ul-Haq's rule was beset by serious domestic problems and ongoing disputes with one of the USSR's close regional friends, India, a situation which has not changed much since then. Furthermore, Pakistan was still subject to the American arms

⁷See Georgi Arbatov, *Cold War or Detente: The Soviet Point of View* (Zed Books, London, 1983) pp.2-3; and Alexandre Bennigsen, 'Soviet Islam Since the Invasion of Afghanistan', *Central Asian Survey*, vol.1, no.1, July 1983, p.69.

embargo of the early 1970s. Similarly, China, while emerging from post-Maoist uncertainties, was heavily preoccupied with the Soviet-backed Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea; and its ties with Pakistan had a very limited military dimension. As for the US, its regional standing was at an all time low following the fall of its main ally, the Shah. It lacked the regional capability to do anything more than gather a limited naval force in the Persian Gulf in order to exert pressure on Iran for the release of the American hostages. Moreover, its international position under the Carter Administration was marked by an acute restraint in world affairs and by a commitment to the policy of detente. This was another reason why President Carter chose to ignore Brzezinski's early warnings about the probability of a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

It seems likely therefore that Moscow was motivated by perceptions not of *threat* but of *opportunity*. Regional conditions suggested two things. First, there was not going to be any major regional and global obstacle to its invasion. Second, the invasion could put the Soviets in a stronger position, enabling them to gain from any fortuitous developments which might arise in a chronically unstable region, particularly in the wake of the Shah's fall. These considerations, together with the fact that the Soviets had all along been well positioned through their knowledge of conditions in Afghanistan, may have helped the Kremlin to make its invasion decision on a measured basis, with an eye on both its short and long-term implications.

Indeed, the Soviet invasion sparked off a great deal of debate, especially in the West, about possible wider Soviet motives. Some, including pro-Soviet leftists, labelled it a 'defensive' act, designed for the limited objective of protecting desirable Soviet security and political interests, and signifying no wider Soviet ambitions. Such figures generally accepted the Soviet action as a 'limited intervention' and cautioned the West against overreacting. On the other hand, many branded it the most flagrant post-world war II Soviet aggression outside the

Warsaw Pact countries. They saw it as a first step towards fulfillment of a Soviet historical and ideological ambition to achieve regional domination, and called for an immediate Soviet troop withdrawal and for effective regional and Western responses, including material assistance to the Afghan resistance and a strengthening of the defences of the receptive frontline states, most notably Pakistan. Washington and Beijing, on the whole, sided with this interpretation.

Yet, there were many others, including a number of serious scholars of Afghan politics and society, who found acceptable neither the passivity underlying the 'defensive' interpretation nor the extremity inherent in the 'offensive' posture. They attributed the Soviet action to a variety of factors, ranging from Soviet concern for its international prestige, which could not allow it to let an ideologically-allied protégé regime fall in favour of a possibly hostile Islamic one, to a Soviet misperception and miscalculation of the Afghan situation. At any rate, under the impulse of their principled support for the right of nations to determine their own future and their opposition to the use of force by the superpowers as a means to settle conflicts and impose their will on other countries, they condemned the Soviet action and demanded international support for the legitimate cause of the Afghan people against foreign imposition. Whatever the Soviets' and their supporters' justification, they contended that since the Soviet troops had crossed the internationally recognised borders of a poor and weak small state, their action constituted a military invasion, which cannot and ought not to be condoned, but rather resisted in the international community. This argument has found growing acceptance with a great majority of states, which have continued to date to oppose the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan. Some of them have provided a degree of material assistance to the Afghan resistance and indeed Pakistan.

Whatever the individual merits of the above arguments, in retrospect and in the context of Soviet subsequent actions since

the invasion, two aspects of the invasion need to be reiterated. First, the invasion followed a long and complex period of growing Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. In shaping this background, unforeseeable political developments in Afghanistan, and the frequently naive and shortsighted actions of successive Afghan rulers, played as much a part as did Soviet actions. However, changing regional and international circumstances, which reflected a marked impotence on the part of the United States, gave rise to opportunities for the Soviet Union. All this created a crisis in Afghanistan that led the Kremlin leaders to choose an invasion of Afghanistan as a final necessary choice in terms of their perceived interests.

Second, the underlying immediate objective of the invasion was to be *pre-emptive assertion*, not necessarily *outright expansion*. It was to pre-empt the imminent collapse of the PDPA rule under Amin in favour of a (likely hostile) Islamic regime - the only alternative available - and to assert the Soviet hold on its long-standing interests, investments and political initiatives in Afghanistan as well as Soviet credibility, manoeuvrability and prestige in the face of what the aged, conservative Kremlin leaders under Brezhnev may have perceived, whether rightly or wrongly, as both adverse and favourable developments in regional and global politics.

THE SOVIET STRATEGY

The Kremlin, however, wanted to achieve its objective at minimal cost for the Soviet Union, and wanted to do everything possible to avoid what had eventually run the Americans into the ground in Vietnam. It therefore adopted a low-risk, low cost long-term military-political strategy. The strategy essentially postulated a 'limited' as against 'massive' military campaign, in proportion to what Soviet political and military strategists presumably perceived as appropriate and adequate to accomplish the initial basic Soviet political objective: the *rapid* consolidation of the PDPA government under Karmal as the *core operative mechanism* for whatever the Soviets wanted to achieve in Afghanistan in the long run.

The Soviet strategists may have hoped that once this objective had been achieved, the PDPA regime would possess sufficient administrative and military capabilities of its own to carry out most of the responsibilities of effectively governing Afghanistan. This would have allowed the Soviets rapidly to streamline their forces into a supporting role for the PDPA rule and to withdraw most of them eventually when the opposition forces were exhausted and the stability and continuity of the PDPA rule was ensured. In such circumstances, Soviet civilians, and military and security advisers, would be able to guide and control the PDPA's rule from behind the scenes without the presence of substantial Soviet forces in Afghanistan - a position similar to that in a number of the Soviet East European satellites. Thus the success of the Soviet military campaign and the consequent Soviet ability to achieve its basic political objective were linked to and conditioned upon one another.

Soviet strategy displayed two interlocked functional dimensions. The first dimension was manifested in the initial Soviet use of its forces in a series of swift, sharp and necessarily

brutal and bloody operations against Amin and his strong supporters.¹ These operations were designed to achieve two major goals. One was to assert Soviet control as quickly as possible over a number of critical spheres: (1) the PDPA leadership; (2) the disintegrating PDPA power structure and administrative-military apparatus; (3) the major cities, particularly Kabul - the central nerve of political, economic and military life in Afghanistan; (4) the military bases, especially the Bagram and Shindand bases near Kabul and Herat respectively, which were already to a large extent in the hands of the Soviet advisers; and (5) the key communication lines and points. The Soviets considered this necessary and sufficient to establish a structure for their nationwide command of Afghanistan, and well within the capability of their intended limited troop deployment. The other goal was to stop the *Khalqis* and the *Parchamis* from continuing their disastrous factional fighting, and therefore to bring about urgently-needed party unity within the PDPA under Karmal. The Soviets were consequently content to leave most of the small towns and countryside either in the hands of, or wide open to, the Mujahedin for the time being, and to concentrate on pressing the claim that the PDPA was the only legitimate party in Afghanistan.

The second dimension was inherent in the initial Soviet deployment of its forces largely in defensive positions within major cities and fortified military bases and strategic points. This deployment was effected in such a way that the Soviet forces, backed impressively with heavy weaponry (including T62 tanks, heavy field guns, MIG 21 and 23 and Sukhoi fighter/bombers and the MI-8 HIP and MI-24 HIND helicopter gunships), could make their operational presence felt extensively among the Afghan population and could adopt an offensive posture for

¹See Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* (Duke University Press, Durham, 1985) chapter 11

limited operations whenever necessary.² The apparent Soviet expectation was that the projection of its rather limited military power could deter the urban population from rising in opposition and causing disruption in the major cities, especially Kabul, and the Mujahedin from attacking the Soviet dominated cities and strategic military and communication points and lines, and also could deter outside support for the Mujahedin, particularly that from and through Pakistan and Iran.

