Afghanistan and the Return to Cold War

On the night of 25 December 1979 large numbers of Soviet troops crossed the border into Afghanistan and occupied Kabul. According to Pravda the Soviet Union had responded to an ‘insistent request from the Afghan government and sent a limited contingent which would be withdrawn as soon as the factors precipitating this action were no longer present’. The interpretation of events by the Carter administration was very different. Soviet intervention was regarded as an act of adventurism which compelled a reassessment of superpower relations. President Carter denounced the invasion, imposed sanctions on the Soviet Union and effectively abandoned superpower détente by deferring further Senate consideration of SALT Two. Afghanistan provided the occasion for the Carter administration to embrace the cold war orthodoxy that had come back to the forefront of American thinking but which the President and Secretary of State Vance had hitherto resisted. After the invasion, the Carter administration, in effect, accepted that the arguments of the Committee on the Present Danger had offered a more compelling basis for US foreign policy than the ‘world order’ approach. Within the administration, Brzezinski emerged triumphant as both Carter and Vance acknowledged the need for a firm response. Indeed, one of the most striking results of the Soviet invasion was that it produced a degree of consensus within the Carter administration that had hitherto been unattainable.

Whereas there was little divergence of opinion in the administration over the threat posed, directly and indirectly, by the Soviet military intervention, the key figures differed in the way in which they reached their conclusions. For Brzezinski, the invasion vindicated his earlier assessments of Soviet behaviour in the Third World and demonstrated that US reluctance to adopt a hard-headed geopolitical approach had encouraged increased Soviet risk-taking. In his view Afghanistan was the result of the failures of recent American policies in regions such as the Horn: ‘Had we been tougher sooner, had we drawn the line more clearly ... the Soviets would not have engaged in this act of miscalculation.’

Vance and Carter agreed with Brzezinski’s overall conclusions – that the United States had to adopt a tougher stance towards Moscow to prevent further adventurism – but they emphasised that Afghanistan represented an essentially new and more virulent strain of Soviet
activism than anything previously discernible. As Carter noted, the Soviets had intervened directly, for the first time since February 1948, in a sovereign country outside its acknowledged sphere of influence. Furthermore, it was a move which had serious implications for Western security. According to the President, ‘a successful take-over of Afghanistan would give the Soviets a deep penetration between Iran and Pakistan and pose a threat to the rich oil fields of the Persian Gulf area and to the crucial waterways through which so much of the world’s energy supplies had to pass’. Such fears were compounded by the instability and loss of American influence in Iran, which meant that ‘if the Soviets could consolidate their hold on Afghanistan, the balance of power in the entire region would be dramatically modified in their favour and they might be tempted toward further aggression’.

In his State of the Union Address on 23 January 1980, Carter emphasised the global implications of the Soviet incursion: ‘Let our position be absolutely clear: any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary.’ This statement, inevitably dubbed ‘the Carter Doctrine’, provided an epitaph for detente, highlighting as it did the American reversion to traditional notions of containment. Although there was still a gap between commitments and capabilities, the increasing prominence given to the Rapid Deployment Force was designed to ensure that American interests in critical areas of the Third World could and would be upheld.

Afghanistan was widely seen in the United States as the culmination of the geopolitical offensive which had been initiated under the cover of detente. Soviet objectives were viewed in global rather than regional terms, and it was generally accepted that the invasion of Afghanistan not only reflected a qualitative change in Soviet willingness to use force outside its accepted sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, but that it was directed towards the Gulf and would give the Soviet Union a hand on the West’s jugular vein. A more persuasive analysis is that the intervention resulted essentially from local factors, but that any incentives Moscow had to refrain from the action for the sake of detente had been taken away by the Senate debate over SALT Two. The Soviet leaders faced what they deemed to be a threat to Soviet security interests. Even had superpower relations been less strained, it is unlikely that Moscow would have eschewed action necessary to rescue the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. In the aftermath of the furore over the Soviet combat brigade in Cuba, and with the benefits of detente appearing increasingly problematic amidst the hostile Senate debate over SALT Two, the incentives for Soviet
restraint were minimal. The irony is that the Carter administration was still attempting to maintain detente despite the emerging consensus in the United States on its inadequacies and dangers, but was galvanised by Afghanistan into precisely the kind of stance that the hard-line critics had long been demanding.

**Soviet–Afghanistan Relations**

Afghanistan’s importance to Moscow is nothing new. During the nineteenth century it was the focus of intense competition between the Russian and British empires, while the common border ensured that the country remained salient in Soviet security calculations after the British had departed. One analyst of Soviet–Afghan relations has even suggested that ‘the 1979 military move was only another, long-delayed, step forward in a lurching Russian advance’ into the territories on its periphery which had been evident well before the 1917 Revolution.7 This move was in some respects more disconcerting – and in some respects less – because it did not come against a background of continued great power competition in the country. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Afghan requests for American economic and military assistance were given a low priority in Washington, where relations with Pakistan took precedence. The result was that Afghanistan increasingly looked to Moscow for support. This suited Soviet objectives very well, and Afghan–Soviet relations were frequently cited in Moscow as an example of the mutual cooperation that could occur between states with different social systems.

