

7-4-1984

AFGHANISTAN STALEMATE: "SELF-DETERMINATION" AND A SOVIET FORCE WITHDRAWAL

Selig S. Harrison

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Harrison, Selig S.. "AFGHANISTAN STALEMATE: "SELF-DETERMINATION" AND A SOVIET FORCE WITHDRAWAL." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 14, 1 (1984).
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol14/iss1/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

AFGHANISTAN STALEMATE: "SELF-DETERMINATION" AND A SOVIET FORCE WITHDRAWAL

by

SELIG S. HARRISON

© 1984 Selig S. Harrison

Politically as well as militarily, the ugly stalemate in Afghanistan deepens. On one side, the Soviet-subsidized communist regime is slowly but steadily building a stable Afghan city-state in Kabul and its environs, buttressed not only by Soviet forces but also by an elaborate Afghan military, paramilitary, and secret police apparatus. On the other, scattered groups of dedicated resistance fighters, while better coordinated militarily than in the past, continue to lack the political infrastructure that would be necessary to follow up their military successes by establishing secure liberated areas in the countryside.

The prevailing Western image of the Afghan struggle is grossly distorted because it denies the reality of a political stalemate. In this simplistic imagery, there is a sharp dichotomy between an illegitimate Kabul regime, unable to establish its writ beyond the capital, and an alternative focus of legitimacy collectively provided by the resistance fighters, who are seen as controlling most of the country's land area. It is true that the Kabul regime does not have a firm grip on much of the countryside, but neither does the resistance. In reality, most of Afghanistan, now as in past decades and centuries, is governed by free-wheeling local tribal and ethnic warlords.

Until its destruction in 1973, the monarchy had provided the sole focus of

political legitimacy and authority in Afghanistan for more than three centuries. The Afghan state was just barely a state. It was loosely superimposed atop a decentralized polity in which separate ethnic and tribal communities paid obeisance to Kabul only so long as it accorded them substantial autonomy. The number of politicized Afghans who wanted to create a centralized state was miniscule in relation to the total population. This politicized elite consisted of three distinct groups: Western-oriented intellectuals, who made up the largest segment; Soviet-oriented communist factions; and Islamic fundamentalist elements with Moslem Brotherhood links in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. None of these groups had substantial independent organizational networks in the countryside. They were all equally dependent on alliances with the local tribal and ethnic leaders who held the real power then and who continue to hold the real power in Afghanistan today.

Most of these local warlords would like to get Soviet forces out of their areas and out of Afghanistan, but this does not mean that they are firmly committed to the resistance. Some of them are opportunists who try to get what they can out of both sides. Others give intermittent help to one or another of the resistance groups but are constrained by fear of Soviet reprisals. Still others, smaller in number, are trying to come to terms with the

Babrak Karmal regime but are afraid that helping Kabul would bring punishment from the resistance. For most villagers, trapped between increasingly efficient Soviet-cum-Afghan forces and increasingly well-equipped resistance fighters, the issue is simply how to survive.

The concept of legitimacy has little meaning against the backdrop of recent Afghan political history. The destruction of the monarchy left a political vacuum in which no consensus existed concerning the future of the Afghan polity, and no one group could make a clear-cut claim of greater legitimacy than another. If former King Zahir Shah's democratic experiment in the 1960s provided a test of political acceptance at that time, Karmal could claim at least a marginal place in the Afghan political constellation, since he was elected to parliament from Kabul twice during this period. Neither the communists nor the Islamic fundamentalists claimed more than a few thousand members each in 1973. But even a few thousand disciplined, highly motivated members loomed large in what was such a limited political universe.