The Soviet strategists seemed to believe that this two-dimensional strategy would be adequate to enable the Soviets to embark on a process of not only transforming the PDPA into an effective ruling body, but also inaugurating a number of policy initiatives and waging intensive propaganda for several purposes. The important ones were to market Karmal's rule, and their own invasion, to the Afghan people, and to counter the mounting regional and global criticisms of their Afghan adventure. Karmal and Soviet spokesmen denounced Amin's rule as an aberration, pledged their deep respect for the Afghan people's religion of Islam and long-held traditions, and promised the muting of many policies of Taraki and Amin, including the land reform. They committed themselves to beginning a new 'stage of the April 1978 revolution', directed towards the achievement of 'national freedom and prosperity'. They thus sought to present themselves as forces of liberation and defenders of the Afghan people.³

Meanwhile, the Soviets launched a forceful campaign to promote party unity within the PDPA and to reconstruct its administrative and security structure, as well as consolidate

²For a discussion of Soviet weaponry see D. Mil, 'Afghan Lesson For Europe's Generals', *New Scientist*, vol.98, no.1364, 30 June 1983; and G. Jacobs, 'Soviet War in Afghanistan: Three Years Later', *Asian Defence Journal*, December 1982.

³See Zalmay Khalilzad, 'Soviet-Occupied Afghanistan', *Problems of Communism*, vol.29, no.6, November-December 1980.

Soviet defence capability in Afghanistan. For this purpose, they brought in thousands more civilian advisers, many of them Soviet Tajiks, who share a common language and physical appearance with many of the Dari-speaking Afghans, to man the PDPA administrative and security apparatuses. They renamed the PDPA-*Khalqi* secret police the *Khadamati-i ittila'at-i dawlati* (the Government Information Service) or what has simply become known as KHAD, to serve as a central instrument of the PDPA-Soviet rule. The man who was brought together with Karmal from exile to head the KHAD was a veteran, hardline *Parchami* activist and trusted Soviet ally, Dr Najibullah. Commanded and assisted directly by several KGB operators, Najibullah embarked upon the vicious and bloody process of rebuilding KHAD along the lines of the Soviet KGB, and transforming it into a brutal and ubiquitous secret police. It was to be deployed not only to penetrate the society wherever and in whatever way possible, but also to watch the party members and activists at all levels.

The Soviets also spared little effort in helping the PDPA forcibly to round up for military service eligible males of 18 to 35 years - an age bracket which has now been expanded to 16-50. Agencies of the regime sought to stamp out the opposition within and outside the government by killing many, gaoling thousands and forcing a host of people to leave the cities for the Mujahedin-controlled countryside as well as Pakistan and Iran. Of course, as the Soviets subsequently found it necessary to expand their security operations, this process rapidly reached horrendous proportions, at the cost of incalculable damage to the Afghan people, which will be elaborated later. Moreover, thousands of Afghan youths and children of all ages were dispatched, in many cases forcibly, to the USSR and Soviet bloc countries to be trained as the future cadres of PDPA rule⁴; and

⁴Marie Broxup, 'The Soviets in Afghanistan: The Anatomy of a Takeover', *Central Asian Survey*, vol.1, no.4, April 1983, p.98.

millions of dollars were provided to sustain the dislocated Afghan economy.⁵ Further, the Soviets sought to exploit national divisions and cultivate fear and distrust among the Afghans, so that they would remain divided and incapable of providing collective support for the Mujahedin resistance to the PDPA and the Soviets. They also undertook a massive expansion of the old Afghan military bases, such as Bagram and Shindand, and the construction of new ones, as in Kandahar and in many other parts of the country. This was done not only to facilitate routine operations against the opposition but also to strengthen Soviet capabilities in general for the purpose of exerting pressure on the socially and politically troubled Pakistan and Iran to accept the Soviet-PDPA rule as a *fait accompli* and to abandon support for the Afghan resistance.

Concurrently, the Soviets launched a large-scale propaganda campaign to the effect that the 'limited contingent of Soviet troops' had been sent to Afghanistan at the request of the Afghan government and for a limited period. However, Brezhnev declared that the Soviet troops would be withdrawn only 'with the agreement of the Afghan [i.e. PDPA] government' and only when Afghanistan's neighbours had given 'dependable guarantees' that they would respect the legitimacy of the PDPA's rule and would not support the 'counter-revolutionary gangs' (the Soviet term for the Mujahedin). This represented, as he put it, 'the fundamental position of the Soviet Union, and we adhere to it firmly'.⁶ It was on this basis that Moscow also intimated, despite its rejection of UN and other international calls for the immediate,

⁵K. Wafadar, 'Afghanistan in 1981: The Struggle Intensifies', *Asian Survey*, vol.22, no.2, February 1982, pp.150-151.

⁶See Brezhnev's statement in F. Schulze (ed.), *Soviet Foreign Policy Today: Reports and Commentaries from the Soviet Press* (The Current Digest of the Soviet Press, Columbus, 1983) pp.97-98; and L.I. Brezhnev, *Report of the Central Committee of the CPSU to the XXVI Congress* (Novosti Publishing House, Moscow, 1981) p.18.

unconditional withdrawal of Soviet troops, that it would be prepared to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the Afghanistan crisis with its neighbours, Pakistan and Iran. To this end, from June 1982 it endorsed a series of UN-sponsored indirect talks at Geneva between the PDPA and Pakistani governments for the purpose of finding a political settlement to the Afghan problem. Iran and the Mujahedin, whom the Soviets had dismissed simply as 'imperialist-backed counter-revolutionary bandits', immediately rejected the talks on the grounds that no one but the Mujahedin had the right to negotiate legitimately on behalf of the Afghan people. Pakistan, backed by Washington, alone agreed to the talks, which have continued periodically to date.

Thus, the long-term, low risk Soviet strategy apparently rested on two intertwined assumptions. The first assumption underlined a conclusion on the part of Moscow that a limited deployment of its troops, but with impressive firepower, would be sufficient over a period of possibly 10 to 20 years to achieve several objectives. It would enable the Soviets to exhaust and starve out the Mujahedin, and to pacify the Afghan population as a whole by eliminating and banishing into Pakistan and Iran most actual and potential opposition. It would also allow the Soviets concurrently to achieve consolidation of the PDPA rule, Sovietisation of Kabul and a few other main cities, and construction of a comprehensive defence network, which could enable the Soviets not only to establish a permanent structure of control of Afghanistan but also to advance overall Soviet defence regional capabilities. Furthermore, it would allow the passing of time to kill the urgency of the Afghan problem, reducing it simply to a nagging matter in regional and global politics. The second assumption was that this process would give the USSR a strategic capability in Afghanistan and provide it with a breathing space that it could use to encourage certain changes in regional politics, especially in regard to Pakistan, in pursuit of a correlation of forces which would be more favourable to its Afghan policies.

THE FAILURE OF THE STRATEGY

The Soviet strategy, however, soon ran into trouble. This rapidly became evident, not so much because anything went drastically wrong with the Soviet military campaign, but because their military commitment (and strategy for its use) proved inadequate to achieve their basic *political* objective. This in turn placed the Soviet forces under increasing strain. The Soviets could not enlist the support of a large number of the *Khalqis*, who could not credit that Amin had invited the Soviet troops and who felt betrayed and humiliated by the Soviets' killing of their leader and wresting power from them in favour of the *Parchamis*. The Soviets' action intensely inflamed the already deep-seated *Khalqi-Parchami* feud, which could be resolved according to the cultural code of the Pushtuns only by bloodshed and the elimination of one side. This resulted in hundreds of relatively experienced *Khalqi* administrators and field officers either taking up arms or working from inside the PDPA administration against the *Parchamis* and the Soviets; and in many more leaving for exile abroad. Prompted by their common Islamic religion and patriotic feelings, Afghan people in both urban centres and rural areas viewed Karmal as worse than Amin, and in collaboration with the Mujahedin began to mount formidable ideological and physical resistance. The Mujahedin groups gained increasing popularity, and grew in size. They drew on their religious zeal and social determination as well as their traditional skills in tribal warfare to penetrate the PDPA's fragile administration at all levels; to wage effective *valley-mountain guerilla warfare*; and to harass the Soviet forces in cities and other strategic places.

In this form of guerilla warfare, the Mujahedin have often exploited Afghanistan's rugged terrain to attack Soviet forces and convoys passing through valleys or mountain passes. Perhaps no Mujahedin commander has exemplified this as well

as Ahmad Shah Massoud. He has largely succeeded in turning the Panjshir Valley, located strategically 60 miles north of Kabul between northern and southern Afghanistan and on the main Soviet supply lines, into one of the Mujahedin's strongholds, virtually a state within a state.¹ He has also lately succeeded in using his Panjshir powerbase to establish a unified command in most of the northern provinces bordering the Soviet Union. Since 1980, the Soviet-PDPA forces have launched numerous massive operations against Panjshir, but with little success. In 1983, they found themselves in so desperate a position that the Soviets had to negotiate a six month ceasefire directly with Massoud - a ceasefire which Massoud skilfully exploited to coordinate bigger operations afterwards.