Prince Daoud, the Afghan Prime Minister from 1953 to 1963, was a key figure in drawing the two countries closer together, and when he seized power from the monarchy in 1973 this was greatly welcomed by the Kremlin. His autocratic and extremely conservative rule, however, was a considerable disappointment to Moscow, especially when he began to shift away from Moscow and towards closer links with Egypt, Pakistan and Iran. Consequently, when Daoud was killed in a coup in April 1978, there were allegations of Soviet complicity. The 1978 coup, like that of 1973, ‘pulled Afghanistan back from pragmatic or rightist policies disliked by local communists and the Soviet Union’.8 If Moscow was not averse to a change of government in either 1973 or 1978, however, there is little evidence that it played a major role in either Daoud’s seizure of power or his overthrow. The regime’s demise came when the military turned against Daoud. After a confused sequence of events the functions of government were transferred to the leaders of the communist movement.
The movement was totally unprepared for the power that unexpectedly, even accidentally, fell into its hands. Its misuse of that power with a combination of idealistic reformism and brutal authoritarianism started the country on a downward spiral into civil war and foreign occupation.²

The Communist Party, the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), was made up of a loose and highly fractious coalition of two main groups – the Khalq and the Parcham – lacking in organisation, governmental experience and a coherent policy programme. In the power vacuum that emerged in the immediate aftermath of Daoud’s ouster, however, the PDPA was the one group willing to take on the burden of government. This burden was considerable. The internal situation in Afghanistan was so desperate that successful government would have taxed the ingenuity of the most skilled and experienced political leaders – which the new leaders most certainly were not.

Afghanistan needed a strong, united government and a broad base of support for its policies. The PDPA could provide neither: it was riven by personal and factional rivalries which resulted in large-scale purges and rapid turnover of leading personnel. The Khalq–Parcham alliance broke down and Babrak Karmal, the leader of the Parcham faction, was exiled. Within the Khalq, Hafizullah Amin, the Foreign Minister, and Nur Muhammad Taraki, who had become President, emerged as the dominant figures. At the outset, institutional and mass support for the new government was slight – and it declined thereafter. A reforming government was bound to meet opposition, but the PDPA made what a leading Soviet commentator described as ‘serious mistakes’, which weakened its position.¹⁰ Its attacks on the Islamic religion and Muslim clergy proved particularly damaging, not only alienating the mullahs but encouraging the disaffection of the great mass of Afghans, who remained deeply religious. Indeed, the attempt to centralise control over the Afghanistan tribes and to introduce a new social order ‘violated practically every Afghan cultural norm and strayed far beyond the allowable bounds of deviance in the social, economic and political institutions’.¹¹ By introducing ambitious proposals for land reform the new leadership alienated the landowners, who helped to transform opposition into open revolt.¹²

The Soviets were not opposed to the general aims of the PDPA government: constraints existed in Soviet Central Asia on the traditions and culture of Islam, while some kind of land reform was clearly necessary to alleviate the worst of rural poverty and loosen the political grip of the ‘obscurantist feudal lords’. Nevertheless, Moscow was concerned over the hasty way in which these policies were implemented.¹³ In spite of their reservations, however, the Soviet leaders clearly saw benefits in supporting the PDPA government and
attempting to save it from its own ineptness. Consequently, the Soviet commitment was steadily deepened. The number of Soviet military advisers in Afghanistan increased from 350 before the April revolution to 1,000 in May 1979. Just before the invasion in December there were around 4,000 Soviet advisers in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{14}

The growing Soviet involvement was formalised in the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, which was signed in December 1978, and would later be used as justification for the Soviet military intervention. Even more significant was the uprising in the town of Herat in March 1979 in which a number of Soviet advisers and their families were killed.\textsuperscript{15} One analyst has suggested that this was 'a major turning point in the Afghan situation: Moscow's reaction to it led on inexorably, even inevitably, to the Soviet invasion nine months later.'\textsuperscript{16} Military aid to the regime was significantly increased and, in April, General Yefishev – who had gone on a similar fact-finding mission to Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1968 – was sent to Kabul to assess the situation. Equally important was the fact that within the government Amin consolidated his power at the expense of Taraki, and became even more repressive. A Soviet official, Vasily Safroshchuk, was sent to Kabul to act as adviser to the Amin government but succeeded only in encouraging cosmetic changes. Despite Soviet pressures for moderation Amin continued his excesses and the country drifted towards anarchy.

Increasingly Amin was seen in Moscow as 'an obstruction to the Soviet effort to save the regime from its own mistakes'.\textsuperscript{17} As early as May 1979 American intelligence reports suggested that the Soviet Union was profoundly dissatisfied with the leadership, and had plans to change it. Within a few months the search for an alternative had become more insistent. Although Soviet advisers were taking a hard line against the insurgents, it was obvious that without a change of government this would not be sufficient.

Other signs of Soviet unease were also evident during the middle of 1979. In late June military preparations in the southern part of the Soviet Union were monitored by Western intelligence, although their precise purpose – and whether they were related to Afghanistan or the unrest in Iran – was not clear. In July a small but elite military unit was stationed at Bagram air base, the key communications and logistical centre for the Kabul region.\textsuperscript{18} The following month a further military delegation under General Pavlovsky, who had been commander-in-chief of the invading forces in Czechoslovakia in 1968, was sent to assess the situation.

In September, Taraki met with the Soviet leadership on his way back from a meeting of the non-aligned countries in Cuba. By this time Moscow had decided that stability in Afghanistan was impossible with Amin at the helm, and Soviet interests required
his speedy removal. As well as impressing upon Taraki the need for changes in government policy, therefore, the Soviet leadership almost certainly encouraged him to remove Amin, if necessary by assassination. In the event, it was Taraki who was captured and executed. The Soviet plan had misfired: ‘Like a later bungled attempt to remove Amin that led to the overt Soviet invasion instead of a smoother introduction of Soviet troops by internationally acceptable invitation, the September attempt created the worst possible result for the Soviet Union.’

