Afghanistan: the end-game

The Afghan crisis has reached a most critical turning-point. After nine years of costly and embarrasing military involvement, the Afghan situation continues to deteriorate. The Soviet Union, which has been left with the task of stabilizing the situation, has announced a new offensive. The Afghan government, which relies on the support of the U.S., has launched a counter-offensive. The situation is critical and the stakes are high.

The main factors that shaped the outcome of the conflict are: the ideological and strategic interests of the superpowers, the influence of local power brokers, the role of international organizations, and the role of non-governmental organizations. The situation in Afghanistan is complex and multifaceted, and requires a comprehensive and long-term approach.

The Afghan government has shown a willingness to negotiate, but the Soviet Union remains uncompromising. The Soviet Union has a strong interest in maintaining its influence in Afghanistan, and is unlikely to withdraw its forces without a negotiated settlement. The Afghan government, on the other hand, is committed to achieving a peaceful resolution, and is ready to make concessions.

The future of Afghanistan is uncertain, but there is hope for a diplomatic solution. The United Nations and other international organizations should take a leading role in facilitating negotiations and promoting peace. The Afghan people deserve a peaceful future, and the international community has a responsibility to support their efforts.

Note of the month

The Afghan crisis has reached a most critical turning-point. After nine years of costly and embarrasing military involvement, the Afghan situation continues to deteriorate. The Soviet Union, which has been left with the task of stabilizing the situation, has announced a new offensive. The Afghan government, which relies on the support of the U.S., has launched a counter-offensive. The situation is critical and the stakes are high.

The main factors that shaped the outcome of the conflict are: the ideological and strategic interests of the superpowers, the influence of local power brokers, the role of international organizations, and the role of non-governmental organizations. The situation in Afghanistan is complex and multifaceted, and requires a comprehensive and long-term approach.

The Afghan government has shown a willingness to negotiate, but the Soviet Union remains uncompromising. The Soviet Union has a strong interest in maintaining its influence in Afghanistan, and is unlikely to withdraw its forces without a negotiated settlement. The Afghan government, on the other hand, is committed to achieving a peaceful resolution, and is ready to make concessions.

The future of Afghanistan is uncertain, but there is hope for a diplomatic solution. The United Nations and other international organizations should take a leading role in facilitating negotiations and promoting peace. The Afghan people deserve a peaceful future, and the international community has a responsibility to support their efforts.
meeting on 25 December with the Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister and Ambassador to Kabul, Yuri Vorontsov. Nor could it bring pressure to bear on the international bankers of the Afghan government, the Soviet Union, and the United States to help it with a coalition settlement. These backers ignored the proposals put forward by Mr Gerashchenko in his speech at the UN General Assembly on 26 June. Soviet support, however, did not materialise, despite the coming to power, following the general elections of 16 November, of the traditional Islamic fundamentalist regime of Habibullah Khorasani, who is committed to the establishment of a theocratic regime.

The third factor was mujahidin strength. In contrast to the regime, the mujahidin had never felt as confident of a final victory as in the past following the Soviet Union's withdrawal in mid-May 1988. They regularly ignored Moscow's demand for more successful forms of military defeat, a direct result of their success in the battle for survival, although the supply of American Stinger missiles since mid-1986 had considerably boosted their effectiveness. They equally considered Moscow's most conclusive decision to hold direct talks with them (the first round of which was held in early December in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and the second round was held later in Islamabad) as a further outcome of this success. In their eyes, this amounted to a new Soviet acknowledgment of the mujahidin's ideological and practical strength over the forces of communism, ending any claim of legitimacy on the part of the PDPAs to exist as a national force in Afghan politics.

While providing them with an added psychological boost, it encouraged them to conclude an agreement with the PDPAs, but also to go beyond their basic demands for the immediate unconditional withdrawal of all Soviet forces and the exodus of all Muslim, Soviet-backed forces from Afghanistan. They still demanded, however, the withdrawal of all US forces and the reopening of the Taliban's borders to Afghans from abroad, and the return of hundreds of young Afghans who are currently being detained in the Soviet Union and in Soviet client states as the future cadres of the PDA. This, together with the fact that Hekmatyar has been a controversial Islamic militant, caused him and his group to become somewhat marginalised in the Afghan resistance—this was initially accompanied by mass consequences.

First, it helped the largest and most professional mujahidin group, the Islamic Society of Afghanistan, which includes the celebrated commander Ahmad Shah Musazami, to seize a more central position in the political resistance. Its leader, Burhanudin Rabbani, who led the mujahidin in the Taliban and who is the former mullawal of the PDA, was able to come out more openly in favour of pragmatism and greater unity in the mainstream of the resistance. Second, it weakened the Soviet and Indian argument that an alternative to the PDA would be a radical Islamic fundamentalist regime similar to that of Ayubullah Khoestani in Iran. This would not be the case in Afghanistan, given the predominantly Sunni nature and the decentralized ethnic-tribal characteristics of the country.

These developments, plus the recent moves made by India and Pakistan as well as in India and China to improve their mutual relations and Iran’s continued support for the Afghan resistance (although increasingly downplayed in accordance with its own needs to maintain reasonable relations with the Soviet Union) mean a strengthening rather than diminishing of the foundation for a regional consensus in favour of the mujahidin. The overall result was a neutralization of any regional support that Moscow may have considered for a coalition settlement of the Afghan problem.

