The Afghanistan crisis: a negotiated settlement?

AMIN SAikal

A great deal has been written in the past two years about the possibility of a political solution to the Afghanistan crisis. Some observers, attaching credibility to the UN-sponsored indirect Geneva talks between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan held from June 1982 to June 1983, have expressed optimism that a solution may be in sight. One of them, Mr Selig Harrison, has gone so far as to suggest that the Soviet Union has been serious in its desire to negotiate a settlement and that it is the United States which has been hindering the progress of the talks by ‘paying lip service to the goal of a negotiated settlement’ and neutralising ‘its diplomatic overtures with psychological warfare designed to maximise Soviet discomfiture’.

He has also lately claimed that the Soviet Union is doing much better in Afghanistan than ‘the prevailing Western image of the war’ in that country indicates, seemingly implying that the Soviet government may consequently be more willing to negotiate a settlement.

However, neither Soviet behaviour nor the reality of the situation in Afghanistan lends much credence to such observations. The Geneva talks have hitherto failed to produce any result, and so one must doubt whether the Soviet Union yet faces the necessary incentives in Afghanistan to engage in serious negotiations for the withdrawal of its troops. Given the current Soviet commitment to the Babrak Karmal government, the nature of popular resistance in Afghanistan, and regional uncertainties, it is unlikely that the Soviet leaders would be attracted in the foreseeable future to anything more than a process of negotiation as a mechanism which could serve Soviet interests.

This is something that the proponents of a negotiated settlement have largely overlooked.

The background to the invasion

One of the central reasons why the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in late December 1979 was that the Kremlin had run out of the necessary internal mechanisms of control with which it could protect its long-standing influence

1 S. Harrison, 'A Breakthrough in Afghanistan', Foreign Policy, No. 31, Summer 1983, p. 3.
3 See, for example, Anthony Hyman, 'The Struggle for Afghanistan', The World Today, July 1984.

The author is Lecturer in Political Science, Australian National University; and Rockefeller Foundation Fellow in International Relations. Dr Saikal contributed an article on the Pakistan utopic and the Afghanistan problem to the March 1984 issue of The World Today. This article is based on a paper presented at the September 1984 Conference of the Australasian Middle Eastern Studies Association.
in the country. The pro-Moscow People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which had seized state power in April 1978 and had been fully supported by the Soviet Union as a bridgehead for transforming Afghanistan into a ‘Soviet Socialist periphery’, had proved to be highly factionalised, incompetent and unpopular. In continuing intra-party fighting, the PDPA’s Khalq faction under Noor Mohammed Taraki and Hafizullah Amin had outmanoeuvred the Parcham faction, led by Babrak Karmal—much to the annoyance of the Soviet Union which preferred Karmal and his followers to their rivals for both ideological and pragmatic reasons. At the same time, neither could the Khalq’s rule win all-round support from the Soviet Union, nor could the Soviet Union back away from providing such support, given its initial commitment to the survival of the PDPA regime. However, the Khalqis could not progress far beyond instituting a ‘Stalinist Khalq’ gang rule’. They failed to widen their narrow power-base. They drove the Islamic-tribal circles into forming armed Islamic resistance forces (the Mujaheddin), and the people into supporting the Mujaheddin. They also proved to be very unreliable allies for the Soviet Union, particularly under Amin’s presidency (September–December 1979). As a result of these factors, the Soviet Union saw both its short- and long-term interests threatened in Afghanistan.

The Soviet government was convinced that it was running out of internal mechanisms of control in Afghanistan. It feared that the collapse of the PDPA regime was imminent and that it would very likely be replaced by a hostile Islamic regime—the only alternative available after the Khalq’s elimination of all other alternatives (except the Parchamins who were protected by Moscow). That was what led the Kremlin to decide on an invasion. The invasion was its last option, to achieve by force what it had failed to do through political means. At the time, while there was in the Islamic world and the west (including Washington), some sympathy for the Mujaheddin, there is no shred of evidence to substantiate the Soviet claim that the Mujaheddin, or as they are called, ‘imperialist-backed bandits’, were receiving substantial material support from sympathetic circles, least of all the Carter Administration which was keen to pursue a policy of understanding and accommodation with the Soviet Union. The Afghan resistance stemmed largely from the distinctive nature of the Afghan people. They are individualistic, with a complex ethnic, tribal structure and socially pluralistic. At the same time, they are fiercely Islamic, patriotic and proud, with limited political sophistication, and therefore capable of mounting collective ideological and physical opposition to any foreign, particularly communist, imposition. In this they are helped by their traditional skill in tribal warfare and their mastery of Afghanistan’s rough and mountainous territory, whose permeable borders with the non-communist world make it extremely difficult for any central government, let alone a weak one, to impose its rule throughout the land.