Amin’s power was increased and his hostility towards Moscow was intensified. It seems to have been in the aftermath of Taraki’s failure that General Pavlovsky, who was still in Afghanistan, was directed to evaluate the requirements for a direct military intervention.

In the following months Amin’s distrust of the Soviet Union expressed itself in efforts to improve relations with the West. Not only did he seek a rapprochement with General Zia of Pakistan, but he also began to adopt a more conciliatory approach towards the United States. For its part, Washington remained aloof. Since the abduction and death of Dubs, the American Ambassador, in February 1979, relations between Kabul and Washington had been strained. Moreover, the White House was preoccupied by the developing crisis in Iran and paid scant attention to these soundings from Amin. The result was that the United States was ‘virtually oblivious to the frantic signals Amin was sending in November and December’.

By then crucial decisions had been taken in Moscow. When General Pavlovsky returned from Kabul in October, the situation in Afghanistan was regarded as desperate, and there appeared to be only two alternatives – both involving some risks. The first was to abandon Amin in the hope of reviving Afghan–Soviet relations with his successor. This option would have left Moscow with no influence over events and could have resulted in the emergence of an Islamic regime which was just as unstable as its predecessor, but more anti-Soviet – the model of Iran was not very comforting. In comparison, the second option of a military intervention looked relatively attractive. The aim appeared to be to replace Amin with a more popularly based government including both Parcham and Khalq factions. In the short term, Soviet troops would be needed to ensure Amin’s fall and establish a new leadership. It was hoped, however, that the population would be won over eventually – as it had been in Soviet Central Asia – by moderate but progressive policies implemented by firm government. There were dangers with this option. It was almost certain to arouse national emotions and, at least in the short term, could exacerbate rather than ease internal tensions. Possibly in an attempt to forestall this, the Soviet Union invited Amin to visit
Moscow in November. The Afghan leader declined, and Soviet preparations for intervention were intensified.

The Soviet Intervention

The Soviet decision to intervene was both a continuation of existing policy towards Afghanistan and a result of the inability to achieve Soviet objectives through limited involvement. The failure to get rid of Amin by indirect means left Moscow with little alternative if it was to uphold its influence in Afghanistan. Indeed, despite claims about the broader strategic intent of the Soviet invasion, it resulted primarily from the peculiar dynamics of the relationship between Moscow and the Amin regime. Having established the commitment to the PDPA, Soviet policy was subsequently based on an incremental approach. Furthermore, the presence of a significant number of Soviet troops in Afghanistan probably encouraged this incrementalism by magnifying Soviet assessments of what was at stake. The limited presence was not proving viable, yet could not be easily withdrawn. In these circumstances dramatic reinforcement seemed to be the most compelling option. In other words, the December invasion can be explained in part in terms of a military involvement which took on a dynamic or momentum of its own. Important as this is, however, it should not obscure the broader considerations which influenced the unfolding decision-making process in Moscow. Several anxieties seemed to weigh particularly heavily on the Soviet leadership.

The first of these was concern over the increasing instability on its southern border as a result not only of developments in Afghanistan but also events in Iran. In these circumstances, a limited yet decisive military intervention in Afghanistan probably seemed to be the best way to retrieve a deteriorating situation. After all, Amin was increasingly a liability who might not only become a ‘counter-revolutionary’ traitor but also a loser. Reports from Soviet officials in Afghanistan assessing the prospects of Amin re-establishing control became increasingly pessimistic. Furthermore, the Soviet military was unhappy about the course of events. It is probable that Pavlovsky, Yepsishev and other Soviet generals, mainly those in charge of the military districts adjacent to Afghanistan, urged a massive intervention to assist pro-Soviet elements to stabilise the restive southern borders and put an end as quickly as possible to the killing of Soviet advisors. After the invasion, the commander of the Turkestan military district, Colonel-General Y. Maksimov, and other Soviet generals of military districts in Central Asia, suggested that there had been a real threat of war on the USSR’s southern border. Now that the Soviet Union had
attained full superpower status this was something that it was simply unwilling to tolerate. Ironically, traditional insecurities may have combined with a new sense of power and assertiveness to encourage Moscow to resort to military force.

An additional Soviet concern may have been over what is sometimes called 'spillover' or 'contagion', and its impact on the 'nationality' question. Events in Iran and Afghanistan almost certainly made the Soviet leadership more sensitive about the loyalty of its own Muslim population in the Caucasus and Central Asia. If Islamic fundamentalism found favour in the southern Soviet republics, then the danger to the national security of the Soviet Union would be considerable. The level of support for Islam in the USSR, however, is a matter of contention. On the one hand the Muslims represent a significant and rising proportion of the Soviet population, which has not been integrated fully into the Soviet way of life. In view of the Slavic dominance of Soviet society this leads almost inevitably to tension. Although for the most part this tension seems to be contained, there are some reports of overt unrest. Indeed, in 1978 there seems to have been a nationalist riot in Dushanbe in the republic of Tadzhikistan. This event may have had some relevance to the subsequent intervention in Afghanistan. Some concern over the possible contagious properties of Islam was revealed by the launching of a so-called 'vigilance campaign' by the KGB and MVD in the southern republics immediately after the invasion.

