AFGHANISTAN IN TURMOIL

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This article went to Press before the December 1979 coup in Afghanistan and the Soviet intervention in that country.

In the mid-1970s, visiting the industrial city of Mazar-i-Sharif—a town of 100,000 souls just below Soviet Turkistan—an observer could already not help being struck by the echoes of Eastern Europe. The wide, empty streets issuing from monumental roundabouts carried the only traffic—the slow chug of vintage Volga taxicabs bringing bureaucrats in heavy overcoats and Astrakhan caps from their bungalows in the quonset-hut suburbs to the stucco chancelleries in the city. Along these dusty streets plump, East European matrons stood before tiny fruit stands buying hard bargains with the Afghan vendors. In the centre of the city, in the tiled lapis and turquoise mosque of Imam Ali, dervishes kept watch over the grave of Sher Shah, the Afghan Amir who played the Tsars and the Viceroys of India off against one another in the Great Game. When asked what they thought of the Rus nowadays the dervishes volunteered, “It’s good for the merchants … may God never let them enjoy anything”.

A visitor to Afghanistan in the time of the ancien régime would thus not have been too quick to call the coup d’état of April 1978 a major Soviet gain in Central Asia. The Soviet Union had long enjoyed a dominant role in the internal affairs of that country, without having had much impact on the Thousand and One Nights’ life of the Afghans. Most old Afghan hands greeted the coup with a ready, ‘plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose’. But indications soon arose that the Russians had encouraged this latest coup out of frustration with the twenty-five-year-old policy of giving aid to Afghanistan and seeing no results. In this coup they have stepped in as never before, using the leverage of financial and technical assistance to seek to transform Afghanistan’s traditional rural economy into a model of Soviet-style centralised development. The government of the leftist Khalqi (People’s) Party, established in the wake of the April coup, shows every sign of taking such a programme seriously, in fact hastening on with radical social measures. The speed and violence with which the new government has carried out its programme has provoked revolts in the country’s ever-volatile border provinces. Moreover, being unable to implement many reforms without heavy reliance on Comecon personnel, the Khalqi government has raised the profile

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of its Communist supporters to levels which undermined the legitimacy of the regime. Can the Khalqis ask the Afghans to accept a social revolution and at the same time ask them to give up Sher Shah’s legacy of fierce independence? If that is a choice to be made in Moscow, rather than Kabul, do the Russians understand what they are up against in Afghanistan?

The Legacy of Daoud

They have had over twenty-five years to learn. Extensive Soviet influence in Afghanistan first arose at the instance of Mohammad Daoud Khan, a cousin of the then reigning monarch, Zaher Shah, who assumed the premiership in 1953. Spurned by the United States in his quest for military support, the royal prime minister signed an agreement with the Soviet Union which was to make the Afghan army entirely dependent on its northern neighbour for arms, training, and financing. With Soviet encouragement, Daoud reversed the postwar trend towards capitalistic—albeit monopolistic—development in Afghanistan, and embarked the nation on a series of ambitious, Stalinistic five-year plans. The effect of Daoud’s policies was to give the Soviet Union not only a great strategic stake in his country, but also an ideological commitment to making Afghanistan’s development work. Afghanistan thus became the first non-Communist country to seek Soviet development aid in the postwar period. Many observers viewed this event as epochal, regarding President Nasser’s fateful switch to the Russians in 1956 as having been inspired by Daoud’s example.¹

Throughout this article it will be argued that the Soviet stake in Afghanistan is more than merely geopolitical. A country of high—2,000 metre—mountains and roads, often little better than goat paths, Afghanistan is a poor staging ground for modern war. While nomad armies in the past have used the country as a highway for the conquest of the subcontinent, the lack, or extreme fragility, of its technical infrastructure now makes such a ‘highway’ unusable. And despite the high martial reputation of the Afghans, the human material of the army is poor—half of the young men drafted are turned away because of physical disabilities.² Thus neither Afghanistan’s highways nor its nine divisions offer the Soviets much strategic advantage. On the other hand, in developing Afghanistan, the Russians aim to create both a modern infrastructure and a modern army. If they were to succeed, they would realise both the strategic advantage of gaining a viable military base, and the equally significant ideological advantage of proving Soviet development capabilities in a very poor country.