The Soviet stance

The Soviet invasion was, by and large, a response to the developments inside
Afghanistan. It was to preempt the imminent collapse of the PDPA regime and to reassert Soviet influence in Afghanistan. Given the Kremlin’s close monitoring of the progress of the Afghan crisis and the amount of time that it had to examine options available to it, it would be hazardous to assume that the Soviet decision-makers made the decision to invade either in a vacuum or on a basis of gross misjudgment of its possible implications. They made their decision, as Brezhnev put it, ‘...in full awareness of their responsibility and took all circumstances into account’ in order to avert ‘a serious danger to the security of the Soviet Union’ which had arisen on the Soviet Union’s southern border’.

Having committed itself further through an invasion to the survival and continuation of the PDPA regime, now under its old and favourite agent, Babrak Karmal, whom it installed on liquidating its former but unreliable ally, Amin (thus giving ascendency to the Parchamis over the Khalqis), the Soviet Union soon set out a negotiating position. Brezhnev declared that the Soviet side would be prepared to withdraw its ‘limited contingent’ of troops only ‘with the agreement of the Afghan government’. Furthermore, this could be done only when all the ‘counter-revolutionary’ activities against the PDPA regime were ‘completely stopped’ and on the basis of ‘accords between Afghanistan and its neighbours’ which would be required to give ‘dependable guarantees’ that they would no longer support the ‘counter-revolutionary gangs’. In other words, he made the possible withdrawal of Soviet troops conditional upon Afghanistan’s neighbours recognizing the sovereignty of the PDPA regime, closing their borders to the Mujaheddin and ceasing all support for them; in effect, helping the Soviet Union to eliminate the opposition in Afghanistan and thus conceding the country to the Soviet Union forever. This represented, as Brezhnev put it, ‘the fundamental position of the Soviet Union, and we adhere to it firmly’.

The Soviet ‘negotiating’ position was advanced in the context of the prevailing situation in Afghanistan and the Soviet need to contain it by consolidating the Karmal regime as an instrument for whatever the Soviet leadership wanted to achieve in Afghanistan (and possibly beyond). Nearly five years have passed since the start of the Soviet invasion, but the original Soviet negotiating position, as reiterated from time to time by Soviet leaders and backed by Soviet actions, has remained unchanged. The Soviet Union may, of course, at some time in the future alter its negotiating position and withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s neighbours, the Islamic world and the west have shown (and continue to show) a serious interest in a negotiated settlement,

---

7 Ibid.
provided it could secure a definite withdrawal of Soviet troops and a freely chosen Afghan government. But, for the time being, the position in Afghanistan remains stagnated.

The Khalqis versus the Parchamis

The PDPA regime continues to remain very narrowly based and highly fragmented. The Parchamis are divided among themselves into several cliques, around Karmal and some of his Ministers (Ali Keshmand, Suleiman Layeq and Abdul Majid Serbiland). The Khalqis still feel deep hatred for the Parchamis and intense resentment against the Soviet Union. The Khalqis, who are mostly Pushtun (the largest ethnic group and historically the rival of the second largest ethnic group, the Tajik, to which most of the Parchamis belong), feel betrayed by the Parchamis and their Soviet backers, who killed their leader, Amin, and wrested top power positions from them. They still have not forgiven either the Parchamis or the Soviet Union and, according to their ethnic code of honour (Pushtunwai), the only way they can settle their feud with them is through bloodshed, resulting in a decisive victory of one over another. This bloodshed has, indeed, continued unabated to the present day. The Khalqis are doing everything possible to undermine the position of the Parchamis and their Soviet patrons. The Soviet Union is showing itself incapable of putting an end to the bloodshed and of bringing about the urgently needed party unity, to which it had committed itself at the start of its invasion.