On the other hand, the fear of 'contagion' from across the border was far less than in the case of the Ukraine and Czechoslovakia in 1968. During this crisis, Ukrainian party chiefs – most notably Shelest – repeatedly demanded military intervention to prevent the spread of 'reformist' ideas to the Soviet Union. There is no evidence of similar pressure on Moscow in 1979 from party chiefs in Muslim areas. The fact that Muslims made up a large part of the original invading force was probably a sign of Soviet sensitivity to the Islamic issue and part of an attempt to minimise the alienation of the Afghan population. Yet it also casts further doubt on any great Muscovite fear of Islamic contagion.

This complacency may have resulted partly from the split within the Islamic movement. Whereas the Muslims in Iran and Afghanistan were Shiites, those in Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus were Sunnis. Moreover, the Soviet Muslims had higher living standards and better educational opportunities than their co-religionists across the border. Consequently, the Islamic revival may have seemed relatively unattractive to citizens living inside the Soviet Union. In view of all this it seems unlikely that concerns over contagion were critical in the decision to invade Afghanistan.
Nevertheless, it would be wrong to dismiss it entirely. The sensitivity of the Kremlin was starkly revealed when the deputy prime minister of Kirgizia was prematurely retired after admitting that the spread of Islamic fundamentalism was of some concern. Furthermore, on occasion local party chiefs have hinted that concerns over the spillover of instability did have a bearing on the final decision to intervene. Although not decisive, therefore, worries over contagion could well have been an additional factor propelling Moscow towards invasion.

If security considerations demanded decisive action by Moscow, the international situation was relatively permissive for such action. This permissiveness had several dimensions, all of which were related in one way or another to the United States. In the first place, Soviet military intervention carried no risk of direct military confrontation with Washington. Critics of the Carter administration—and indeed some members of it—suggested that this was because of the failure of the United States to take a firmer line in previous regional crises such as the Horn of Africa. This argument is spurious. It overestimates the ability of the United States to exert influence in circumstances where it has only marginal interests at stake. The reputation of the Carter administration was relatively unimportant: even if Carter had adopted a tougher approach towards Moscow in the past it would have been extremely difficult to deter Soviet military action in Afghanistan. Not only were American interests in Afghanistan negligible, but they seemed to be declining. Throughout 1979 the Carter administration was scaling down what was already a modest American presence by withdrawing most of its diplomats and aid workers. In contrast to the Middle East in 1973, therefore, there was a clear asymmetry of interests which gave Moscow considerable discretion in deciding how to deal with the deteriorating situation.

During 1979 Brzezinski was pressing for stronger US reactions to what he described as ‘the Soviets’ creeping intervention in Afghanistan’. Largely as a result of his urgings the United States, between March and August, gave Moscow several public and private warnings about Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. The way in which these were disregarded, however, confirms rather than challenges the argument that the asymmetry of interests was decisive. American warnings were not heeded in Moscow because Afghanistan was peripheral to American security interests. Such an assessment may have been reinforced by the lack of congruence between warnings and actions: American words were designed to inhibit Soviet behaviour; yet Washington’s continuing disengagement from Afghanistanc probably reinforced the view that Moscow need not feel inhibited.

The tendency to disregard American pronouncements on Afghanistanc was probably reinforced by the Soviet combat brigade fiasco,
which both perplexed the Kremlin and helped to devalue American warnings. As Marshall Shulman, special adviser on Soviet affairs to Cyrus Vance, put it, ‘The weight of our views was diminished by the frayed state of United States-Soviet relations and the fact that we had already invoked the prospect of damage to United States-Soviet relations on several other issues.’ If the indiscriminate nature of American warnings diluted their impact, they appeared particularly inappropriate when they were directed at Soviet behaviour towards a country where the United States had nothing at stake.

Nor was there much incentive for the Soviet Union to refrain from what was deemed a necessary action in order to maintain detente and avoid the derailment of SALT Two. Detente had not prevented the Carter administration from normalising relations with China; SALT Two had not prevented the decision to deploy the M-X missile nor had it stopped NATO from agreeing to deploy in Western Europe 572 cruise and Pershing missiles capable of hitting the Soviet homeland. By December 1979, even if SALT Two was ratified, it was beginning to look far less attractive than it had appeared at the Vienna Summit. This in no way provoked the Soviet Union into taking the action it did in Afghanistan, but it removed a possible, if always limited, constraint. SALT Two had become dispensable and, as a result, Washington had little leverage over Soviet actions. It is possible that the Soviet decision to use force in Afghanistan was taken in full awareness that this could mean the postponement or even the demise of the Arms Limitation Treaty.

In other words, the Soviet Union had both the motive and the opportunity. The leadership may have also believed that large-scale military action would be decisive. Although in retrospect such optimism seems totally unwarranted, it was understandable. The American failure in Vietnam, if it was considered as a possible warning, was probably dismissed as irrelevant: direct rather than vicarious experience generally proves decisive in shaping expectations about likely outcomes. If the Soviet Union had a model for the intervention in Afghanistan it was probably the move into Czechoslovakia in 1968. The temptation to adopt the same framework of assumptions and expectations was strengthened by the fact that the crucial military assessments in the months prior to the invasion decision were made by General Yevgeny and General Pavlovsky, both of whom had played a crucial role in 1968. The optimism may have been strengthened by the successes that had been obtained through a mix of proxies and advisers in Angola and the Horn of Africa. The precedents seemed auspicious, while the fact that the Army had never had to engage in a large-scale counter-insurgency campaign may have made the military leadership less sensitive to the difficulties involved.
The Czechoslovakia model may have been relevant in another way. In 1968 the Soviet military had rounded up the Czech leaders and sent them to Moscow. It is certainly not inconceivable that the Soviet leaders thought they could deal with Amin in much the same way. Arranging this may have been the task of Lieutenant-General Paputin, a First Deputy Minister of the Interior, who was sent to Kabul in late November, possibly with the intention of initiating a coup against Amin. Whether the purpose was simply to topple Amin or to assassinate him is not clear. An assassination attempt on 17 December failed, and in its aftermath Amin took refuge in the Tajbeg Palace on the outskirts of Kabul. By this time, it must have been clear to Soviet leaders that their efforts to control the situation in Afghanistan had failed yet again ... they had failed to rein Amin in during the autumn, and now they had failed to destroy him in a quiet, plausible way. In these circumstances, a decision to use force was inescapable, and was made in a climate which, Marshall Shulman has suggested, was characterised by intense emotionalism, anger and frustration.

