The endgame in Afghanistan

Introduction

This year marks the 15th anniversary of the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan. Afghanistan has failed to meet the headlines. The Soviet pullout, along with the end of the Cold War, has taken it off the superpower agenda. Both the United States and the Soviet Union are anxious to forget Afghanistan, part of the legacy of their rivalry.

The Soviet forces were spared the ignominy of scuffling like the Americans out of Vietnam. The heroic image of the Islamic guerrilla forces challenging the might of the Red Army, so assiduously built up in the West, turned out to be little more than a figment of the imagination. The endgame now appears to be as much in the focus of the external powers who have been meddling in Afghanistan for so long, has moved to the Gulf.

This article attempts to assess the political and military situation in Afghanistan and argue that the mujahedin have been effectively marginalised by the Kabul regime. It also examines the prospects for a political settlement and argues that, while the Afghan Interim Government (AIG) has neither the will nor the autonomy to act independently, its ability actually to block the political process much longer is questionable, especially as it is beginning to be devoured by its external allies.

Most of the analysts, especially in the West, had expected the Kabul regime to collapse rapidly once the pullout of the Soviet troops was completed in February 1989. In retrospect it is quite clear that such an expectation was not based on reality, and the subsequent failure of the mujahedin to capture Jalalabad, despite tactical and psychological advantages, confirmed the staying-power of President Najibullah’s government. Two years later the government has not only survived but has actually managed to strengthen its political and security control. By contrast, the mujahedin leaders in Pakistan are perhaps in a greater state of disarray than before.

Instead of weakening the Kabul regime, the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan had the opposite effect. Fighting for their very survival, with their backs to the wall, the government troops showed much greater resilience and initiative than expected. They had, indeed, succeeded in their fight against the mujahedin forces. But much more important, the withdrawal of the Soviet forces removed the hated occupiers and this deprived the mujahedin of a reason to fight. The war now degenerated into a power struggle in which Moslem leader were pitted against Moslem and the spirit of jihad, which had sustained the mujahedin for nearly a decade, was dissipated. Instead, many Afghan now began to look upon Najibullah as an Afghan nationalist resisting forces fighting at the bidding of their foreign paymasters. Moreover, the government forces were buoyed by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in the formation of the Afghan Interim Government. However, it illusion that Najibullah was the opportunity to mobilise the force of the anti-Soviet sentiment among the Afghans. This was also a decisive factor in alienating many of the mujahedin commanders from the leaders in the AIG, even though their loy-alty against Kabul remained largely unaltered.

A related factor which greatly helped Kabul was the split in the ranks of the mujahедин leaders based in Pakistan, and between the leaders based in Pakistan and Iran. In Pakistan alone there are seven major mujahedin factions: two Herat Islah parties (one led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the other by Manzur Yusuf Kabul), Jamait-e-Islami, the Hizbul-e-Jugahat-e-Islami, and the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan. This does not include the eight-party alliance in Iran representing, mainly, the Shia Moslem of Afghanistan. The inability of the mujahedin leaders to agree on a unified interim government meant that any concerted political action was precluded. The AIG rapidly degenerated into a farce and lost its international credibility. Militarily, the consequences were less disastrous: density ruled out any concerted military strategy against Kabul. Not surprisingly, many of the field commanders, disillusioned by the constant in-fighting among the leadership, have asserted their autonomy and pursued their own ambitions, either by fighting with the government forces or by entering into secret deals with Kabul. In many of the so-called "liberated" areas the field commanders have established their respective "oases of control", levying taxes on passengers, trucks and those that pass through their territories, and not infrequently funding their bands of mujahedin through the lucrative cultivation of marijuana.

Kabul’s new strategy

No less crucial to the Kabul government’s ability to consolidate its position is a radical reversal of its military strategy. Instead of pursuing, as in the past, an offensive war in which the objective was the complete routing of the mujahedin forces and an attempt to maintain control over the entire country, Kabul now appears to have opted for a much more defensive strategy. The government has reduced its "defensive perimeter" by pulling back its forces from outlying and remote areas and is instead concentrating on the defence of the major cities, the main sources of population and the strategic posts and routes. The rest of the country—most of which is neither economically nor demographically critical—has been abandoned to the mujahedin.