The Russian stake in Afghanistan was imperilled by the abrupt fall of Daoud in 1963. After ten years of Daoud’s Soviet gambit the development of the country showed little improvement. Ousting Daoud from the premiership by a

constitutional sleight of hand, a clique of American-educated technocrats took charge of the government. In a manner reminiscent of the nineteenth century’s Great Game, they began cautiously to juggle Soviet and American influence in order to gain more aid from both super-powers. Their third Five Year Plan (1963–68) relied heavily—to the tune of 30 per cent—of expenditures—on Soviet and American financing, ostensibly for the foreign-exchange component of the plan, but in reality for the basic outlays. The juggling act failed to impress either of the super-powers with the sincerity of the Afghans’ allegiance. Aid cutbacks by both the United States and the Soviet Union brought the plan’s expenditures down to 40 per cent below the previous plan, after having been budgeted at 200 per cent above it.3

The failure of this non-alignment posture to secure aid, together with the economic stagnation produced by the emasculated plan, were Daoud’s mandate to return to power. After a decade in retirement Daoud seized power from his royal cousin Zaher Shah and declared himself President of a Republican Afghanistan. Among the enthusiastic supporters of the new regime were the junior army officers who had been schooled in the Soviet Union—at the rate of about 1,000 annually—under the 1953 agreement signed by Daoud. Afghanistan’s two leftist parties, Khalq and Parcham, were likewise visible in the early days of the new regime. Divided more by personality and style than by substantive issues, the two parties lacked, in any case, the significant mass support to contend for power.4 Both looked to Moscow for inspiration, however, and Daoud availed himself of this shared ‘Moscow connection’ to develop an alliance of convenience that led observers to conclude that the Republican revolution constituted a Communist takeover—with Le Monde solemnly calling Daoud, ‘le prince rouge’.5

That early presumption, that Daoud’s coup was a Communist takeover, proved to be wrong. When the Communist threat actually materialised in the April 1978 coup, observers were reluctant to acknowledge the fact, remembering their mistake of five years earlier. Nevertheless, there were some who understood the relationship between the two events, even at the time of Daoud’s coup, including a quite clairvoyant minister who told the American ambassador, Elliot in 1973, ‘I give Mohammad Daoud six years, six years before the Communists decide to dispense with him’. Meanwhile, soon after Daoud’s putsch, the deposed Prime Minister, Mohammed Hashim Maiwandwal, was found dead in his jail cell. Daoud expressed his ‘shock’. Maiwandwal was the dean of the Westward-looking technocrats, and the most distinguished statesman of the liberals. If the Soviets did have a schedule for taking control of Afghanistan their move could not have been better timed.6

Russian benevolence under Daoud’s presidency made his premiership look

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like famine. In rapid succession the Russians offered Afghanistan hydroelectric stations; nitric fertilizer factories; a new road; irrigation for Jelalabad province; and—the jewel of the whole complex—a natural gas industry in Mazari Shariq. By 1973 the Russians and the Afghans had agreed on over seventy projects.  

Yet each of the projects had its catch—as even the Afghans learned that there is no such thing as a free lunch. The road, for example, linked Kabul with the Soviet border, with a capacity for 80-ton vehicles; there were no such vehicles in Afghanistan, or in the Soviet Union, besides Soviet battle tanks. The Soviet irrigation projects were tied to fruit-export agreements. This needed boost to Afghan export earnings was secured somewhat by Russia’s classification of all Afghan produce as ‘lowest quality’; sorting was done in the Soviet Union by Soviet sorters. The Jaraduq Natural Gas Project, a joint venture between Soviet Mitroprom and the optimistically named Afghan National Oil Company, was capitalised at 62.5 million rubles, with the Soviets financing two-thirds of that. According to the agreement, 2 billion cubic metres of gas were to be exported to the Soviet Union each year after 1976. Again, this silver lining had a cloud: the price of gas was fixed in 1975 and remained there long after the world price of natural gas had soared. The Soviets, who had similar agreements with Iran, bought that gas at whatever price the Iranian National Oil Company chose to sell it. The Afghans did not have the kind of clout the Shahanshah enjoyed.

Further Soviet penetration of the Afghan economy occurred in more traditional areas. The Afghan Karakol wool market, typically an exclusively London affair, was partially diverted to Leningrad where it had to compete with the Soviet Union’s own domestic Karakol industry. Profits there were credited directly into the servicing of Afghanistan’s burgeoning debt to the Soviet Union. An important 10 per cent of the country’s export earnings were thus tied into the Soviet system.  

But the key source of Soviet control in Afghanistan lay in the structure of the economy. Under Soviet pressure Daoud nationalised the major industrial ventures and turned these into unwieldy lynchpins for massive industrialisation. Afghanistan was to be a show case—a model of Soviet-style development in the poorest region of Asia. If the Russians could not help to develop a country on their own borders with strong cultural and historical affinities to successful socialist Central Asia, where could Soviet aid be shown to be effective? Adhering to the Soviet doctrine that industry comes first, Afghanistan joined those countries in the Middle East that must import food to feed themselves. With only 4 per cent of the arable land given over to the production of cash crops, and with 90 per cent of the people living in a largely subsistence economy, this emphasis on heavy industry was quixotic, to say the

6. See Kabul Times, 1974-75.  
7. Based on discussions with former Interior Minister, Ahmad Shafii.  
least. In order to develop agricultural produce the government concentrated on a few, mechanised co-operative farms and intensive tractorisation of the rich Jalalabad region. The displaced peasants and nomads found themselves victims of what the Soviets like to call capitalist exploitation. The impinging of agrobusiness—to call a spade a spade—on the countryside is a striking repetition of events in neighbouring Iran, only in this case with the state as the capitalist, financed by the Soviet Union.