Even at this stage Amin continued to frustrate the Soviet leadership. Unlike Dubček and his colleagues in 1968, the Afghanistan leader was prepared to resist. On 27 December a special unit of Soviet forces, probably led by Paputin, stormed the palace, and in the ensuing fighting Amin was killed. Speculation that the manner if not the fact of Amin’s demise meant that the Paputin mission was a failure is reinforced by Paputin’s own death and possible suicide a few days later. It seems, therefore, that in their dealings with Amin, the Soviet leaders lurched from one fiasco to another. They had planned a much smoother removal of Amin which might have made the invasion unnecessary and at the very least would have given it greater legitimacy.

This gives some credence to Brezhnev’s claim in Pravda that the decision to intervene was not an easy one. The delay in taking action after the failure of the September coup may be another indication of hesitancy, indecision and possible division within the Politburo. Speculation to this effect has been intensified by rumours that some Soviet leaders were unhappy at the decision. At a high-level meeting between President Carter and his chief foreign policy advisers in February 1980, it was revealed that both Soviet Party Secretary Ponomarev, and the Foreign Trade Minister, Patolchev, had claimed to Western diplomats that they were opposed to the intervention. A close reading of the election speeches to the Supreme Soviet in February 1980 also hinted at some shades of opinion among Politburo leaders. For example, Andropov and Chemenko sounded less enthusiastic than others about the Soviet intervention. Significantly, though, there was no change in the substance of Soviet policy when they later assumed the General Secretaryship.
In so far as there was a debate, however, it was probably a very narrow one, revolving about means rather than ends, and not challenging the principle of consensus on which Brezhnev apparently operated. The increasingly overt nature of the threat to Soviet security concerns, and the fact that the costs of inaction were seen as outweighing the costs of invasion, suggest that there was little room for controversy and debate about the need for a decisive move to retrieve the situation. Any discord is likely to have centred on the timing and scale of the invasion, rather than on whether or not it should take place.

An additional item of debate might well have been about the likely reaction both inside Afghanistan and elsewhere. If so, there appears to have been a systematic underestimation of the difficulties. In attempting to gauge the American reaction, the Politburo was hampered not only by the unpredictability of the Carter administration but also by the absence of some of the more experienced Soviet figures more attuned to American attitudes. Arbatov and his deputy at the US Institute were both ill and played a less prominent role than might have been expected. It seems unlikely, however, that this affected the final decision. The absence of the academicians was hardly decisive, especially as the Politburo still had available much expert advice on the United States. Brezhnev’s assistant, Aleksandrov-Agentov, was a specialist on the United States, while Dobrynin, who had been the Soviet Ambassador to Washington since 1962, was flown back to Moscow for consultations.

The fact that Brezhnev and Kosygin were also ill might have had more impact on the decision. Yet there was a sense in which much of the discussion about the United States would have been irrelevant. As suggested above, Washington’s ability to influence Soviet behaviour towards Afghanistan was, for a variety of reasons, extremely limited in late 1979 — and so long as the Carter administration would not respond in ways likely to provoke a military confrontation, then the Soviet Union did not have to be too concerned.

Without more direct information about the Politburo’s deliberations this is speculation. There is circumstantial evidence about division within the Politburo, but no more. Furthermore, in view of the apparent failure to predict the kind of difficulties that a large-scale invasion would encounter, it seems equally legitimate to contend that the Soviet leadership suffered not from too little consensus but from too much. What Western analysts sometimes call ‘group-think’ — a tendency for individuals to conform to the dominant attitudes within the group and suppress doubts about the proposed action for the sake of consensus and group cohesion — could well have been present in the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan. 41
If there were problems in the formulation of policy, even greater difficulties arose in its execution, which seems to have been handled very badly. Evidence of Soviet sensitivity towards Afghan nationalism and world opinion can be found in the attempts by Moscow to suggest that Amin was overthrown by locals and not by the invading Soviet Army. Because of the circumstances of his death this claim lacked credibility. Soviet military intervention was widely seen as a violation of the sovereignty of a non-aligned state and an attempt to install a puppet regime. The UN General Assembly reflected this view when only 18 states voted in support of the Soviet action while 104 were opposed. In Afghanistan itself, the invasion and subsequent fighting precipitated a massive exodus to Iran and Pakistan. In addition, the Afghan Army was decimated by desertions. After the invasion, the size of the Army fell by two-thirds to around 30,000, and would have been lower had it not been for press-gangs, a reduction in the age of conscription, and the high material incentives offered to officers and conscripts who remained. As a result, the Soviet Union had to commit its forces to a longer struggle than anticipated at the outset.