The latest manifestation of this intra-party feud was the fight in July 1984 between two of Karmal's senior Cabinet members, the Defence Minister, General Abdul Qadir, and the Communications Minister, Aslam Watanjar. Qadir and Watanjar, who both played an active role in the coup of April 1978 which brought the PDPA to power and in the crisis which prompted the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan, belong to rival ethnic groups and factions of the PDPA. Their growing rivalry and suspicion of one another finally came to a head in the wake of the heavy Soviet losses in the 1984 spring offensives against the Mojaheddin commander, Ahmed Shah Massoud, and his force in the strategic Panjshir valley. Karmal, the Soviet command, possibly at Watanjar's instigation, demoted Qadir to a less important position. In an incident typical of PDPA rule, Qadir shot Watanjar, wounding him seriously. Qadir's own fate is not known.

The Mojaheddin challenge

Thus intra-party fighting, which has not allowed the PDPA to develop anything beyond a frail power structure, has been compounded further by the Mojaheddin's deep penetration of the Karmal administration at all levels and their growing popularity and fighting strength. The Mojaheddin's agents have succeeded in occupying influential administrative, military and security positions. This enables them to frustrate the government's administrative and security efforts. They have been able, for example, to secure
the release from the maximum security Pul-Charki concentration camp (just outside Kabul) of hundreds of the Mojaheddin and their sympathisers, many of whom are now in Peshawar and other parts of the world. They have also managed to give adequate advance warning to the Mojaheddin units of planned Soviet assaults and operations. This was illustrated by the advance information that Commander Massoud received about the last Soviet assault, the biggest of its kind since December 1979. The information enabled Massoud to evacuate most of his fighters and the valley dwellers, and to make sufficient tactical preparation to minimise his own casualties but maximise the Soviet ones. As a result, despite their initial claim of victory, the Soviet troops reportedly lost about 2,000 men as against some 300 Mojaheddin killed, without achieving full control over the entire valley to the present day.

This degree of the Mojaheddin’s active influence within the Karmal administration helps to build up public support for them and to increase their fighting capability. Undeniably, the Mojaheddin have been very divided, and poorly armed, trained and coordinated. Their leaders, most of whom have their headquarters in border towns in Pakistan, are locked in continuing rivalry on both personal and ideological grounds. This, however, has not seriously prevented the Mojaheddin military units inside Afghanistan from achieving today a level of popularity and resistance which few analysts and observers of Afghan politics and society could have foreseen at the beginning of the Soviet invasion. They claim to have more than 100,000 armed men and to control most of the countryside and small-medium size towns, with access to and operational capacity within the major cities. Kandahar and Herat, the second and third largest cities of Afghanistan, have frequently changed hands, but Kabul, the capital, has also proved vulnerable to the Mojaheddin’s operations. At the moment, the Karmal government and Soviet troops control the first and second checkpoints in and immediately out of the conurbation of Kabul, but most of the remaining checkpoints on different routes to the frontier with Pakistan are under the control of the Mojaheddin. Kabul itself is a city offering little to its citizens, where insecurity is pervasive and tangible. Karmal and his colleagues cannot trust one another and must be on their guard even within the Cabinet room. The members of the ruling party, the PDPA, cannot rely on each other’s support even in moments of urgent need. Contrary to inflated official claims, the PDPA still does not contain more than 3,000 committed members, and its leadership is vulnerable to Mojaheddin attacks, as shown by the reported recent assassination of the Finance Minister, Abdul Wakil, as well as of numerous others. The Soviet authorities have not been able to make even their embassy building and residential compounds immune from the Mojaheddin’s periodic attacks. The Karmal regime exercises control over no more than 30,000 troops, whose propensity to defect to the Mojaheddin has been often noted.

9 Private sources.
11 Private sources.
14 Private sources, also see International Herald Tribune, 24 January 1984.
authority is limited to Kabul and a few other major cities, from which most males of military age have fled, it simply lacks a pool on which to draw to replenish its troop numbers.