Moreover, the Kremlin was not entirely successful in weathering both regional and global criticisms, although it managed largely to override the limited and ineffectual political and economic sanctions levelled over its invasion.² The invasion resulted in international support for the Afghan resistance, something which expanded Soviet vulnerability as against opportunity and therefore limited still further Soviet performances inside Afghanistan. A further important consequence was the creation of deep psychological and security anxiety for the regional states, in particular Pakistan. The Soviet invasion provided General Zia ul-Haq's domestically troubled regime, which faced a dramatic increase in the flow of Afghan refugees, with the rationales of 'Soviet threat' and the 'burden of refugees' to justify not only the continuation of martial law, which lasted until 1985, but also its drift toward China and,

¹For a popular account of Massoud's activities, see Sandy Gall, *Behind Russian Lines* (Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1983).

²See M. Doxey, 'Sanctions Against the Soviet Union: The Afghan Experience', *The Year Book of World Affairs 1983* (Stevens & Sons, London, 1983).

more significantly, the United States.³ Furthermore China, fearing 'Soviet encirclement', linked the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to Soviet support of Vietnam and its occupation of Kampuchea as well as to close Soviet ties with India - a country considered hostile by Beijing. It drew on this complex of factors to harden its position against the USSR, increasing its support for Pakistan and maintaining and strengthening its rapprochement with the US.⁴

The reaction against 'Soviet expansionism' in the West, particularly in the United States, helped to produce a change in American public opinion and assisted the election of President Ronald Reagan on an anti-Soviet platform. Reagan was able to point to 'the Soviet expansionist threat' as a reason for strengthening the United States's global military power and regional position. Virtually for the first time in the history of US-Soviet relations, Washington found itself in a position to help cause the Soviets humiliation in a Third World country. These consequences of the invasion not only prompted the Zia and Khomeini regimes, especially the former, to provide substantial assistance to the Mujahedin. They also induced the anti-communist but oil-rich Muslim Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, to give generous financial help, and prompted Egypt and the Chinese to supply some arms and training. Furthermore, they enabled Washington to renew its strategic alliance with Pakistan, providing Islamabad with an economic and military aid package of \$ 3.2 billion for 1981-86; and to coordinate via the CIA a delivery of arms from the international market to the Afghan resistance, amounting to about \$50-75 million annually until 1985. Since then, this American aid to the resistance has been considerably augmented by a US congressional allocation

³Amin Saikal, 'The Pakistan Disturbances and the Afghanistan Problem', *The World Today*, vol.40, no.3, March 1984, p.105.

⁴See R.K.I. Quedsted, *Sino-Russian Relations* (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1984) pp.154-156.

of a further sum of more than \$500 million aid for military supplies, which since mid-1986 have come to include a number of Stinger missiles, complemented by the British supply of a number of Blowpipe missiles.⁵

The overall result has been that despite the fact that the Afghanistan crisis has lost much of its initial urgency in world politics, the Afghan people's resistance has progressively increased in magnitude and effectiveness in the context of regional-global circumstances, and continues to prevent the Soviets from achieving even their basic political objective. The Soviets' fundamental problem remains their inability to secure in Kabul a workable PDPA government, with an effective administrative-military machine. Karmal and his top colleagues could not trust one another, and the PDPA remained bloodily factionalised. Its frail governmental structure remained riddled with inefficiency and corruption, and was penetrated by the agents of the Mujahedin. Yet the Mujahedin moved from strength to strength, harrassing the Soviet forces even in their defensive positions and causing them growing human and material losses.

This failure in the political realm within a year of the invasion was reflected in the Soviets' military position. It forced them increasingly to take over not only administrative duties, but also military operations. The Soviet strategists appeared to realise that neither the Soviet forces' initial defensive posture of holding onto their original gains and fighting only when attacked, nor their extensive use of heavily equipped motorised troops in the face of the Mujahedin's successful guerilla warfare, could take the Soviets very far. They consequently engaged in a step-by-step process of changing their mainly defensive campaign of pacification into a predominantly

⁵For details of outside arms aid to the resistance, see J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation* (National Defense University Press, Washington D.C., 1986) pp.202-214.

offensive one. While replacing some of their regular troops with special counter-insurgency units, which from 1983 came to include the elite commando units of *Spetsnaz*, the Soviet forces precipitously resorted to 'seek-and-destroy' missions against the opposition wherever possible. They maximised their firepower and applied extreme coercion, ranging from violently and brutally confiscating property and rounding up people for military service and interrogation under torture, to burning crop fields and blanket bombing of towns and villages.⁶ This process was intensified from early 1984, with an unprecedented escalation of Soviet firepower. The prime objectives were not only to force urban dwellers into acquiescence, but also to terrorise, starve out⁷ and depopulate the actual and suspected opposition-held towns and valleys in order to deprive the Mujahedin of their popular sanctuaries and means of livelihood, and block their supply and infiltration routes.

⁶See *Democratic Republic of Afghanistan: Background Briefing on Amnesty International's Concerns* (Amnesty International, ASA 11/13/83, London, October 1983); *Afghanistan: Torture of Political Prisoners* (Amnesty International, ASA 11/04/86, London, November 1986); Jeri Laber and Barnett Rubin, *"Tears, Blood and Cries": Human Rights in Afghanistan Since the Invasion 1979-1984* (Helsinki Watch, New York, December 1984); Barnett Rubin, *To Die in Afghanistan: Human Rights in Afghanistan 1985* (Helsinki Watch/Asia Watch, New York, December 1985); Michael Barry, Johan Lagerfelt and Marie-Odile Terrenoire, "International Humanitarian Enquiry Commission on Displaced Persons in Afghanistan", *Central Asian Survey*, vol.5, no.1, 1986; *Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan* (A/40/843, General Assembly, United Nations, 5 November 1985); *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan* (E.CN.4/1986/24, Human Rights Commission, Economic and Social Council, United Nations, 17 February 1986); and *Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan* (A/41/778, General Assembly, United Nations, 31 October 1986).

⁷See Frances D'Souza, *The Threat of Famine in Afghanistan* (AfghanAid, London, 1984).

In the process, the sufferings of the Afghan people have been immense. Assessing the costs is very difficult, for in many cases there are no exact nationwide surveys available. However, if we base our assessment on piecemeal surveys and cross-filed reports supplied by various international agencies and Afghan resistance sources, it is clear that so far, in addition to the destruction of hundreds of villages and urban centres, the people's losses have been horrendous, and on a scale inadequately appreciated in Western countries. For example, according to the Stiftung Bibliotheca Afghanistanica, a respected research foundation based in Switzerland, 51,406 Afghan civilians are *known* to have been killed *between January 1985 and July 1986 alone*.⁸ In total, victims of the war include an estimated one million dead, about 30,000-50,000 imprisoned (particularly in the dreadful Puli Charkhi concentration camp outside Kabul) and 5 million, or almost one-third of the Afghan population, forced to flee as refugees. Of these, three million are in Pakistan, nearly two million in Iran and the remaining in other parts of the world. The Afghan refugees consist of both urban and rural people, include a substantial proportion of Kabul's pre-1978 600,000 citizens, and constitute the single largest group of refugees in the world. Until recently, they had been dismissed by the PDPA and Soviets as 'nomads'.⁹

However, the Soviet offensive operations, which have intensified over time, have proved to be as unsuccessful and

⁸Albert A. Stahel and Paul A. Bucherer, *Afghanistan 1985/86: The Effects of Soviet Occupation and Warfare* (Stiftung Bibliotheca Afghanistanica, Liestal, 1986) p.32.

⁹On refugee problems, see Fazel Haq Saikal and William Maley, *Afghan Refugee Relief in Pakistan: Political Context and Practical Problems* (Department of Politics, University College, University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 1986), and Nancy Hatch Dupree, 'The Demography of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan', in Hafeez Malik (ed.), *Soviet-American Relations with Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan* (Macmillan Press, London, 1987) pp.366-394.

counterproductive as the earlier Soviet efforts. Although the operations have impressively projected Soviet fire-power and ability to cause mounting civilian casualties and property destruction, they have not been able to break the back of the resistance and subdue the popular opposition in general. They have necessarily been in proportion to the Soviet troop-strength and therefore of limited value in stamping out the resistance. As Moscow has deemed it politically and militarily expedient (presumably in relation to Soviet resources and priorities, and regional-global circumstances) to keep its troops at a steady level of about 120,000, the Soviet forces have not been able to cope with the types of operations for which they were not originally deployed.