In addition to posing ideological challenges to the Western-oriented elite, the communist and fundamentalist movements were vehicles of social protest by disadvantaged elements of the Afghan populace. Karmal's Parcham (Flag) communist faction represented many of those in the detribalized Kabul intelligentsia and bureaucracy who felt shut out of power by the narrow dynastic in-group that dominated both the monarchy and the republic set up by Zahir Shah's jealous cousin, the late Mohammed Daud. The rival Khalq (Masses) faction had more of a tribal base, drawing largely on out-groups within the Pushtuns, Afghanistan's largest ethnic bloc. As American anthropologist Jon Anderson has observed, the Khalqi leaders consisted largely of politicized "second sons and younger brothers" from the weaker Pushtun tribes, searching for channels of social ascent in the face of the monopoly on military, bureaucratic, and professional jobs enjoyed by the Pushtun in-group centered in the royal family.¹ By contrast, the strongest fundamentalist cadres were organized in

ethnic minority areas, such as the predominantly Tajik Pansjer Valley. The current resistance hero, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and his mentor, Jamaat Islami leader Burhanuddin Rabbani, built their organizational base in the Pansjer long before the Soviet occupation, preaching not only the Jamaat brand of fundamentalism but also the cause of Tajik liberation from Pushtun exploitation.

The intractability of the political stalemate in Afghanistan today can only be understood if one recognizes that the present conflict began as a civil war. To be sure, many Afghans who welcomed the communist takeover in 1978 were alienated by the brutality and overzealous reforms of the late Hafizullah Amin, and many Afghans today feel that Karmal has lost all patriotic credentials as a result of his collaboration with the Russians. In the eyes of Afghan communists, however, Karmal has aligned himself with the Russians temporarily and unavoidably in order to get the foreign help needed to consolidate a revolution and to modernize Afghanistan.

On a recent visit to Kabul, I was reminded forcibly that dedication and a patriotic self-image are not a monopoly of the resistance fighters. The Afghan communists see themselves as carrying forward the abortive modernization effort launched

Selig S. Harrison, a senior associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has specialized in South Asian affairs for 35 years. His frequent visits to Afghanistan have spanned the monarchy, the Daud Khan republic, and both of the communist regimes established in Kabul since 1978. He has reported extensively on Pakistan-based resistance groups opposing the Soviet occupation. Mr. Harrison, formerly *Washington Post* Bureau Chief in New Delhi and Tokyo and Senior Fellow in Charge of Asian Studies at the Brookings Institution, is the author of four books including *In Afghanistan's Shadow* and *The Widening Gulf: Asian Nationalism and American Policy*. This article is appearing concurrently in French in *Politique Etrangere*, quarterly journal of the French Institute of International Relations.



by King Amanullah in the 1920s. The communist organization is clearly much stronger now than it was in 1978 even if one assumes that many of the new party recruits are mere job-seekers. In particular, I found widespread evidence that Karmal is making progress in moderating Khalq-Parcham factional tensions and in building a new communist leadership network drawn from the 10,000 or more young Afghans being trained in the Soviet Union. The communist regime is no longer incapacitated by factionalism as it was during the initial years of the Soviet occupation.

Despite popular distaste for the Soviet presence, there is a grudging tolerance of Karmal as a "moderate" communist who is trying to live down Amin's extremist mistakes. The communist regime now avoids direct assaults on the property and prerogatives of Islamic dignitaries, merchants, and small and moderate landowners, permitting peasants to own up to 15 acres. In contrast to Amin, who sought to centralize the country overnight, Karmal promises to respect the traditional tribal power structure. He told me that the Communist Party would not interfere with tribal autonomy and that local tribal *jirgas*, or assemblies, would be given direct representation in local and national governmental bodies. So far, however, this is only talk, and there is little evidence that his soft line toward the tribes has had much impact.

Kabul is not Beirut. Security precautions were casual or nonexistent during my eight days there in March. I was able to walk freely in all parts of the city, now swollen to more than two million people by refugees displaced from the countryside, which is roughly 15 percent of the population still left in the country. Policemen patrol major intersections, making spot checks of identification cards, but there are no checkpoints. Soviet forces and Afghan army units generally stay out of sight in their suburban encampments. The fact that a nightly curfew is still necessary after four years of the Soviet occupation testifies to the existence of a potent underground resistance in the capital, and resistance rocket attacks from nearby

mountain redoubts have become more frequent since my visit. But the Western image of a city ever ready to burst into open rebellion, and of a regime perpetually on the verge of collapse, seems highly overdrawn.