In the folks around Kabul and the other cities, the government forces are well entrenched with commanding views of all the enemy approaches. The key Salang Highway, which links Kabul with the Soviet Union, has been difficult to safeguard, but with a careful mix of aerial bombing and show of forces, the enemy commanders through whose territory the highway passes, have managed to keep open its life-line to Tirmiz. The daily airlifts from the Soviet Union bring in essential supplies, and Kabul maintains its links with most of the provincial capitals by air, as much of the countryside is in the control of the mujahedin.

The mujahedin, who excelled as guerrilla fighters harassing the government troops, are now being compelled to fight an offensive war for which they are neither trained nor equipped. Without a large force under a unified command it would be impossible to deter the government defences. Moreover, the chances of the undisciplined and dispirited mujahedin capturing Kabul can be virtually ruled out. Without braving on air, it is unlikely any mujahedin attempt to attack the entrenched defences of Kabul and other cities would be at best futile.

Not surprisingly, the mujahedin now confine their activities to the indiscriminate firing of missiles and rockets. They have done little to preserve the government troops, but the indiscriminate killing of Afghani civilians has given the government a powerful propaganda weapon. The mujahedin commanders, who are mainly Pakistanis, are aware of the consequences of their action but prefer to ignore them since most of the casualties are Dari speakers.
To the 10 years since the fighting began, the large-scale exodus of Pushtuns and the influx of displaced Dari-speaking people from the north has turned Kabul into a predominantly Dari city.

The countryside, ostensibly 'liberated' and under mujahedin control, is also slowly returning to a sort of normality. Of course, there is no government, or at least no visible sign of government such as officers, schools (except madrasahs) or police, as is clearly noticeable in any of the districts adjacent to Pakistan, including Angorish, Afghanistan and Murta. What limited governance there is is provided by the district officials, an extremely impotent and ineffective institution made up of important members of the mujahedin, the clergy and the elders. The refugees, both from Pakistan and those who were displaced internally, are beginning to return, agriculture is slowly being revived, some of the bazaars which destroyed are gradually resuming and houses are being rebuilt. Trade and travel are also picking up, despite the appalling state of the roads and non-existent bridges.

In the government-controlled territories, too, a semblance of normality is returning and the regime is gaining confidence. The absence of President Najibullah from the country for nearly a month during August and September 1990 did not tempt any of his rivals to seek to capture power. The improvement in the security situation is also reflected in the return of several Western Embassies, including those of France, Italy and Turkey. The British, who had withdrawn their Embassy against their own better judgment, have also recently sent a team to investigate the possibility of re-establishing links with Kabul. The various UN and humanitarian agencies, including UNOCA, UNHCR (dealing with the refugee problem) and UNDP (dealing with economic development) and the International Red Cross, are quite prominent and expanding their activities.

A difficult transition

However, despite these signs of returning normality, numerous problems continue to confront the government. The mujahedin have clearly failed to topple the Kabul regime; but at the same time the Khoja regime has singularly failed to end the conflict. The country remains in a state of war and much of the government's energy is directed towards containing the insurgents. Nightly curfews are still in force and sporadic acts of sabotage are still being carried out by the mujahedin. Schools and colleges remain closed. Millions of displaced Afghans, both internal and external, are still waiting to return home.

More critically, there is great scarcity of almost all essential items: food and fuel are rationed and the cost of living has soared in the last two years. The prospect of famine during the coming months in the oulying provinces cannot be ruled out. The government has survived largely because the Soviet Union has continued to provide essential supplies. There is an understandable apprehension that the Soviet Union, confronted as it is with its own domestic crises, cannot be expected to continue an open-ended commitment to Afghanistan.

Most important of all, both the population at large and the government leaders are exhausted and suffering from war-weariness. Even though the government has improved its security and appears to be politically quite stable, there is a popular consensus that political efforts should be stepped up to heal the rifts within Afghan society. Also, Najibullah cannot ignore the fact that, while his personal stature has been enhanced and there is a general acceptance of his policies, his government is not popular and only tolerated because the alternatives are even worse. In other words, while the Najibullah regime has gained the gratitude of many Afghans for preventing their country from slipping into chaos, there is also a strong underlying opinion that long-term economic recovery and political stability cannot be secured without a political settlement with the mujahedin. It is this realization which lies behind Najibullah's quest for 'national reconciliation'.