With the war engulfing all of the 29 provinces of Afghanistan, which the Soviets in 1980 divided into seven military zones, the Soviet forces have had to deal with the Mujahedin's frequent attacks from different strongholds in the mountains, valleys and cities throughout the country, forcing them to spread out too thinly. They have consequently proved to be incapable of undertaking sustained operations and holding territories for a reasonably long time in order to force the Mujahedin out of their sanctuaries and prevent their returning to them permanently. For example, in early 1986, the Soviets destroyed two important Mujahedin bases on the border with Pakistan. One was in Barikot and the other in Zhawar, with the latter being a model base, on which the Mujahedin prided themselves. However, within a few months, the Mujahedin were able to return to these bases and rebuild them.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the Soviets' and PDPA's killing of thousands upon thousands of civilians and destruction of their property have further outraged the Afghans and created an immense hatred among them for the Soviets and their surrogates. The

¹⁰See *Strategic Survey 1986-1987* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 1987).

Afghans have consequently contributed to the resistance in whatever way possible. They are sustained by the belief that they do not have much more to lose, and must defend their religion, honour, land and way of life as a means to upholding their historical pride and to gaining Islamic martyrdom in the world hereafter. They have become increasingly ferocious and revengeful, to the extent even of mercilessly stoning Russians and their collaborators and mining their bodies. The Soviets have indeed become entangled in a very costly and savagely demoralising war.

Whereas the total Soviet troop casualties, killed and wounded, are estimated by Western intelligence sources at over 35,000 since the invasion,¹¹ the Soviet material costs of the war rose sharply towards the end of 1986 to an average of more than \$15 million a day,¹² with the loss of one plane of some kind or another almost daily.¹³ This has been so partly because of the improved anti-aircraft defence system of the Mujahedin, with the delivery to them of American Stinger missiles at the rate of 20 a month since mid-1986 and 100 a month since April 1987, as well as a number of British Blowpipe missiles.¹⁴ The Mujahedin's successful integration of these shoulder-fired missiles into an air-defence system made up of missiles, machine guns and light cannon has dramatically reduced their vulnerability to the intensified air-power on which the Soviet-PDPA forces have heavily relied for their wide range of

¹¹Michael Mecham, 'U.S. Credits Afghan Resistance With Thwarting Soviet Air Power', *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, 13 July 1987, pp.26-27.

¹²For an American figure of \$15-18 million, see *The Friday Review of Defense Literature*, no.9, March 1987, p.5; for a discussion of various estimates of war costs before 1986, see Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* (Duke University Press, Durham, 1985) pp.270-271.

¹³See 'Afghan Air War: U.S. Missiles Score', *The New York Times*, 7 July 1987.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

operations. There have also been frequent reports of a steady drop in the morale and discipline of the Soviet troops. Cases reported among them have ranged from drug addiction and stealing, looting and selling of weapons to the Mujahedin for the purpose of buying drugs and other commodities, to indiscriminate beating and shooting of civilians in broad daylight - all reflections of boredom and frustration.

Moreover, with the costs of the war mounting, the Soviet involvement has grown to be unpopular with the Soviet public, despite Moscow's massive propaganda that its troops in Afghanistan have been fighting heroically to defend the Afghan people against 'external, imperialist aggression'. Although it is extremely difficult to tap the extent of the Soviet public's displeasure, numerous eyewitness accounts and occasional Soviet media and press reports in the last three years have indicated it to be quite considerable.¹⁵ Also, an unofficial poll conducted by human rights activists in Moscow in 1984 found that 62% of respondents did not support the war, and more significantly, that 41% of Communist Party members did not either.¹⁶

By contrast, the Mujahedin have exhibited a relatively high degree of morale, determination and fighting capacity. They have steadily achieved a level of resistance which few observers of Afghan politics and society could have foreseen at the time of the invasion. This has been the case even though they have been divided, under-armed and poorly trained, and despite certain setbacks, such as those in 1985 when the Soviets drove the Mujahedin into mainly defensive postures. Since the Soviet invasion, the Mujahedin in general have waged their holy war under the umbrella leadership of several organisations, ranging in philosophy and political aspirations from Islamic hardliners

¹⁵Taras Kuzio, 'Opposition in the USSR to the Occupation of Afghanistan', *Central Asian Survey*, vol.6, no.1, 1987, pp.99-117.

¹⁶See *Strana i mir* (Munich), no.12, December 1984.

to Islamic moderates and Islamic-based secularists.¹⁷ However, of these organisations, the ones which have proved most effective forged a loose, but a relatively stable Islamic alliance in May 1985. The alliance consists of seven groups, with the following three being the most substantial ones:

The *Hezb-i Islami Afghanistan* [Islamic Party of Afghanistan] is a well organised Pushtun group, with a rigidly disciplined internal structure. It came into existence before the Soviet invasion, but after initial splits within its leadership ranks, it fell under the control of a young, relatively untutored, dogmatic, yet charismatic, radical Islamic activist, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. It upholds a puritanical Islamic approach to its military operations and political ambitions. Its goal is to establish an Islamic government, although the lines on which it would be structured are unclear. Hekmatyar is a controversial leader, who has been blamed for much of the initial in-fighting among the Mujahedin groups and accused of being extremely intolerant of his political opponents. Nonetheless, the group, whose fighting units are concentrated largely in Afghanistan's Pushtun-dominated eastern and south-eastern provinces, is a significant political and military force in the country. Its extreme dogmatism has been publicly denounced by the Soviets, on the one hand, and viewed with great caution by other Mujahedin groups, on the other.

A second party, also called the *Hezb-i Islami Afghanistan* came into existence as a break-away faction from the above. While sharing a common ideological and political outlook as well as ethnic composition with Hekmatyar's *Hezb-i Islami*, it is led by an elderly traditional theologian, Mawlawi Yunis Khalis. Most of its followers are those traditionalist clergy who have historically assumed influence in Afghan society. It commands a much looser political organisation than its parent group, but has

¹⁷For a detailed discussion, see Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986).

proved militarily very successful. Its two main field commanders, who have achieved considerable reputation inside and outside Afghanistan are Abdul Haq (in and around Kabul) and Jalaluddin Haqani (in Paktia province). Abdul Haq has paid successful visits to certain Western countries, particularly Britain, where in early 1986 he was received by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. This party is the main recipient of British Blowpipe missiles.

The *Jamiat-i Islami Afghanistan* [Islamic Society of Afghanistan] shares basic Islamic goals with the above two, but differs from them not only in its ethnic composition but also to some extent in its political orientation. Its followers are predominantly Dari speakers, including many intellectuals, and it is quite moderate in its political behaviour. It is led by one of the original founders of the Islamist movement of the late 1960s, Burhanuddin Rabbani, a former Professor in the Faculty of Theology of Kabul University. While well organised both politically and militarily, it is particularly strong in northern and western provinces of Afghanistan. It is considered to be the largest single party. Its most celebrated commander is Ahmad Shah Massoud, whose support would be crucial for the success of any political settlement of the Afghan problem.

The remaining four members of the Islamic alliance, which are not as significant as the above in their popular following and military capacity, are as follows:

The *Itihad-i Islami Afghanistan* [Islamic Unity of Afghanistan] is a Pushtun-dominated group, which while relatively small, derives its influence very much from its leader, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a shrewd political operator, and recipient of lavish funds from several moderate-conservative Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia. Sayyaf in the past has often been allied with Hekmatyar, although currently the relationship between the two is not as strong as it used to be.

The *Harakat-i Enqilaab-i Islami Afghanistan* [Islamic Revolutionary Movement of Afghanistan] is particularly strong

in central and north-east Afghanistan, with its main base of support being in the Ghazni province, southeast of Kabul. It is led by an Islamic traditionalist, Mawlawi Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi.

The *Mahaz-i Milli Islami Afghanistan* [National Islamic Front of Afghanistan] is led by a descendant of a Sufi saint (Islamic mystic), Pir Sayid Ahmad Gailani, and has a special following among the Sufi traditionalists, who operate in different parts of the country, although most importantly in the south and south-west.

The *Jabha-i Milli-i Nijati Afghanistan* [Afghan National Liberation Front] revolves around a traditionally influential Islamic family under the leadership of Sebqatullah Mujaddedi. It has followers among both Pushtu and Dari speakers, who operate in different parts of southern and eastern Afghanistan.

The last three are groupings of Islamic moderates, and support the concept of Afghanistan as a democratic nation and the return of King Zahir Shah to head a government of national unity in place of that of the PDPA. They have proved to be fairly appealing to Western capitals. On this basis, while maintaining their membership of the seven groups' Islamic alliance of the Mujahedin, they have also forged an Islamic moderate alliance among themselves, known as *Hezb-i Itihad-i Islami* [Islamic Unity Party].