This is not to suggest that the Mujaheddin have gained military supremacy over the Soviet forces and that Afghanistan has become as much of a drain on the Soviet Union as Vietnam had become for the Americans. But the Mujaheddin have made enough gains to demonstrate that they spearhead a credible popular national struggle, keeping the Soviet forces in a considerable degree of disarray and making their Afghan adventure very costly. The estimated cost of the war for the Soviet Union is running, on average, at 300-400 casualties a month and $15 million a day.¹³

There are several important factors which account for the growing strength of the Mujaheddin. They are: first, the nature of the Afghan people who are fiercely Islamic and patriotic; second, their belief that they have already lost so much that they can scarcely lose anything by supporting the Mujaheddin in defence of their religion, honour and land as a prelude to gaining Islamic martyrdom in the world hereafter; third, the fact that the Mujaheddin field commanders—who are very remote from their leadership headquarters, have considerable independence, and are not as politicised and divided as their leaders in Pakistan—have been able to cooperate with one another; and fourth, the global and regional circumstances, which have caused a great deal of uncertainty for Moscow but have favoured the Mujaheddin by permitting them uninhibited crossings (especially into Pakistan) and ensuring for them notable amounts of ideological and material support, including some arms from the regional Islamic states, China and the west (mainly the United States). It must, however, be stressed that the last factor has been of secondary importance in relation to the others, for two main reasons. First, the Mujaheddin have met their arms need mostly from what they have salvaged from Soviet and Afghan troops, and what they have themselves produced locally. Second, the nature of the Afghan resistance is such that it could continue even without external assistance. The limited supply of mainly light foreign arms (including those whose delivery has been coordinated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) since the last year of the Carter Administration in accordance with Washington's stance in opposition to the Soviet invasion)¹⁴ has been important. It has helped the resistance forces to reduce their casualties and has inhibited the Soviet forces and their surrogates from operating unhindered and cheaply against the strongly hostile Afghan population.

Ultimately, it is the popular nature of the resistance which has prevented the Soviet forces from achieving even their basic objective of securing a viable PDPA bridgehead government, with an adequate administrative and military apparatus. It is also because of this that the Soviet Union, now deeply involved


in Afghanistan and with both prestige and major interests at stake, is not yet in a position even to contemplate seriously the possibility of a negotiated settlement. It is well aware that any agreement involving the withdrawal of Soviet troops would result immediately in the collapse of Karmal’s skeleton administration and its probable replacement by an Islamic regime and, therefore, in the defeat of the objectives for which the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in the first place. No wonder that it has remained firm in its insistence on the legitimacy of the Karmal government as a non-negotiable matter and in its refusal to commit itself to a definite withdrawal timetable. It is this insistence, not the demand for ‘dependable (regional and international) guarantees’—something which Afghanistan’s neighbours and the west have pledged to offer upon Soviet withdrawal—that brought the ‘Geneva talks’ to a dead end in 1983. This may remain so for the foreseeable future, even with the renewal of the talks.

The Soviet case for negotiation

Nonetheless, the Soviet Union has a good reason to be interested in a negotiation process, which could in itself serve its interests. Such a process could achieve a number of goals. It could help the Soviet side to buy more time for itself and the beleaguered Karmal government; to play down its political and military setbacks and to intensify its military operations, which started with the spring offensives of 1984; to cause more confusion and dissension within the Mujaheddin; to reduce the regional and, for that matter, international criticism of continuing Soviet presence and the brutal manner in which Soviet forces conduct their operations, including blanket bombing of towns, villages and field crops; to regionalise the Afghan crisis, and, more important, to neutralise Pakistan’s support for the Mujaheddin, in particular, and to forestall any major increase in outside assistance to them.

Such a process would also provide the Soviet side with the breathing space to allow certain possible changes in regional-global politics which could result in a more favourable ‘correlation of forces’, and help it to achieve its objectives in Afghanistan. The Soviet Union may hope that such changes will occur, above all, in Pakistan and Iran as well as in the American-Soviet relationship. In Pakistan, it is clear that the martial law rule of General Zia-ul-Haq is beset by considerable popular discontent and growing political opposition. To Moscow’s advantage, the principal opposition group is the centre-left Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), which has, among other issues, drawn on ‘the burden of three million Afghan refugees’ and Washington’s support for the Zia regime to make the latter the focus of popular discontent. It has promised that in the event of its coming to power it would recognise the Karmal regime, close down the Mujaheddin’s headquarters in Pakistan and return the refugees to Afghanistan as a way of reaching an accommodation with Moscow over the Afghan crisis. The Soviet Union would indeed be very keen to see this happen and it is hardly surprising that it has been quite active in supporting the
PPP. Similarly, in Iran, where the Khomeini regime has so far supported the Mojaheddin cause and denounced both Washington and Moscow in almost equal terms, possible changes appearing on the horizon could favour the Soviet side. Such changes have lately been signalled by a growing split within the ruling Islamic Republic Party (IRP) between the hard and soft-liners favouring an end to the costly war with Iraq and to Iran’s global isolation and a more pragmatic approach to Iran’s relationship with the Soviet Union and the West. This split may come to a head particularly after Khomeini’s death. It is just possible that the soft-liners, under the powerful leadership of the Majlis Speaker, Rafsanjani, may gain the upper hand. Moscow may find such a change quite pleasing.