The number of Afghans on the Soviet-subsidized payroll of the Kabul regime is some 375,000, including about 60,000 in the army, another 75,000 in various paramilitary forces, and at least 25,000 in the secret police. The army is still plagued by desertions, but the desertion rate appears to have leveled off. As for the resistance, the number of organized *mujahidin* with regular links to base camps in Pakistan and to external inputs of weaponry and financial aid appears to be about 35,000. In my interviews with *mujahidin* in Pakistan over the past five years, I have been struck by the fervor of their religious and patriotic commitment to their cause. My impression in Kabul was that the time-serving conscripts in the Afghan army lack this commitment, but that their communist officers and junior officers are highly motivated. Conversations in Kabul with the military attachés of several third world embassies who have close contact with the Afghan army suggest that factional divisions in the officer corps are less severe than in the past and that it is becoming a useful adjunct to the Soviet military machine.

Far from offering an alternative focus of legitimacy to the Kabul regime, the resistance groups are themselves divided on ethnic, tribal, and sectarian lines. Repeatedly during the past five years, they have failed to establish a collective identity despite intense pressure from Washington and Arab capitals. Moreover, since they are organized primarily to conduct military operations, most of them do not have disciplined political cadres capable of building an underground political and administrative infrastructure at the local level. The Pansjer Valley, Kandahar and Herat cities, and parts of Ghazni district are conspicuous exceptions to this generalization. In these areas one or more resistance groups have relatively solid political foundations that could conceivably become the basis for liberated zones similar to those established in China, Vietnam, Guinea-Bissau, and other

third world countries where guerrilla armies have been successful. Kabul is likely to face significant resistance in the Pansjer indefinitely despite the relentless onslaught of the Soviet military juggernaut in offensive after offensive. But the fact that the Pansjer is an ethnic minority Tajik area, and a stronghold of the fundamentalist groups, limits its potential as a rallying point for the resistance in the Pushtun areas and other parts of the country where the fundamentalist appeal is weak.

Islamic fundamentalism is not as strong in Afghanistan as it is often assumed. It is arrayed against the entire traditional Islamic leadership as well as against Western-oriented and communist modernizers alike. More important, with their pan-Islamic ideology, the fundamentalist groups have alienated the powerful tribal hierarchy in the Pushtun areas by calling for the abolition of tribalism as incompatible with their conception of a centralized Islamic state.

Except in the Pansjer Valley and several urban areas, the fundamentalist groups have never had significant locally-based organizations, but the advent of a communist Afghanistan in 1978 gave their exiled leaders a golden opportunity to build cadres among the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Since 1978 they have received support from fundamentalist elements in the Middle East and the Gulf. Most of the American and Chinese aid to the resistance channeled through Pakistani authorities has also gone to the fundamentalists rather than to tribally-based Pushtun elements of the resistance. One reason for this is that the Zia Ul-Haq regime in Islamabad is dependent on political support from the Pakistani fundamentalist groups. Another is the legacy of Pushtun irredentism. The Pushtuns in Afghanistan have periodically demanded the return of Pushtun areas annexed by the British Raj a century ago and later bequeathed to Pakistan when it was created in 1947. Pakistani leaders fear that Pushtun refugees from Afghanistan might now combine with Pakistani Pushtuns to demand the creation of a separate "Pushtunistan" in the Pakistani-Afghan borderlands. Islamabad has consciously

sought to prevent Pushtun groups from using the present conflict to coalesce politically and to strengthen themselves militarily.

Oblivious as it is to the political aspects of the conflict, the United States has accepted the Pakistani rationale that military effectiveness should be the only criterion for aid allocations. This has given Islamabad carte blanche to channel aid to the relatively cohesive fundamentalist paramilitary cadres, based in Pakistan, rather than to the loosely organized but locally prestigious Pushtun tribal guerrillas operating in the Afghan countryside.