In addition to these groups, which represent predominantly the Sunni Muslim sect, there are three Shia Persian-speaking groups: *Nasr* [Victory], *Harakat-i Islami* [Islamic Movement], and *Sepah-i Pasdaran* [Ranks of Guards] which operate mainly in central Afghanistan, where the 15-20 percent Shia population of the country is concentrated. *Nasr*, and especially *Sepah-i Pasdaran*, are known to have been supported by the Khomeini regime and have often been in conflict with *Harakat-i Islami*.

Of course, it must be noted that not all the Mujahedin belong to the above groups and not all of them regularly uphold their allegiances to them. There are many smaller Mujahedin

groups which operate under local commanders. They are either independent of the main groups or often express some sort of attachment to one or more of them for no other purpose than to supplement what arms they salvage from the Soviet and Afghan troops.

There is no doubt that the leaderships of the seven main Sunni groups, which operate from headquarters in Pakistan's North-West Frontier and Baluchistan provinces, have suffered from personal rivalries and ideological, ethnic and linguistic differences. But this has not necessarily affected the fighting capacity and operational unity of the combat Mujahedeen inside Afghanistan. A number of important factors account for this. First, it is certainly true that diversity, not unity, and Islamic spiritual strength and moral cohesion, not technological sophistication, have historically underpinned much of the Afghan people's resistance to outside imposition. However, after several years of fighting a world power, the Mujahedeen at all levels have found it necessary to cooperate considerably in their current struggle, for the sake of survival and continuation of the resistance. This is largely why the confederate Islamic alliance of the seven major groups has remained intact. In turn, this has been reflected in the resistance's performance inside Afghanistan, as it has been nowhere near as divided and debilitated as the PDPA regime.

Second, whatever the outside perception of squabbles among the leaders of the Mujahedeen groups in Pakistan, the Mujahedeen field commanders and their unit guerillas have increasingly become experienced and skilled not only in the art of combat and maintenance of social support, but also in the ability to adjust to changing enemy tactics; and have coordinated their activities. They are not as politicised as their Pakistan-based leaders, and are geographically remote from them. For the Mujahideen within Afghanistan, fighting has become a way of life, as they have not much else to do.

Third, in spite of frantic Soviet-PDPA efforts, the Mujahedin have continued to enjoy effective support from their agents who have infiltrated the PDPA's frail and factionalised administration at all levels. Reportedly even the KHAD is riddled with Mujahedin moles.

Fourth, the shift in the Soviet-PDPA strategy to forward fighting since 1984, without an increase in man-power, has not helped the Soviets much either. It has forced their troops to spread themselves out further and further. They have at no stage been able to conduct successful sustained operations for a necessary length of time, or to cut the Mujahedin's infiltration/supply routes for more than a short period.

Fifth, although the Soviets' depopulation of many areas has caused severe food shortages for the Mujahedin, the latter's traditional existence on a limited diet, and ability to transport food from other areas, have compensated for such shortages. However, as usual it has been the civilian population that has suffered most.

Sixth, contrary to public opinion, the degree of polycentrism, which has characterised the Mujahedin, has proved quite beneficial under the prevailing circumstances. Had the Mujahedin been united under a single leadership, it would have been vulnerable to the Soviets' and their surrogates' attempts either to co-opt or buy off such a leadership.

At present the Mujahedin in total command an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 armed fighters, and have no difficulty in recruiting more from the growing pool of refugees, a majority of whose male elements prefer fighting over the idle life of the refugee camps, provided there are sufficient arms available. All this, however, does not mean that they have been able to achieve a position of superiority over the professionally trained, well-equipped and well-provided Soviet troops. The Mujahedin have not achieved a capacity to win a decisive military victory against the Soviets, and thus force them to leave Afghanistan unconditionally. What it *does* mean is that the Mujahedin have

admirably maintained their resistance, depriving the Soviets of the opportunity to consolidate even their initial gains. By the PDPA's own admission, the Mujahedin still control two-thirds of Afghanistan,¹⁸ with wide operational access to major cities, more importantly Kabul; and most of the regime's 'grand thoughts and plans [have] drowned in mere words and remain on paper'.¹⁹ Furthermore, Dr Najibullah finally admitted on 14 July 1987 that 'during the nine years of fratricidal war we have not been able to resolve even one of the issues which caused the war, not one. Now it has become clear that we cannot resolve these issues by military means'.²⁰

Thus, all Soviet efforts, based on a variety of political manoeuvres, public deceptions, 'divide and rule' tactics and, above all, violent actions and forceful impositions, have thus far run into the ground. The Soviets and the regime have not succeeded in strengthening their initial hold on Kabul and other major cities. Life in the capital has not been secure for anyone, including the Soviets. Even their Embassy and residential compounds have periodically been attacked by the Mujahedin, and Kabul has often been cut off from the rest of the country. The second and third largest cities of Kandahar and Herat have frequently changed hands between the PDPA-Soviet forces and the Mujahedin, and are virtually ruined like many more cities and numerous towns. The Mujahedin, on the other hand, have successfully set up several liberated zones and increased their activities especially in northern provinces, bordering the USSR. Meanwhile, the PDPA and Soviets have been unable to build an effective Afghan army. Despite the extensive application of coercive means to draft people into military service in the limited areas under the regime's control, the army's strength still does

¹⁸See Najibullah's remarks quoted in *The Canberra Times*, 16 January 1985.

¹⁹BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts* FE/8260/C/1-2, 16 May 1986.

²⁰BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts* FE/8622/C/1, 17 July 1987.

not exceed 30,000 and even so, more than two-thirds of these troops cannot be trusted and are prone to defection.²¹

The overall result has been a situation of stalemate. As this stalemate has dragged on, so have its human, material and political costs for the Soviets. The Kremlin has increasingly faced the prospects of a Vietnam-type syndrome - a syndrome, from the humiliation of which the USSR's global adversary, the United States, still has not fully recovered. This, together with a generational leadership change in the Soviet Union from the ultimately conservative and stultified 'old guards' under Brezhnev to more reformist and younger communist builders under Gorbachev, has prompted the Kremlin to look for alternative options to that of military pacification in order to break through this costly stalemate.

²¹See *Strategic Survey 1986-1987*, *op.cit.*

OPTIONS FOR THE TWO SIDES

Against the backdrop of the Soviet Union's failure thus far to achieve its central political objective of consolidating the PDPA's rule in Afghanistan, the Kremlin has had three alternative options at its disposal. One is to escalate the war above the level at which it has been conducted so far. A second would be to end its involvement by immediately and unconditionally withdrawing all its troops and letting the Afghans determine their own future - an option which is demanded by the Afghan resistance and the international community. Its final option is to seek a compromise political solution, whereby it could pull out its troops without altogether sacrificing its protégé regime and foregoing future influence in Afghan politics. It has become increasingly evident since early 1986 that the Gorbachev leadership has deemed it in its best interests to pursue the third option, for a number of important reasons.

First of all, the option of escalating the war could prove to be very risky. There is every chance that such an option would make the Soviets pay much higher costs than has hitherto been the case. Given the determination and the human resources of the Afghan resistance, and the unfavourable regional and global circumstances, for the Soviets to implement this option, they would need to increase their troop deployment from the current level of about 120,000 to at least half a million. Furthermore, they would need to be ready to expand the war into neighbouring states, especially Pakistan, in order not only to seal off the Afghan borders, but also to penalise Pakistan as heavily as necessary to curtail its support for the Afghan resistance. In this, however, they would run a number of high risks. The USSR could suffer greater human and material losses, as more Soviet troops would become the targets of the Mujahedin. There would also be a real danger of the further

internationalisation of the Afghan conflict and therefore deterioration of Soviet regional and global relations, for neither the regional states nor the Soviets' global adversaries would find the escalation tolerable. There could be a larger domestic backlash, for the Soviet public is unlikely to remain as passive in the face of greater losses as they have so far been. There could be little guarantee that at the end such an escalation would meet with success. On the contrary, there would be every possibility of Afghanistan's becoming much more than just a 'bleeding wound'. Consequently, it is not an option which the Kremlin is at all eager to adopt.