Furthermore, the Soviet government is aware that the Reagan Administration has come under increasing pressure from peace campaigners and others (including some of the American allies) who advocate a policy of ‘realistic accommodation’ with the Soviet Union as the only way to relax the current international tensions and to serve the West’s interests in the long run. It would be naive of the Soviet leadership if it did not do everything necessary to maximise this pressure and did not count on possible accommodating changes in Washington’s behaviour irrespective of who is in the White House in the coming years.

What the West can do

Should the Soviet Union succeed in strengthening its position in Afghanistan, the world would face its most difficult problem there yet. Not only would Afghanistan be lost to the Soviet Union and the threat of Soviet expansion become greater in the region, but the Soviet forces would find themselves much freer to ‘pacify’ the staunchly anti-communist, anti-Soviet Afghans, causing far more casualties for the Afghan people than anyone could estimate. Given the depth of Soviet involvement in and intransigence over Afghanistan and the level of the suffering and resistance of the Afghan people, there are no present grounds for a viable negotiated settlement of the Afghan crisis. Only generous assistance to the Afghan resistance could pave the way for that. As the Afghan campaign became more and more costly for the Soviet Union, it would be essential for the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Afghanistan’s neighbours to seek to initiate a process of negotiation, in which representatives of all concerned Afghan parties (including the Mojaheddin groups) could participate with the aim of reaching a settlement. The process may be long and agonising as well as costly for the UN, which would need to station a substantial administrative and peacekeeping force for a period of two to five years in place of the Soviet troops so that a national government could come into existence in Afghanistan. This may be a high cost for the world community to pay, but it would be far less than the losses which it would incur if it let Afghanistan go to the Soviet Union for ever.

It could be argued that a substantial increase in outside aid to the Afghan

10 See Rafsanjani’s interview in Kayhan Hawaye, 29 July 1984 (in Persian).
resistance might induce the Soviet Union to escalate its troop deployment and the war in Afghanistan. This is a possibility, but a remote one, for it would also mean a higher drain on Soviet resources to an extent that the Kremlin might not find acceptable in relation either to its national or global position. The Kremlin leadership may appear to be stubborn and monolithic, but it is also an ageing and conservatively inclined group, which may prefer pragmatism and stability to costly adventurism and ideological glorification.

In conclusion, negotiation can only produce a positive outcome to a crisis where both sides are prepared to make genuine concessions. There is no indication that the Soviet Union has any incentive from the costs which it currently bears to make such concessions. In this author’s view, more aid to the Mujaheddin may provide such an incentive. Abandoning the Afghan resistance would not make life easier for the Afghans. All it would do would be to make it easier for the Soviet Union to absorb Afghanistan.

Book note

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF PEACEKEEPING

General Rikhye writes of what he knows. His personal experience of peacekeeping operations by international forces serving under the United Nations flag has been unsurpassed in its scope and variety. Between 1957, when he went to Sinai with the Indian battalion of the first UN Emergency Force (Unef-1), and 1969, when he retired from the post of military adviser to the UN Secretary-General, he was actively involved in the operations in the former Belgian Congo (now Zaire), and in New Guinea, Yemen and Cyprus. During his service with the UN he also took part in exploratory missions to Cuba, the Dominican Republic and other flashpoint areas.

The International Peace Academy, which was largely his creation and which he has headed since his retirement, is no mere talk-shop. It provides, among other things, training courses to which more than 100 governments have sent soldiers and diplomats so that they can learn from the hard-won experience of others in their professions who have wrestled with the task of international peacekeeping 'in the field'. The IPA thus fills a gap which the UN itself has been prevented from filling, mainly by Soviet suspicions.

As the Academy’s very active president, General Rikhye has closely followed all the developments in peacekeeping since his own service as a soldier ended. In this book, he reviews not only the UN operations but also the relev-