In my view, covert aid to the Afghan resistance is desirable as part of a two-track policy in which the United States and others simultaneously pursue a negotiated settlement designed to achieve a Soviet force withdrawal, accompanied by limitations on the expansion and upgrading of the bases that Soviet forces have been developing in Afghanistan. Support for the resistance is essential to bolster the bargaining position of noncommunist Afghans in efforts to reach accommodation with the Afghan communists and the Russians. But a politically myopic aid program that serves primarily to build up Islamic fundamentalist cadres in the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan is not consistent with such a two-track policy. Aid to the fundamentalists helps to sustain resistance activity militarily and thus to raise the costs of the Soviet occupation. But it is questionable whether it promotes a political solution that could lead to a Soviet withdrawal. The fundamentalist factions espouse foreign and domestic policies that make them anathema to the Soviet Union. Most of these factions seek not only the withdrawal of Soviet forces but the eradication of Soviet and communist influence. By contrast, many of the tribally-based Pushtun resistance elements, focusing on a Soviet withdrawal, are prepared to consider some form of coexistence with a more broadly-based Kabul regime in which tribal autonomy is honored and noncommunist elements have a significant share of power. Former King Zahir Shah has not ruled out such a com-

promise. His refusal so far to lend himself to the idea of a government in exile appears to reflect a belief that a Soviet withdrawal can only be achieved through a face-saving accommodation in which the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan would at least nominally continue to exist.

The Reagan Administration calls for an Afghan settlement in accordance with United Nations resolutions, based on "a Soviet withdrawal, a return to the independent and non-aligned status of Afghanistan, self-determination for the Afghan people and the return of the refugees with dignity and honor." However, the United States has had an ambivalent attitude toward the UN scenario for a settlement developed by Undersecretary General Diego Cordovez in his continuing mediation efforts.² This ambivalence is explained in part by objections to important procedural aspects of the projected settlement. But it also reflects more basic objections to the Cordovez premise that a Soviet withdrawal, per se, would fulfill the self-determination criterion of the UN resolutions.

Under the UN scenario, the DRA would be left in place and would have a chance to survive following a Soviet withdrawal, if it could, either through a political accommodation with its opponents, or internecine military struggle, or both. The DRA argues that it could, in fact, survive without a Soviet force presence if US and other aid to the resistance were stopped in accordance with the terms of the draft settlement. Administration officials ridicule this claim, but the American position is, in any case, that the replacement of the Karmal regime by a more representative regime should be agreed upon as a precondition for concluding the UN settlement.

The prospects for a settlement acceptable to significant noncommunist Afghan elements are dim, especially in the present context of Soviet-American relations. Nevertheless, the United States and other noncommunist countries should make a more serious effort to test the possibility of a Soviet withdrawal through a reorientation of aid allocations and a more positive and more

flexible approach to the UN negotiations. The American approach to the UN negotiations has so far been governed by the uncritical assumption that the DRA could not survive in the absence of Soviet forces. As I have suggested elsewhere, this may well be the case, and the Russians may merely be playing a game of diplomatic brinkmanship.³ But it should be remembered that the UN scenario would permit the DRA to continue receiving Soviet economic and military aid while precluding further outside aid to the resistance. It is an inherently asymmetrical scenario. The United States and other noncommunist countries should not prejudge whether the Russians could, or would, withdraw under this scenario but should focus instead on the quid pro quos that would make such a scenario desirable.

The governing criterion for an acceptable settlement should be whether it assures that Moscow would not add strategic bases in Afghanistan to its other military capabilities adjacent to the Gulf and Southwest Asia. At present the Soviet air bases at Bagram, Kabul, Kandahar, and Shindand have runways long enough to receive a limited number of Bison bombers and other long-range strategic aircraft, but these facilities were built before the occupation with earlier Soviet and American economic and military aid. Most Western intelligence sources agree that Moscow has not yet taken a variety of steps (e.g. substantially lengthened the runways, substantially expanded petroleum storage facilities, and built new hardstands for parking reserve squadrons) that would be necessary to equip its Afghan air bases to support large numbers of strategic aircraft on long stopovers. Instead, Soviet efforts to improve these bases have been primarily tailored to make them more effective as counterinsurgency bases for helicopters and tactical fighter aircraft used against the *mujahidin*.