From the Kremlin's perspective, the option of unconditional withdrawal is also seriously problematic. After so many years of deepening involvement and mounting losses, it would mean the total frustration of the very objective for which the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in the first place. That objective, as noted earlier, was to secure the long-term survival of the PDPA rule as a culmination of the Soviets' long-standing ambition to secure in Afghanistan a strong fulcrum of leverage with which to pursue a successful power game in the region. At this stage, the Kremlin may fear several potentially negative consequences implicit in this option. First, it thus far has not secured a PDPA regime which could stand on its own feet without Soviet troops for more than a very short period before disintegrating from within, let alone resist on its own any assault by the Mujahedin. For this reason, Moscow appears to reason that an unconditional pullout of its troops would result in the establishment of a Mujahedin-led Islamic government in Kabul. In such a case, not only would the new government be unsympathetic to the Soviets and the PDPA surrogates be eliminated, but also there would be a possibility that Afghanistan would be plunged into a period of serious domestic power struggles, causing it to become vulnerable to interferences by Soviet adversaries. Second, Moscow fears that the fall of a protégé regime would undermine its prestige and credibility with its allies, in particular,

and its status as a world power, in general. This could set a precedent which might encourage the populations of the Soviet Union's client-states, particularly in Eastern Europe, to draw inspiration from the success of the Afghan struggle as concrete proof of the fallibility of Soviet power. Third, the Kremlin may face credibility and authority crises within the Soviet system itself in justifying and selling the defeat of its Afghan campaign and its ensuing implications. Thus, the unconditional troop withdrawal is an option that the Kremlin would also like to avoid if possible.

As a result, in view of the complexity of the Afghan problem and the importance of Soviet ideological and pragmatic stakes in it, the Gorbachev leadership has evidently found it expedient to promote the third option as the best way to break through the Afghan stalemate and disentangle the USSR from its involvement. It is an option which rests on the belief that it is possible to achieve a conciliation of different and conflicting interests; and that a balance can be struck between what the Soviet Union as a world power can accept in Afghanistan and what could be tolerable to the Afghan people and the international community. Thus, as is evident so far, Gorbachev seems to want to promote a solution which could satisfy both sides to some extent, and enable the Soviets, over a shorter period of time than originally envisaged, either to end their military involvement or stabilise it at the lowest level possible, with an option if necessary to *afghanise* the war.

Early signs of such a 'solution' actually emerged in the second half of 1985, when Moscow shortly before the November superpower summit in Geneva stepped up its publicity about a more serious willingness to negotiate a political settlement of the Afghan crisis. In an unusually frank editorial in its issue of 21 December 1985, *Pravda*, while upholding the inviolability of the PDPA regime, acknowledged the dissatisfaction of the Afghan people with the 'April [1978] revolution'. It also stressed that 'it is necessary to create the

atmosphere for a positive dialogue between public and political forces, including those that still hold views that are hostile to the revolution...'; and that such 'reconciliation presupposes certain compromises'.¹

However, a more clear expression of it came in Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech of 28 July 1986. He conveyed three main points upon which a solution of the Afghan problem and a Soviet troop withdrawal were dependent. First, he stressed that the leading role of the PDPA was not negotiable. He described the April 1978 coup as a 'national-democratic revolution' and implied its irreversibility under the PDPA leadership, against which all armed hostilities had to stop. He warned that '... if intervention [i.e. the Mujahedin struggle and outside support for it] against Democratic Afghanistan continues the Soviet Union will not leave its neighbour in the lurch. Our internationalist solidarity with the Afghan people [i.e. the PDPA], as well as the security interests of the Soviet Union rule that out absolutely'.

Second, he emphasised that at the same time the PDPA's rule had to be strengthened and its power base needed to be expanded through a policy of 'national reconciliation', 'up to the point of creating a government with the participation' of those opposition forces prepared not to question the legitimacy of 'the April [1978] revolution' (and therefore the PDPA's leading role) but to 'participate sincerely in the nationwide process of constructing a new Afghanistan'.

Third, he intimated that only in conjunction with these two elements, and when a 'political settlement' was finally worked out, primarily with Pakistan, would the Soviet Union pull out all of its troops. Even then it would be 'stage-by-stage', according to the timetables which 'have been agreed with the Afghan

¹Translated in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol.37, no.51, 1985, pp.18-19.

leadership'. He preferred the 'political settlement' to be reached within the framework of the UN-sponsored Geneva talks.

To demonstrate the sincerity of his moves for a political settlement, he also proposed to pull out six Soviet regiments - one tank, two motorised infantry and three anti-aircraft regiments (about 6,000-7,000 troops in total) from Afghanistan before the end of the year.²

What the Soviet leader's proposals essentially constituted was little or no change in the original Soviet goal in Afghanistan but a change in the Soviet strategy for achieving this goal. On the one hand, he accepted his predecessors' basic objective: to ensure the long-term survival of the PDPA regime and for that matter Soviet influence in Afghan politics. On the other, he judged his predecessors' strategy of long-term, low-cost military pacification and uncompromising reliance on the PDPA as the sole ruling body very unproductive, and proposed a modification of it by stressing one qualitative difference. That difference was to put more stress on advancing the Soviet objective by political means, with certain marginal concessions, rather than largely military means.

What interests Moscow most in a settlement would be a 'non-interference' agreement, backed by international guarantees, between the PDPA regime and Pakistan. It has reasons to be quite optimistic about securing an agreement (although not necessarily a workable one) on the basis of Gorbachev's proposals. This is for several reasons.

First, the Geneva talks have so far been exclusively conducted between the PDPA and Pakistani government, with only the endorsement of Moscow and Washington. Pakistan has not up to this point insisted as a precondition for the success of the talks on the inclusion of the Mujahedin or their other main outside supporters in the region, namely Iran and China.

²For the text of the speech, see BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/8324/C/1-17, 30 July 1986.

Second, the talks have to date focussed principally only on such issues as an agreement of 'non-interference'; international guarantees of this agreement; repatriation of Afghan refugees; and a timetable for the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Reportedly substantial progress has been made on the first three issues and a settlement has for some time hung on a resolution of the last. Moscow has lately proposed a two year timetable as against Pakistan's demand of 6-8 months. However, the gap was still wide enough for the two sides to abandon their last round of talks in early 1987, without fixing a date for a resumption. Third, the growing burden of the Afghan problem, and its potential for partisan exploitation, have equipped Pakistan's sizable left and centre-left opposition parties, which generally have favoured a solution of the Afghan problem along similar lines to those desired by Moscow, with further ammunition to focus public discontent on President Zia ul-Haq's regime, pressuring it to become amenable to Gorbachev's settlement initiatives.³

Consequently, since early 1986, the Soviets have pursued a two-tiered objective in keeping with the policy lines set out in Vladivostok. One is to strengthen the PDPA rule, with organic, structural ties with the Soviet Union, and the other is to seek to create certain conditions conducive to the political settlement desired by the Kremlin. In respect of the first objective, while intensifying their military operations against the Mujahedin to an unprecedented level throughout the country, with special stress on the provinces bordering Pakistan and indeed the border itself, the Soviets have launched a vigorous campaign to overhaul the PDPA under an effective leadership.

After having struggled for several years with Karmal's disreputability as the 'Soviet-installed leader of the PDPA', and his inability to contain factionalism within the PDPA or expand

³For background, see Amin Saikal, 'The Pakistan Disturbances and the Afghanistan Problem', *The World Today*, vol.40, no.3, March 1984.

its power base, Moscow finally decided in late 1985 to replace him with someone who could prove to be more effective, particularly in view of Gorbachev's pending initiatives. The choice of replacement was indeed difficult, given the fact that there are only a few PDPA leaders that the Soviets can really trust in a party which still does not command more than 3,000 committed members, although it has officially claimed 120,000-140,000.⁴ The best they could do was to settle on the Chief of KHAD, Dr Najibullah, a *Parchami* activist loyal to Moscow since the late 1960s. He was favoured for several reasons.

First, he had proved to be totally dedicated to the goal of Soviet communist rule in Afghanistan. He had instrumentally helped the Soviets to transform the KHAD into the most brutal and efficient governing force bolstering the PDPA rule and Soviet control in Afghanistan. Second, at the age of 39, he had gained a reputation as the PDPA's most shrewd, cunning and brutal tactician, possibly capable of handling the types of political manoeuvres which were necessary to complement Gorbachev's initiatives. Third, unlike most of the *Parchamis*, including Karmal, he is a full Pushtun - the largest ethnic group, which has provided some of the best Mujahedin fighters.