The policy of national reconciliation has so far brought little response from the leaders of the ANI in Pakistan for reasons discussed below. However, inside Afghanistan it has won growing admiration, even from Najibullah's political opponents. Najibullah is aware of the stigma attached to the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) for its excesses in the civil war, and, more important, for its collaboration with the Soviet forces. Therefore he has sought to re-establish his party and broaden his political base through the creation of the Watan Party. The Watan Party is essentially the old PDPA, but under its new name the creation between the Parcham and the Khdja faction has been less pronounced. It has also made it possible for many non-PDPA leaders to join the government. In the current cabinet as many as 13 of the 25 key members do not belong to the Watan party. Indeed, several of the members of the cabinet suffered imprisonment during the period of Soviet intervention. The presence of these members has made the government much more sensitive to its past mistakes which led to the civil war. It also appears to be much more responsive to the traditional power structure.

Many of the tribal elders, who had earlier been alienated by Kabul's attempt at centralisation, now appear to be reincorporated into the ruling structure. The government appears to have reverted to the earlier pattern of leaving the authority of the tribal leaders in the traditional sphere. It has enhanced the role of the Loya Jirga assembly, which has recently been convened twice after remaining dormant for many years. Perhaps it is also worth mentioning that excessive concentration on the civil war during the last decade may have led to an exaggeration of the divisions in Afghan society. The very fact that members of the same family, tribe and region are on both sides of the conflict has meant that despite the hostilities essential contact has been maintained and is now helping to smooth the process of reconciliation. The absence of racism and the ease with which the displaced families are re-integrated into their home areas and after an absence of many years of fighting on opposite sides is remarkable.

The policy of national reconciliation has also benefited from two unexpected sources. First, the brunt of the indiscriminate shelling and rocket attacks by the mujahedin has been borne by the civilian population, mostly the poor people in the slums of Kabul. This, together with the stories of atrocities perpetrated during the siege of Jalalabad, especially the abduction of women by the Wahabi-dominated mujahedin groups, has increased the Afghan tribal notions of warfare and has further alienated them from the mujahedin. Second, the abortive coup by General Tami failed to oust Najibullah but helped to strengthen the cohesion of the Kabul regime. Tami was the main proponent of a hard-line policy against the ANI. After his escape to Pakistan many of his supporters were purged from the government. There now appears to be a genuine desire for peace and the Cabinet, too, seems unanimously committed to seeking a political solution.
What sort of interim regime?

The confidence of the regime is reflected in the various offers for the formation of a transitional government. The Najibullah governement has dropped its claim to a majority share in the transitional government and does not raise any objections to the ex-King, Zahir Shah, being awarded a role in the transition process. The plan envisages that each of the six groups—the Kabul government, the AIr in Peshawar, the mujahidin alliance in Iran, the Horia, the mujahidin field commanders and the Afghan expatriate technocrats and internet crawlers—would each nominate 10 members and form the transitional government. The transitional government would be entrusted with the task of drafting a constitution and holding elections for the formation of a regular government.

Since these elections, which are to be subject to UN and international supervision, may be difficult to hold throughout the country, given the disturbances in some parts and sheer logistical obstacles, the proposal is to secure the widest possible participation through a variety of means. In the first place, popular elections based on adult franchise will be held in the urban areas and the main population centers; further expression of popular opinion will be secured through representation by the Layalina and the district assemblies.

The Kabul regime, however, is unwilling to give in to the AIr's demand for Najibullah's resignation as a precondition for political negotiations. The leaders of the AIr, including the emir, are adamantly opposed to Najibullah's resignation (remember, the government of ex-Khan Huma has been in power for five years). The AIr's 10-member delegation represents a united front. By contrast, the government's delegation, which has been split, is more likely to agree to the AIr's demands.

There are also important practical difficulties preventing Najibullah's resignation. The current government can be put in place. Most obviously, Najibullah's resignation would create a power vacuum which would in all probability plunge the country into chaos and a fresh round of bloodshed. Moreover, several of the external powers are still actively supporting the AIr, and any sign of chaos in Kabul would greatly encourage them to step up their activities. However, Najibullah has repeatedly refused to step down provided an agreement is reached on the transition period. That option might then be more acceptable to the government.