At the international level, nothing seemed to happen to help the Soviet Union to secure a favourable Afghan deal. USSR leaders had envisaged a change in America’s Afghan policy as a result of last November’s presidential election, but it was disappointing. No change occurred there. On the contrary, the election of George Bush must be seen as a blow to the President’s strong support for the mujahidin, who enjoyed strong support in the Congress, in their quest for an unconditional Soviet withdrawal, as well as the renewal of the US Congress’s precondition for the Afghanis to exercise their right to free self-determination. Although during President Zia’s visit to the US, Washington had not shown any signs of political judgment in the distribution of arms supplies to different mujahidin groups, this was partly due to the latter’s President’s preference. But with Zia’s death this changed, giving Washington’s variant...
Foreign policy agencies a wider opportunity to become more aware of the changing realities on the ground inside Afghanistan. Consequently, the United States has been moving closer to the more perceptive policy pursued by Britain whose main influence has been a support for the mainstream of the mujahedin in order to foster greater unity among them; and resistance to the Soviet invasion of the fundamental demands of the resistance. This development also served the cause of the mujahedin well, and helped to frustrate Soviet allies to achieve a viable Afghan deal.

The fifth factor pertains to the constraints which arose from a Soviet desire not to do anything with regard to Afghanistan that could upset other Soviet foreign policy objectives at both regional and global levels. The process of Soviet withdrawal, beginning in mid-May 1988, had already generated a greater international image for the Soviet Union, helping it not only to improve its relations with Western nations, but also to make itself more appealing as a counter-balancing power to those less developed areas which have been the mainstay of their traditional Western allies. It must have quickly become clear to Moscow that, in the absence of a coalition settlement, a Soviet troop withdrawal was still essential for strengthening the Soviet Union's regional and global ties and fostering conditions for the Soviet Union to become involved in a resolution of other regional conflicts as a constructive power.

To look at it only at the regional level, Moscow could not enjoy the opportunity that its troop withdrawal could have served for the development of a more economic and commercial ties with Iran. The powerful Iranian Majlis Speaker,Ali Akbar Hashemi, had already made it clear that the only route to a better balanced relationship with the Soviet Union was the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. With Iran embarking, shortly after the start of the Soviet withdrawal, on a process of developing its links with Iran, and Iran's involvement to the Goma Accord, Moscow could not find in it an interest to let go the advantage that it could draw from this development by prolonging its troop withdrawal beyond the deadline set under the Geneva Accord.

Similarly, Moscow could not let opportunities pass for better ties with Pakistan and many conservative Arab states. It must have noted that an improvement in Soviet-Pakistani relations could help Benazir Bhutto's government to reduce its dependence on the United States. By the same token, Moscow could gain better standing in the region. Furthermore, a strengthening of Soviet ties with Saudi Arabia, irrespective of whether or not it involved diplomatic relations, could assist Moscow in two important ways: helping it to implement economic benefits and to enhance its capacity to play a more effective role in the region, particularly over the Pakistan problem. This is precisely why Amin Saikal was keen to give his talks with the mujahedin regional dimension by meeting the Saudi, Iranian and Pakistani leaders during and between rounds of talks. It was the consideration of such potential gains for the Soviet Union that both weakened the Soviet commitment to haggle hard for a coalition settlement in Afghanistan and strengthened the position of the mujahedin in opposing anything short of satisfaction of their fundamental demands.

In view of all these factors, and the pressure which had been placed on the Kremlin by growing domestic opposition to the Afghan war, the Gorbachev leadership was ultimately not really in a position to squeeze any concessions from the mujahedin that could ensure the long-term survival of the PDPA and, therefore, Soviet influence in Afghan politics. At the same time, the Kremlin could not afford to lose political and logistical grounds, so dump the PDPA in favour of transferring power to the mujahedin. A sudden Soviet abandonment of the PDPA would have caused more political problems for the Kremlin and logistical chaos for the final phase of Soviet troop withdrawal that would further threaten the regime's fragile survival, with no-coalition Soviet help. Second, a Soviet transfer of power to the mujahedin could have landed the Soviet Union with the serious problem of how to disengage the regime. Whatever the extent of the unpopularity of the regime, it must be noted that it has a sizable Party militia and sufficient destructive firepower under its command to have made things very difficult for the withdrawing Soviet forces if Moscow had opted for a soft landing.

As a result, in the absence of a face-saving coalition settlement, Moscow has found it expedient to opt for the 'Afghanistan' of the war not unlike what the United States adopted in order to disengage itself from the Vietnam War. Thus, nevertheless, it leaves Moscow with the problem of letting the PDPA regime fall. It is not very unnoticeable, as Washington did with the Saigon government, and departs the whole Soviet Afghan debacle as a mistake of the Brezhnev era. But until this happens, the Soviet Union has left the Afghan with no choice but to continue to pay with more blood for what Mr Gorbachev has called a Soviet 'sin'.

It is also worth stressing that while the eventual overthrow of the PDPA government, and its replacement by an Islamic one, will fulfill the final objective of the resistance; this in itself cannot guarantee that peace and order will soon thereafter prevail in Afghanistan. The structural damage that the Soviet Union and its surrogates have inflicted upon Afghan society over the last decide alone is so far reaching that the Afghan people will not be able to overcome it for a long time after the fall of the PDPA. They will have to face daunting difficulties not only in devising a widely acceptable political system, but also in rebuilding their nation out of the ruins of the Soviet Union and their material base left behind. Meanwhile, their most urgent task is to secure the removal of the PDPA government as the next step after the Soviet troop withdrawal, to help maintain a process of free de-determination. This will open a new chapter in the evolution of Afghan politics, whose direction is as much beyond anyone's ability to predict.

Amin Saikal

1 For background, see Anthony Humm's 'Note of the month' "Afghanistan's future" in the August/September 1988 issue of The World Today.