If the present escalation of the Afghan conflict should continue, together with a growing polarization of Afghan political forces, Moscow would be likely to intensify

its efforts to make Afghanistan a South Asian Mongolia governed by a monolithic communist elite. This would necessitate an indefinite military occupation, which would no doubt be accompanied, in time, by the development of strategic bases. The security interests of noncommunist countries would be better served by a negotiated settlement based on acceptance of a Finland-style security relationship between the Soviet Union and a less monolithic client regime in Kabul.⁴

Strictly speaking, the experience of Finland is not comparable to the tragedy in Afghanistan, since the Finns had a degree of political and military unity that the Afghans lack. But the parallel does suggest the type of security relationship with Afghanistan that the Russians would be likely to expect as part of a settlement. Moscow withdrew its forces from Finland only after Helsinki agreed to a treaty proviso that in effect permitted the return of Soviet troops "in the event of Finland, or the Soviet Union through the territory of Finland, becoming the object of military aggression." To be sure, Article One of the 1948 Finnish-Soviet treaty did not give Moscow the unqualified *de jure* right to reoccupy Finland, but it provided for Soviet assistance to Finland "in case of necessity . . . on the granting of which the parties will reach agreement with one another." Similarly, Article Four of the 1978 treaty concluded between the Soviet Union and the Kabul communist regime provides that "the High Contracting Parties shall consult with each other and shall, by agreement, take the necessary steps to safeguard the security, independence and territorial integrity of the two countries."

An agreement on continuation of the 1978 treaty is likely to be a *sine qua non* for Soviet acceptance of a political settlement in Afghanistan. While the UN draft agreement does not address this issue directly, it would leave in place a regime committed to continuation of the treaty. The UN agreement would provide for the complete withdrawal of Soviet combat forces, but it pointedly omits any reference to Soviet advisers: So

long as Moscow continued to have a client regime in Afghanistan, Soviet military advisers could remain there, maintaining airfields, military communications, and other military facilities in a state of readiness. Moscow would thus be in a position to reintroduce its forces on short notice. Nevertheless, in the event of a future military crisis involving the movement of Soviet forces through Afghanistan, the United States and its allies would have much more warning time than at present. A Soviet combat force withdrawal would clearly serve Western security interests in the Gulf and Southwest Asia by relieving the immediate military pressure resulting from ongoing Soviet force deployments and from the ongoing operational use of Soviet bases.

With respect to Soviet advisers, it should be kept in mind that Moscow had some 6000 military advisers in Afghanistan during the noncommunist Mohammed Daud regime. The fact that the UN scenario would not preclude the presence of advisers should not in itself be a barrier to US support of the projected agreement. But the United States and its allies could properly make their support conditional on Soviet readiness to conclude credible ancillary agreements prohibiting the development of strategic bases in Afghanistan as well as any expansion or upgrading of tactical air bases that could pose an offensive threat to neighboring states.

NOTES

1. Jon Anderson, "Afghan Analogies, Afghan Realities" (unpublished manuscript).
2. For an elaboration of the terms of the projected UN agreement, see my article "A Breakthrough in Afghanistan?" *Foreign Policy*, No. 51 (Summer 1983), pp. 3-26; and my essay "The Soviet Union in Afghanistan: Retrospect and Prospect," in *International Security in Southwest Asia*, ed. by Hafeez Malik (Praeger, 1984).
3. See "A Breakthrough in Afghanistan?" See also my testimony before the Asian and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, US House of Representatives, 28 July 1983, and my article "Are We Fighting to the Last Afghan?" *The Washington Post*, 29 December 1983, p. A17.
4. The modalities of such a relationship are discussed in my paper "The United States and South Asia," presented at a conference on "Defense Planning for the 1990's" sponsored by the National Security Affairs Institute of the National Defense University, Washington, 7-8 October 1983.