The external dimension

The AIr's adamant insistence on Najibullah's removal is also easy to understand. Eventually, the AIr needs a face-saving device before it can be seen to be negotiating with the Kabul regime. More important, there is a strong calculation that because there is no obvious successor to Najibullah acceptable to all the groups in the Kabul government, his removal would create a certain amount of confusion which the AIr might be able to use to its advantage. The reluctance of the AIr to enter into sub-

-ative discussion is also explained by the fact that it is not only divided but also failed to build its support outside Afghanistan. In a popular election contest the AIr's prospects are not promising. Indeed, the more cynical observers have argued that the AIr remains the main beneficiary so long as there is no political settlement. The AIr is aware of the leverage it has to frustrate a political settlement. Towards this end, as is common knowledge, there are close ties between the AIr and the mujahidin leadership. However, the fact is that the AIr and the mujahidin have not succeeded in breaking the Afghan refugees from returning home. Time, however, is working against the AIr. Despite the AIr's efforts, the situation in Afghanistan remains, as before, the presence of the mujahidin in the territory.

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dependence on the Soviet Union. He is, therefore, likely to step up his pursuit of a negotiated settlement.

The AIG, however, is more vulnerable to external pressures. In main battle, the United States, is not only disenchanted with the fighting capability of the mujahedin, but its interest in Afghanistan itself has declined. Afghanistan was strategically important to the United States in its policy of containing the expansion of Soviet communism. Now that communism is virtually dead in the Soviet Union and much of Eastern Europe, Afghanistan has lost its status as a front line state against communism. Indeed, both the United States and most of the West have developed a strong interest in propping up the Gerbachev regime in Afghanistan to prevent a possible military or economic blowback. Since Afghanistan has no intrinsic value to the United States, it is hardly surprising that it should be relegated to the bottom of the list of priorities.

The Gulf crisis has pushed Afghanistan out of people's minds. Also, the possible economic consequences of the Gulf crisis and the severe budget deficits in the United States has meant that there will be fewer resources available to offer the AIG, even if the Bush Administration wished to help. The distancing of Washington from the AIG has already begun. It is now more likely that in future American aid to the Afghans will no longer be channelled through the AIG. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is contemplating setting up its own operations in Kabul. And, as more Western European Embassies return to Kabul, Washington will have to follow suit. Without American backing it will be virtually impossible for the AIG to resist a negotiated settlement.

In Pakistan, too, a change in attitude is discernible. Benazir Bhutto, despite her own preference for a negotiated settlement, has reluctantly continued to channel weapons to the AIG so as not to be out of step with American policy. It is also doubtful whether the ISI, which had the overall control of Pakistan's Afghani policy, would have given up its insistence on a military solution. The Pakistan government, however, has now agreed to a significant change in policy of bringing its troops to the border of the civilian government. However, this move will have to be seen in the context of the unprecedented rise in American aid.

The Pakistani attitude is in line with American thinking. For the first time, the Foreign Ministry seems to be in the driving seat and appears to have the President's backing for its Afghan policy. The attitude of the ISI still remains unpredictable, but in view of the close working relationship between the President and the Chief of Staff, it is unlikely that the ISI would risk subverting the initiative of the Foreign Ministry. Under the new scheme, the AIG is being persuaded to keep its arms and press another united front to Najibullah's request for sending representatives to the transitional government. If the different parties fail to agree, the Pakistan government is understood to have threatened to withdraw its assistance and facilities. The AIG leaders, understandably enough, are concerned about Pakistan's tough new posture and are quite anxious to get them back. The Mujahideen and Gulai factions are certainly not to accept Pakistan's new initiative, while Hekmatyar and Suyal groups would prove more reluctant. The net result would be to sit up the fences and make use of the ISI. There is a strong sense of urgency in the Pakistan Foreign Ministry, but in view of Pakistan's own political upheavals and interdepartmental rivalries it remains to be seen whether the government can speak with one voice. Any sign of a division in the Pakistan government is bound to be exploited by the AIG.

Perhaps the most telling consideration is that the AIG's ability to continue its military struggle is the drawback of the crisis in the Gulf. In the last two years, Saudi Arabia has been the main advocate of a military solution. If Afghanistan could not get the level of international aid and assistance to the AIG, together with that of Kuwait, it has surprised that of the United States. In the post-Geneva Accord period, the Soviet-maligned Wali groups have been the main benefactors. The were particularly conspicuous during the disastrous Jalalabad campaign. But because of Saudi Arabia's considerable influence in Pakistan Islamabadi has tolerated the Wali activities, even though they were not consistent with Pakistan's own preferred option. However, in view of the current situation in the Gulf, it is extremely unlikely that the Saudis and Kuwaitis can sustain the level of their economic assistance—or even be concerned with the Afghan problem. The economic burden of the Gulf crisis, the necessity to backfill the cost of the entire multinational forces, in Saudi Arabia, the Kuwaiti government's commitment to providing the economic hardship suffered by countries like Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh as a result of the Gulf crisis—these rules out the ability of the Saudis or the Kuwaitis to continue funding the AIG.