The justification for the initial intervention and the subsequent Soviet presence was cast largely in terms of dealing with external forces. This was evident in Brezhnev’s first statement on the intervention, which claimed that “a well developed conspiracy by external reactionary forces” had created a real threat that Afghanistan would lose its independence and be transformed into a military staging ground for the imperialists on our country’s southern border. Other Soviet statements also emphasised the external nature of the counter-revolutionary forces. Reports appeared in the Soviet press that American trained mercenaries in Pakistan were attempting to undermine the “gains of the April revolution”. It was claimed that the Afghan government, under threat from outside, had invited Soviet military forces into the country to defend the revolution, and that the Soviet response was fully in accord with Article 4 of the Soviet–Afghan Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and Article 51 of the UN Charter. This assessment of events portrayed the West as the aggressor and the Soviet Union as the defender of Afghan sovereignty.

Even excluding the wilder claims that Amin was a CIA agent, the Soviet interpretation was disingenuous and contrived. The problem of stability in Afghanistan was internal rather than external. If the concerns about foreign assistance to the rebel forces were exaggerated, however, they were not completely groundless. There seems to have been some limited aid to the rebel forces from China, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Furthermore, the instability in Iran, and the possibility that the United States would respond to the seizure of the hostages with military force, added an additional element
of unpredictability. As a result of the overthrow of the Shah, the United States increased its naval presence in the Indian Ocean quite significantly during 1979, while the decision in June to create a quick reaction force – which was later to become known as the Rapid Deployment Force – may have added to Soviet neuralgia. This is not to suggest that these activities either provoked or justified the Soviet invasion. Underlying the Soviet rhetoric, however, there may have been an element of genuine, if largely unwarranted, concern – and the activities of the United States and its allies may have inadvertently intensified security concerns which stemmed primarily from internal developments in Afghanistan.

The other element in Soviet justifications was what appeared to be an extension of the Brezhnev Doctrine. Brezhnev, in January 1980, declared that the Soviet Union could not allow another Chile on its southern borders. This reference to a country whose socialist government had been overthrown by a combination of internal and external forces was hardly surprising.\(^7\) Whereas it was necessary for Moscow to accept the loss of socialist countries which were far from its borders, a reversal of the revolution was intolerable in a neighbouring country, where ideology, prestige and national security were inextricably intertwined.\(^8\) In other words, the application of the Brezhnev Doctrine was simply an acknowledgment of the depth of Soviet security interests in Afghanistan and an attempt to legitimise Soviet actions in response to what was deemed an intolerable situation.

Soviet spokesmen also emphasised that the intervention in Afghanistan did not presage a broader Soviet assault on Western interests. From the outset officials and commentators denied any intent to further aggression.\(^9\) Arbatov dismissed Western fears about the Soviet drive towards the Persian Gulf on the grounds that the Soviet Union recognised that such a move ‘would invite world war three’ – and this was something that the Politburo dared not contemplate.\(^5\) Such reassurances had little impact in Washington, and did little to temper the American reaction.

The American Reaction and the Return to Cold War

The American response to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan revealed the continued relevance of the same kind of security dilemmas which had played a major part in the development of the cold war in the late 1940s. Although the Soviet invasion was a clear-cut case of aggression, it seems to have been provoked more by security considerations than by ambition. ‘The Soviet leaders did not see their decision to intervene militarily as an opportunity option but as a security imperative; not as an opportunity for expansion but as
a reluctant necessity to hold on. It was a decision forced by events not an opportunity created by them. In Washington, however, the debate revolved far more around the consequences of the invasion than the motivation. Soviet aggressive intent was taken for granted. As a result, several aspects of the Soviet action caused acute anxiety.

First, the direct military intervention of Soviet troops into a country which, ostensibly at least, was non-aligned represented a significant departure from previous Soviet policy. It appeared, at a minimum, to cast doubt on the views of those who had argued that Soviet behaviour under Brezhnev was cautiously opportunistic rather than openly adventurist and expansionist. Furthermore, Western discussion about the extension of the Brezhnev Doctrine reflected the belief that Moscow was willing to take higher risks than ever before and had embarked upon a course of action which was qualitatively different from previous interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The Brezhnev Doctrine was unpalatable, even in the well-established Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe; it was doubly so when extended to new areas. The Soviet perspective, in contrast, was that the 1978 coup had changed the situation in Afghanistan, and that the December 1979 invasion was simply an attempt to maintain the status quo within Afghanistan.

This was unconvincing to the Carter administration partly because the intervention came against a background of concern over what appeared to be a major Soviet geopolitical offensive. Furthermore, the invasion appeared to presage a new and ambitious policy of expansion aimed at Western interests in the Persian Gulf. Moscow's action was seen not only as part of a pattern but as a new and dangerous element in that pattern. In fact, Afghanistan, with its geographic position and its inhospitable terrain, was not the most obvious route to take if Moscow had serious designs on the Gulf. This is not the way it was seen in the United States. The dominant view in Moscow was that Afghanistan was a local issue; the dominant view in Washington was that it was a fundamental geo-strategic issue.