While openly criticising the party leadership, the Soviets promoted Najibullah on 21 November 1985 to the Secretariat of the PDPA. On 4 May 1986, during a three day plenum of the Party's Central Committee, which was held in Kabul amid unprecedentedly tight Soviet security and attended by the Soviet ambassador, he was finally chosen to head the party. Karmal was initially left with the ceremonial position of President of the Revolutionary Council, formally the supreme legislative body of the state, but subsequently in November he was stripped of all his party positions. Najibullah set out to consolidate his leadership and launched a campaign to make the PDPA a more

⁴See Richard F Staar, 'Checklist of Communist Parties in 1986', *Problems of Communism*, vol.36, no.2, March-April 1987, p.47.

effective ruling body, purging 'undesirable elements' (most of whom turned out to be the *Parcham* supporters of Karmal). This caused the *Parcham* faction to split into two parts, essentially consisting of Najibullah's and Karmal's supporters. Warfare between the two sides in early 1987 cost many lives, and was even mentioned on Moscow television by Aleksandr Bovin, who referred to 'dissensions, feuds and bloody clashes within the ruling party itself'.⁵ Karmal reportedly attempted twice to defect to the opposition side. He was once caught at the gate of the Chinese embassy in Kabul and another time on the way to the border with Pakistan, prompting the Soviets to take him once more into their protective custody in the Soviet Union.⁶ Although Karmal is out of the way, his supporters have continued to undermine Najibullah's leadership from within and outside the PDPA structure. Contrary to the Soviets' original expectations, Najibullah's promotion has *created* rather than solved problems. In addition to causing a serious division within the *Parcham*, it has outraged the opposition which has held Najibullah responsible for the loss of thousands of innocent lives during his tenure as chief of KHAD.

Nonetheless, Moscow has still found it expedient to back Najibullah. While criticising the PDPA's failure to expunge factionalism and corruption, to expand its territorial control beyond one-third of the country, and to bolster the depleted Afghan Army, he has promised to use whatever resources are at his disposal to strengthen the PDPA as the guiding force in fraternity with the Soviet Union. Shortly after his assumption of power, he proclaimed that '[a]ll our work will be based on the continued strengthening and development of friendship with the great Soviet Union, the party of the great Lenin and the heroic

⁵BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/8494/A3/3, 17 February 1987.

⁶Confidential sources.

and generous Soviet people'.⁷ In the wake of his accession, the Soviets not only stepped up their military operations throughout the country to help him consolidate his rule, but also moved with greater urgency than ever before to cement the organic-institutional ties between the PDPA and the Soviet Union. Some of the long-term Soviet measures in this respect have included an acceleration of efforts by thousands of Soviet civil and KGB-military *apparatchiki* to run and build the PDPA administration, based on KHAD as its central operative mechanism, and to train its members in the art of Soviet-type socialist state building, particularly at the Soviet-built Social Science Institute of the PDPA's Central Committee, which was opened in June 1986 in Kabul. Moreover, the Soviets have welcomed more Afghans to be trained in the Soviet Union. For example, in addition to 7500 mature-age Afghans⁸ who have been absorbed over the last few years, a further two hundred Afghan children were sent in mid-1986 to the USSR, bringing the official total to 6500 since 1980. On 15 September 1986 an 800-strong delegation was despatched to Tashkent to participate in the second Afghan-Soviet Youth Festival.⁹ Efforts in these areas have been accompanied by greater steps to build the Soviets' and the regime's defence capability in Afghanistan. Not only have the old military bases been expanded and updated, but also new ones have been built in many parts of the country for wider and long-term purposes, with the largest of them being in Kandahar.¹⁰ The Soviets have used these bases to deploy their firepower against the resistance as well as reportedly to carry

⁷For a condensed text, see *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol.38, no.18, 1986, p.22.

⁸See *Pravda*, 3 July 1987.

⁹*Afghanistan Chronology: July 1985-October 1986* (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, November 1986) pp.7-8.

¹⁰Amin Saikal, 'Soviet Policy Toward Southwest Asia', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol.481, September 1985, p.112.

out long-range reconnaissance flights over Pakistan and Iran, and right across the Persian Gulf coastline. Aiding the process have been a number of SIGINT (Signals Intelligence) sites which the Soviets have built in strategic locations in Afghanistan.¹¹

The Kremlin has put a great deal of effort into depicting the PDPA regime under Najibullah as an acceptable one to the Afghan people and the outside world, stressing in the process the vocabulary of 'national reconciliation'. Until the end of 1986, this process of 'national reconciliation' initially involved such measures as the expansion of the regime's Revolutionary Council and the PDPA Central Committee, as well as the holding of a *Loya Jirgah* (traditional Great Tribal Council, invoked by the Afghan rulers from time to time for the purpose of national legitimacy) and of 'local elections' in order to give greater representation in the government to 'all social forces', including the 'clergy', irrespective of their political affiliation. These measures were backed by a concerted Soviet campaign to gain maximum regional and international support for a prompt political settlement of the Afghan problem. As part of this campaign and in fulfilment of Gorbachev's Vladivostok promise of a partial troop withdrawal, the USSR began pulling out six regiments shortly before the superpower summit at Reykjavik in October - a 'withdrawal' which was completed by the end of the month. Although the PDPA and Moscow hailed it as a significant 'good-will step', the Mujahedin and their international supporters dismissed it as a propaganda ploy for two main reasons. First, most of those regiments had proved superfluous in the conditions of guerrilla warfare and in the face of the Mujahedin's total lack of airpower. Second, they amounted to no marked reduction in the overall Soviet troop

¹¹Desmond Ball, 'Soviet Signals Intelligence', *The International Countermeasures Handbook* (1st ed., E.W. Communications Inc., Palo Alto, 1987) p.85.

strength. Indeed, Washington claimed that Moscow had already increased its troops to make up for the withdrawal.¹² Even so, Moscow continued to keep up with its initiatives. On 24 November, during his visit to India, Gorbachev declared that 'we stand for a non-aligned and independent Afghanistan....We are not going to stay there for ever'; and that the Soviet Union would withdraw its troops as soon as 'the question of the political settlement of the situation *around* Afghanistan' is resolved.¹³

However, before the end of the year it was clear that the Soviet-PDPA reconciliation measures had proved as ineffective as their efforts to unite the PDPA and to pacify militarily the Afghan people. The latter had become too familiar with such measures and had heard them all before in one form or another. They regarded them as nothing more than further deceptive devices. The regime's claims of success looked equally absurd in the face of its own admissions that it had accomplished little in implementing the plans that it had on paper; that it had failed in the objective of gaining 'mass support' and that it had not controlled much more than one-third of the country.

Consequently, the Soviets found it imperative to elaborate further on Gorbachev's Vladivostok pronouncements. During and after a three week visit to Moscow in December 1986, Najibullah detailed what appeared to be a Soviet-designed plan, stressing three points. First, while claiming 'deep respect' for the religion of Islam and emphasising, though mendaciously, that his team is different from that of his communist predecessors, he declared his readiness for the creation of a 'coalition government of national unity'. He called on the surviving officials of former Afghan regimes living abroad, and

¹²Craig Karp, *Afghanistan: Seven Years of Soviet Occupation* (Special Report no.155, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State, Washington D.C., December 1986) pp.10-11.

¹³Quoted in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 November 1986.

the Mujaheedin leaders, to cease their anti-regime activities and enter dialogue with the PDPA leadership to formulate a new constitution (in which Islam would be enshrined as the religion of the state), elect a national assembly, and participate in the governmental process. Second, he proclaimed a 'general amnesty' for the opposition forces. Third, he promised an 'attractive' timetable for the withdrawal of Soviet troops to be submitted to the 11 February 1987 round of the Geneva talks. To facilitate the implementation of this peace plan, he also proclaimed a unilateral 'ceasefire' to be observed by the PDPA-Soviet forces for six months from mid-January 1987, although the start of the ceasefire coincided with the period of the normal winter lull in Mujaheedin activities. Thus for the first time, the PDPA and Moscow implicitly dropped their past labelling of the Mujaheedin as 'imperialist-backed bandits' and recognised them as torch-bearers of a popular resistance, whose consent would be crucial to the success of any settlement.

However, in echoing Gorbachev's Vladivostok stance, Najibullah preconditioned the implementation of all this on the 'irreversibility of the April [1978] revolution' and therefore the continuation of the PDPA leadership; on the 'strengthening' of Afghan-Soviet ties'; and on the 'response' of the opposition and its international supporters.¹⁴ Meanwhile, in early January 1987, through a rare visit to Kabul by a top level Soviet delegation, the Soviet Foreign Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze and the Kremlin's senior foreign policy adviser, Anatolii Dobrynin, not only gave official Soviet approval to this settlement plan, but also reassured Najibullah of continued Soviet support for the preconditions that he had laid down. The Kremlin once again apparently renewed such an assurance in late July during a second visit to Moscow by Najibullah.¹⁵ After official discussions with Gorbachev, Najibullah declared that

¹⁴Speech reported in *The Canberra Times*, 5 January 1987.