Moreover, it might be argued that even after the Gulf crisis is over the Saudis are unlikely to be much involved with Afghanistan. Originally, the Saudis had come to the Afghan mujahedin's assistance at the behest of the United States. Now that Washington has itself changed its stance it is unlikely that Riyadh would attempt to work at cross-purposes with the United States in Afghanistan. No less crucially, Saudi Arabia has for the first time started to woo the Soviet Union. In order to win Soviet support in its conflict against Iraq, Saudi Arabia is bound to be sensitive to Moscow's position on Afghanistan.

Finally, of course, the Afghan refugees are voting with their feet. The return of the refugees has begun, and it would be virtually impossible for the AIG to hold them after the coming spring. There is war-weariness and camp fatigue among the Afghan refugees. Their desire to return home is also obvious. In many cases Afghan families have been living in exile for nearly a decade, driven away from their homes to avoid being caught in the crossfire of the Afghan civil war. Until recently, they were hesitant to return because of the continued fighting. However, in the last two years fighting has virtually ceased in large parts of the country—the areas of tranquillity, as the UN describes them—with fighting confined to a few strategical areas. There is ample evidence that despite the political uncertainty and endemic security hazards, a sizeable number of Afghans have returned and more are returning quite spontaneously. The debit book, which has been going on for nearly two years, is slow and gradual but continuous. In the two largest refugee villages (Shekhals in Pishin and Loralai) about one third of the homes are abandoned, the doors and beams have been pulled out and roofs have caved in. Between a quarter and a third of the refugees have probably already returned. At the same time, there is widespread feeling in Pakistan that the Afghan refugees have outstayed their hospitality, although Pakistan's population has been markedly tolerant and suffered the inconveniences caused by the presence of 3 million refugees with a minimum of resentment.

The exact number of returns has been deliberately concealed. For obvious reasons Pakistanis dealing with refugees have an interest in maintaining inflated figures to ensure that donor commitments do not decline too much. Equally, the AIG and its backers have a vested interest in exaggerating the numbers in the camps to maintain their leverage against Kabul. Since many of the Afghans returning are not registered, it is, of course, not possible to monitor their numbers, but all estimates indicate that they are substantial. The local inhabitants of Quetta, Pishin and Loralai confirm that the number of refugees is declining. The countryside is falling into the hands of the bazaars and smaller stores. In the past, the bazaars were often the number of refugees is declining. The countryside is falling into the hands of the bazaars and smaller stores. In the past, the bazaars were once again coming back to life rebuilding of homes and revival of
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The Fifth Assembly of the United Nations

The mood and emphasis of the General Assembly, as is fitting for a living political organism, change as the world situation develops from year to year. In 1946 the keynote was one of debatable optimism, and in 1947 of growing disillusion. In 1948 the Assembly wallowed in the sluggishness of despair, while in 1949 there was a glimmer of dawning hope after the withering of the Berlin storm. By the opening of the 1950 session the United Nations had met a new storm head on and was even making good headway against it, and the Assembly therefore met in a mood of unbridled enthusiasm, encouraged by what appeared to be the United Nations' first really successful effort to challenge aggression, but anxious to consolidate the ground already won...

Major problems of peace and security have always set the tone of the Assembly's sessions; even then, like the Berlin question in 1948 or the Chinese question in 1949, they have not actually been on its agenda. This year the world's besetting problems were fairly and squarely on the agenda from the start, and the Assembly was able to tackle them in a more whole-hearted and businesslike fashion than before, helped by the deceptive mildness and show-stoppingness of the Soviet speeches in the early part of the session (which coincided with MacArthur's triumphant advance in Korea). With the UN forces at the 38th Parallel and Syngman Rhee close behind them, there was no time to be lost in dealing with the Assembly's most pressing specific problem, Korea. The resolution, originally sponsored by Australia, Brazil, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, the Philippines and the United Kingdom, and finally passed by the Assembly on 3 October, stated the principles governing further United Nations action on Korea and set up machinery for putting these principles into effect. The essential objectives were the establishment of a united, independent and democratic government of Korea...

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