The other two elements which shaped the American reaction were personal and political. Jimmy Carter almost certainly felt betrayed by the Soviet invasion. After all, he had been campaigning vigorously, if not always effectively, for SALT Two and had been attempting to resist pressure for a much tougher stance against Moscow. In these circumstances, the Soviet action was an acute political and personal embarrassment. This sense of personal betrayal — similar to that of John Kennedy in 1962 when he discovered that the Soviet Union had installed missiles in Cuba — was intensified by an exchange of messages over the hot line. Carter's message, which he described as the sharpest of his Presidency, evoked a reply from Brezhnev justifying the
invasion as a Soviet response to a request for help from a government attempting to deal with external interference.\textsuperscript{52} Because Carter knew that the United States had not been interfering, Brezhnev's message was regarded as insulting as well as devious.\textsuperscript{53} The President's subsequent comment that Afghanistan had taught him more about Soviet goals than anything Moscow had previously done, reflected both his sense of betrayal and his anger at Brezhnev. Yet it also compounded the political embarrassment, and was widely regarded as a display of Presidential naiveté. By admitting that he had failed to appreciate the nature of the Soviet threat, Carter was virtually accepting the critique of his foreign policy made by the Committee on the Present Danger. The victors in January 1980 included not only Zbigniew Brzezinski, but Paul Nitze, Henry Jackson and Richard Perle. Once the President had acknowledged, if only tacitly, that they had been right, it was inevitable that there would be a hard-line American response. This is not to claim that Carter's volte-face resulted simply from political expediency. While the President was facing a very tough re-election fight in a climate in which a hard-line response could have political benefits, the sense of conviction and outrage in Carter's pronouncements had a degree of conviction which would have been hard to fabricate. It appears that strategic calculation, political expediency and personal commitment were mutually reinforcing elements in determining the American reaction.

This response was designed to deter further aggression. In order to achieve this the United States had to demonstrate that military intervention was not a cost-free option for Moscow and that business as usual between the two superpowers was impossible. Even so there was an element of over-reaction in American policy. The President himself used highly exaggerated rhetoric, and on 8 January characterised the Soviet invasion as the 'greatest threat to world peace since World War Two'.\textsuperscript{54} With all the zeal of the convert, Carter also took a tough line on sanctions. His advisers drew up a list of possible measures for consideration, but instead of choosing certain options from the list, the President – with a minimum of consultation with his NATO allies – adopted virtually all the proposals. This surprised even Brzezinski, who felt that restrictions on grain sales and technology transfer would suffice to show the strength of American disapproval.\textsuperscript{55} As well as placing restrictions on high-technology exports, and initiating a grain embargo on anything beyond the 8 million tons of grain that had been guaranteed by the five-year agreement signed in 1979, the President curtailed Soviet fishing privileges in American waters, delayed an opening of new consulates, deferred cultural and economic exchanges, and warned that the United States might withdraw from the Olympic Games to be held in Moscow in the summer of 1980 – a warning
which was later carried out. All this was in addition to the request to the Senate to defer further consideration of SALT Two.

Another strand in the administration’s response was to move towards the restoration of the traditional strategy of containment. This was done by the consolidation of US-Pakistan relations, by a shift in emphasis in the fiscal year 1981 defence budget away from European defence and towards global contingencies, by moves towards the creation of a Sino–American military relationship, and by the enunciation of the Carter Doctrine. Perhaps more than any other development, the Carter Doctrine and the increased emphasis placed on the Rapid Deployment Force marked the abandonment of the US detente policy. In so far as Kissinger’s policy of detente had been intended to contain the Soviet Union, it had clearly been a failure. Consequently, the Carter administration felt compelled to revert to the more traditional forms of containment dominant before 1968. The restoration of cold war policies and rhetoric was not accomplished by the Reagan administration in 1981, but by the Carter administration in 1980. President Carter embraced these policies with reluctance rather than enthusiasm, however, and even after his conversion to a hard-line approach was still criticised for doing too little too late. The Reagan administration, in contrast, brought a new sense of dynamism and assertiveness to the Soviet–American relationship. Its major changes, however, were in rhetoric rather than substance, and for the most part it did little more than carry out the policies which had been formulated by Carter in the early months of 1980. In some respects, such as the cancellation of the grain embargo, Reagan even weakened the position adopted by his predecessor.

In considering the American response to Afghanistan, however, it is necessary to look not only at politics but also at psychology. The policies of January 1980 can be understood as a major landmark in the drive to regenerate American power and prestige, which was to become a major motif of the Reagan administration’s approach to international politics. The Carter administration had already taken steps in this direction, increasing the defence budget, for example, well before December 1979. In January 1980, this process was crystallised, but was then undermined by the continuing problem of the American hostages in Iran. The apparent impotence of the United States, together with the ill-fated rescue attempt, confirmed critics in the view that in spite of the conversion of January 1980, President Carter was not the man to reverse the decline of American power and remove the sense of malaise which had become increasingly pervasive as reverse followed reverse in the 1970s. Although the Reagan administration would later characterise the 1970s as a decade of neglect, the problem was not so much lack of power but lack of the will to use it in the face of domestic
constraints. By 1980, the dominant impulse in American politics had changed and these constraints had diminished. The emphasis was no longer on the arrogance of American power—as it had been in the early 1970s when Vietnam was the issue—but on the need to acquire and exercise that power. The Soviet Union had exploited the weaknesses of the United States, but would be allowed to do so no longer. In the aftermath of Afghanistan the views expressed by the Committee on the Present Danger became the new orthodoxy.

These trends in American attitudes and policies inevitably received a hostile reception in Moscow. They also caused consternation in Western Europe and ushered in a period of considerable tension in Atlantic relations. Heimit Schmidt, the West German Chancellor, opposed President Carter’s hard-line response to Afghanistan. He attempted to protect the achievements of the Ostpolitik by insulating detente in Europe from events elsewhere. In France, Giscard d’Estaing was more sympathetic to the Carter administration, but he too insisted on the need to persist with the policy of detente in Europe. It was in 1980, therefore, that superpower detente and European detente seriously diverged. West Europeans were reluctant to follow the lead of the Carter administration in imposing sanctions on the Soviet Union; moreover, in a number of cases European firms were able to benefit by obtaining contracts which, in the absence of the sanctions, would almost certainly have gone to American companies. If there was an element of expediency in the European approach, the fundamental issue revolved around the results of detente. Europeans argued that detente had worked in Europe and should not be sacrificed simply because developments elsewhere had led to renewed tensions between Moscow and Washington.