¹⁵See *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 August 1987, p.14.

while his regime was prepared to share power with the opposition forces, including ex-King Zahir Shah (to whom Gorbachev had in May 1987 pointed as someone who could play an important role in the promotion of a political settlement¹⁶), it would not do so at the cost of the PDPA relinquishing the leadership of Afghanistan. He stressed in mid-July that the PDPA would continue to control the key ministries of defence, internal affairs and KHAD, which had been upgraded to ministry level in early 1986.¹⁷

The PDPA-Soviet settlement efforts, while enabling the Kremlin to seize initiatives in international diplomacy, have produced no substantial results. On the contrary, the fighting has intensified, with the Mujahedin sustaining their successes in the battlefields. This is mainly because the compromise solution that the Gorbachev leadership has thus far sought is not an option that the resistance can adopt or its international supporters can readily support. The Mujahedin have from the start promptly and predictably rejected the whole settlement plan, including the 'ceasefire', as a 'fraud' and totally unacceptable.

The preconditions are exactly those which are anathema to the Afghan resistance and no possibility of conciliation exists between the PDPA and resistance forces after nine years of deep ideological animosity, bloodshed and distrust. The Mujahedin have viewed it as part of a well calculated ploy which seeks to use political means, against the background of military failure, to confuse and divide the Afghan people, and to undermine international support for the resistance. Hence the aim is to fulfil the basic Soviet objective, irrespective of the Afghan people's demand for the total and unconditional withdrawal of Soviet troops and for self-determination. If anything, the concessions offered to them under the plan have further weakened the Soviet

¹⁶See *Pravda*, 20 May 1987.

¹⁷See Najibullah's speech of 14 July 1987, in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, FE/8622/C/1-8, 17 July 1987.

position and have made them continue their struggle with greater intensity, unity and determination than ever before. From their perspective, the best option open to them is to carry on the fight, for they can only gain; they have little more to lose. They are aware that they can fight to full effect only for as long as the regional and global circumstances favour them, permitting unrestricted crossings, especially into Pakistan, and bringing them a reasonable amount of outside financial and material support. It is also clear to them that such circumstances are most likely to continue to prevail for the foreseeable future; and that the Soviets are unlikely to escalate the war much beyond its present level for the reasons which were outlined in the discussion above of the second option open to Moscow.

Similarly, despite the PDPA's and Soviets' claim of some success in their initiatives, *no* credible figure of the past Afghan regimes, including King Zahir Shah, has so far broken ranks with the Mujahedin and chosen to share power with the PDPA.¹⁸ Such figures know that they do this at the cost of immense personal risk and of deadly opposition by the resistance forces. This is not to say that moderate Mujahedin groups would ultimately be opposed to the return of King Zahir Shah, who still commands substantial popularity among the Afghan people, to head a non-communist, non-aligned Islamic government. By the same token, the resistance's outside supporters have to date remained highly skeptical of the PDPA-Soviet initiatives. Pakistan and the United States have welcomed the Soviet moves for a political settlement and withdrawal of Soviet troops, but not if they are designed to undermine the fundamental, legitimate demands of the Afghan opposition and their own political and strategic interests. It is precisely because of this that to this day the PDPA-Soviet initiatives have not produced any major success in the Geneva talks.

¹⁸For Zahir Shah's rejection of power sharing with the PDPA, see *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 August 1987, p.14.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that with the passage of time the Afghan conflict has become an extremely complex one. The complexity stems as much from the ill-conceived Soviet decisions and actions as it does from the nature of Afghan society, with which the Soviets have not been able to come to terms effectively. This has led to the development of a situation from which the Gorbachev leadership, contrary to its wishes, is not now in a position to disentangle itself with a degree of honour. Gorbachev's compromise solution could only have worked if the Soviets had succeeded in securing at least a viable PDPA government, capable of standing on its own feet without the massive presence of Soviet troops, and in weakening the opposition to an appropriate extent. As the situation currently stands, the PDPA regime cannot survive on its own for even as long as the American-backed South Vietnamese government did following the US withdrawal from the country; and yet the resistance forces are capable of wrecking any settlement process which is not based on a fulfilment of their internationally-backed popular demands. After so many years of brutal Soviet 'pacification' of a people who have historically been totally opposed, in both spiritual and social terms, to any form of foreign imposition, let alone communism, it is ludicrous for the Soviet leadership to expect the Mujahedin and the Afghan populace to embrace Gorbachev's 'olive branch' when all that has changed is the Soviet strategy for advancing its original objective.

If the Gorbachev leadership really wants a *viable* settlement of the Afghanistan problem and an end to the costly and humiliating Soviet military involvement in that country, it needs to place the problem in the context of the Afghan people's demands, resilience and sufferings. This would require it to address the central cause of the problem - that is the illegitimacy

of the PDPA rule - rather than its obvious symptoms.¹ The Kremlin cannot do this simply by admitting now that the Soviet invasion was a 'mistake' or that the Soviets are 'deeply unhappy' about their involvement in Afghanistan. It would need to go much further than this. Consequently, the best compromise option open to it is to promote a settlement which could guarantee for Afghanistan domestic self-determination and external neutralisation. Under such formula, the Soviets would be obliged to abandon their support of the PDPA, allowing the Afghans to determine their own future, in return for a treaty from the Mujahedin and their international supporters to safeguard Afghanistan's status as an independent, neutral and non-aligned state in world politics. The Mujahedin have already expressed their willingness for such a treaty through direct negotiation with the Soviets. Similarly, the resistance's outside supporters have never failed to express their support for such a development. This option does not necessarily cater to the Soviet Union's prestige as a world power, but it contains a face-saving mechanism which would allow a decisive and innovative leader, like Gorbachev, to justify the withdrawal of Soviet troops with a sufficient degree of equanimity.

In the event of a settlement on such a basis, Moscow might be concerned about the likely rise in Kabul of a Mujahedin-led Islamic government and the implications of this for Afghanistan and for the Soviet Muslim population on the border. It must recognise, however, that any peacetime government in Afghanistan would be so involved in the problems of domestic reconstruction, particularly in view of the fact that in the last few years the entire traditional pattern of authority has been destroyed in the country, that it would not be able to pose any kind of threat to Soviet power for a long time to come. This,

¹For a discussion of the concept of legitimacy, see William Maley, 'Political Legitimation in Contemporary Afghanistan', *Asian Survey*, vol.27, no.6, June 1987.

together with Afghanistan's delicate geographical position, would place this government under more national constraints than its pre-communist predecessors, which were obliged to pursue reasonable neighbourly relations with the Soviet Union. The Soviets have managed to coexist quite well with Khomeini's Islamic regime in Iran. The same is equally possible with an Islamic regime in Afghanistan. If the situation in the aftermath of a Soviet withdrawal results in conflicts among the Mujahedin - a development which is quite likely - it would be an internal problem of Afghanistan; and one might take consolation from what happened after the French withdrawal in Algeria, where a viable government emerged from a pluralistic resistance.

Until a settlement is worked out along these lines there is little prospect of peace in Afghanistan. In recognition of this basic fact, it is imperative for the world community to maintain its pressure on the Soviets not only by diplomatic means, but also by continuing and if necessary accelerating for the time being, its support for the Afghan resistance and refugees, whose plight in both magnitude and effect is today unequalled in the world.² It is clear that the resistance is a popular, self-motivated and self-propelling one. Its continuation is by no means entirely dependent on outside backing. But such backing has helped the resistance to minimise its own casualties and to make life difficult for the Soviets. Had it not been for the successes of the resistance in the battlefield, it is extremely doubtful whether even Gorbachev would have been prepared to consider the type of 'concessions' that he has outlined so far. If the Soviets had succeeded in attaining their original objective, there would have been little reason for Gorbachev to seek a political settlement. Under the circumstances, further international aid to the resistance is likely to result in greater human and material

²For an acute recent discussion, see Doris Lessing, *The Wind Blows Away Our Words* (Picador, London, 1987).

damage to the Soviets and in consequence strengthen the hands of those in the Kremlin who really want to mount a case for a political settlement and Soviet withdrawal. In this way, further Mujaheedin successes can prove helpful to Gorbachev in his bid against his 'old guard' opponents, who were originally responsible for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and have invested prestige in the transformation of Afghanistan into a subservient state like those of Eastern Europe.

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