This divergence between the United States and Western Europe was the result of several considerations. It reflected the different perspectives and priorities between a superpower with global responsibilities on the one side and a group of regional powers on the other. For Europeans detente had always been focused primarily on normalization in Europe. This is not to argue that the allies were oblivious to other dimensions of detente. Their interest in arms control—as something which clearly impinged on them—was sustained and enduring. Soviet activism in the Third World, in contrast, did not evoke anything like the depth of anxiety in Western Europe that it did in the United States. There was an element of European pirochialism in this. Apart from occasional French military excursions in Africa, most Western European governments focused their activities much closer to home. Although they criticized Soviet military involvement in Africa, they tended to dismiss this as part of the superpower competition, and not as something which really impinged on East-West relations.
in Europe. Their response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was similar. Although they were unequivocal in their public condemnation of Soviet actions, underlying this was a sense that the invasion resulted from regional Soviet security concerns and did not necessarily presage a new militancy in Soviet policy towards Western Europe. Consequently, the European allies resisted the appreciation of the Soviet threat that President Carter arrived at in January 1980. Since they were not convinced that detente should be abandoned in favour of a reversion to cold war policies, they found the hard-line policies of Carter – and subsequently of Reagan – disconcerting.

West European reluctance to fall in line with the new hard-line policies of the United States, however, cannot simply be dismissed as parochial or naive. In part, it reflected a realism about detente that had not always been evident in Washington: never as euphoric about detente as the United States, the Europeans were not as disappointed by its results. Furthermore, there was concern in Europe that the United States was engaging in another of the extreme pendulum swings that periodically characterised its foreign policy. Rather than slavishly follow this, the Europeans felt that it was more appropriate to continue with the judicious and balanced approach towards the Soviet Union which had been pursued through the 1970s. This was particularly the case in the Federal Republic, which had based its foreign policy on the premise that its security would best be ensured by a combination of defence capability within the Western alliance and willingness to negotiate with the Soviet Union and the other states of the Warsaw Pact. Furthermore, the benefits of such an approach were very real – and did not appear to be worth sacrificing because of Soviet intervention in a region that was remote from European concerns and interests. East–West trade was one element in this, but perhaps even more important were the gains that had been made in terms of human contacts, especially between the two parts of Germany.

West European reluctance to fall in line with Washington’s preferences also marked a new independence and self-confidence on the part of the allies, especially the Federal Republic. The Europeans had become sceptical about Carter’s conduct of foreign policy, and saw no reason why the latest in a series of abrupt decisions and reversals should determine their agenda. Yet for Bonn, the difficulties resulting from the American abandonment of detente were intense. The latent conflict of priorities between security – which depended on the United States – and Ostpolitik – which depended on the Soviet Union and its East European clients – had been brought to the fore by Afghanistan and the Carter administration’s reaction. The result was a two-track policy.
Despite its different assessment of the crisis, Bonn attempted by finely measured acts of alliance solidarity (Olympic boycott, increases in defence expenditures, support for Turkey) not to do any irreparable damage to US–German relations. It also took pains not to sever its ties with Moscow and rather to repair the broken channels of communication between East and West.57

In the event, it proved impossible for the Europeans to insulate themselves from the deterioration in Soviet–American relations. The unrest in Poland led in late 1980 to intimations of a possible Soviet invasion of Poland, and in late 1981 to the imposition of martial law by the Polish Army. Whereas the United States under President Reagan reacted strongly to the action of General Jaruzelski, the Europeans regarded it as preferable to a direct Soviet invasion. These differences of attitude manifested themselves in arguments over sanctions, and it was clear in the early 1980s that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had ushered in not only a period of more tense and competitive relations between Moscow and Washington but also a more difficult and often acrimonious relationship between the United States and its West European allies. The crisis of detente also became a crisis of alliance. The reasons for this lay largely in differing appreciations of the detente experience of the 1970s. With this in mind, the concluding chapter offers some reflections on this experience and considers what lessons it may hold for Soviet–American relations in the future.

Notes

5. Ibid., p. 473.
6. Quoted in ibid., p. 483.
8. Ibid., p. 5.
9. Ibid., p. 74.
13. Ibid., p. 191.
17. Ibid., p. 104.
22. Ibid., p. 944.
23. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p. 225.
26. Ibid.
29. This information from dissidents was reported in Daily Telegraph, 21 Jan. 1980.
31. Nevertheless, Muslim troops were withdrawn when their 90-day term ended and were increasingly replaced by Słow forces.
33. For the importance of interests in establishing credibility, see A. L. George and R. Smoke, Deviance in American Foreign Policy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), especially p. 559.
35. Quoted in Bradsher, op. cit., p. 152.
36. Ibid., p. 179.
37. Quoted in ibid., p. 179.
41. The notion of 'group-think' is developed in L. Janis, Victims of Groupthink (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).
42. See Bradsher, op. cit., pp. 184-5.
46. See Garthoff, op. cit., p. 922.
47. For Brezhnev's reference to Chile, see Pravda, 13 Jan. 1980.
52. See ibid., p. 949 and Carter, op. cit., p. 472.
53. Ibid., p. 472.
57. Ibid.