All these ventures cost the Soviet Union money—over a billion dollars by 1978—but it was determined to make a go of Afghanistan. So signs in 1973 that Kabulis was again tempted to play both sides of the fence brought about a reassessment of Soviet policy toward Daoud’s regime.

Concerned over his dependence on Soviet aid, in 1973 Daoud began to reassess the fence-sitting policies that characterised the last royal Cabinets. On the domestic front Daoud shook himself loose from his erstwhile allies in the leftist Parcham and Khalq parties by sending the enthusiastic, youthful ideologues ‘out to the people’. The Afghan Naro-e-Nake proved no more successful in radicalising the masses than their Russian predecessors in Turgenev’s day. They rusticated in the hostile provinces while, more importantly, they lost their party cohesion in the capital. Daoud now had a free hand to move against leftist in his army, whom he purged in late 1973.

Abroad, Daoud sought to replace declining American aid as a counter-weight to the Soviets by turning to the Middle East oil states. As a Muslim country, as well as one of the world’s poorer states, Afghanistan readily qualified for aid from the proliferating numbers of aid and lending institutions, including the Kuwait Fund, the Islamic Bank for Development, and the OPEC Special Fund. Grants from Saudi Arabia included a half billion dollars for hydroelectric works, while the United Arab Emirates offered 85 million dollars for a sugar factory. Iran, anxious to secure its eastern border against Soviet influence, offered 2 billion dollars in aid, surpassing the Soviets in pledged contributions to the Afghan Seven Year Plan (1976–85). 10

The aid from Iran proved to be more than the Iranians were equipped to transfer, and more than the Afghans could have absorbed. After two years, only a fraction of the total pledged reached Afghanistan. As with other aspects of the Shah’s Drang nach Osten—including his parleys with Bhatti and Daoud, and his calls for an Iran-Afghan-Pakistan economic union—the aid pledge turned out to be more smoke than fire. Some observers speculate that the Shah’s moves provoked, first concern in the Kremlin, and then Communist-inspired counter-moves throughout the region. It is hard to know how seriously concerned the Russians were over the Shah’s aborted diplomacy. 11

Daoud’s new posture vis-à-vis the Russians brought him widespread support

9. Duprez, op. cit., p. 3.
11. Selig Harrison, “Nightmare in Baluchistan”, Foreign Policy, March 1979
from moderates, as well as conservative Muslim clergy, who had strongly, even violently, opposed the increasingly visible Soviet presence in the country. Conscious of this religious support, Daoud repaired strained relations with Muslim Pakistan, and made a widely publicised journey to Saudi Arabia, via Islamabad. These moves were too palpable a reversal for the leftists, slowly recovering from their 1975 setback. The Khalq and Parcham, regrouped and recovered from their forced rustication, cemented their leadership differences and joined in stepping up activity against the regime, which resulted in a brutal crackdown on students and army officers in the capital. Pay-rises for the army and subsidised prices for the civil servants—which cost the government 3 billion rupees a year—did not win Daoud broad support in face of 20 per cent inflation. Slipping into a siege mentality, Daoud authorised the assassination of seven prominent leftist personalities, while sending into diplomatic exile even sympathetic moderates. The purge of 1978, more far-reaching and final in its intent than that of 1975, gave the Khalq and the Parcham the choice of liquidation or revolution.

How disturbed the Soviets were at these reversals of policy by their protégé Daoud, and how much part they played in his overthrow, is impossible to know. But the scale on which they have backed Daoud’s leftist successors speaks volumes. Immediately twenty-five agreements with Comecon countries were signed by the new regime; an unusual burst of diplomacy on the part of a government scarcely secure in its own capital. While street-fighting went on in Kabul, the government began contracting for Bulgarian television and East German printing equipment, together with an additional 22 million dollars from the Soviet Union to exploit natural gas. Fidel Castro paid a brief visit shortly after the revolution, presumably to assure the new government that it is possible to run a small country entirely on Soviet aid for years. Congratulatory telegrams from Poland’s Henryk Jablonski and other Warsaw Pact heads of state, flooded in.12

The Khalqí regime

Observers who had been quick to call Daoud’s regime Communist in 1973 were now willing to give the new government the benefit of the doubt. Said a former USAID official, “I think they’re just raising the level of rhetoric in order to be heard above the rhetoric Daoud used”. The Western Press pointed out the American connections of both the new President, Nur Mohammad Taraki—a former translator at the American embassy—and the Prime Minister, Hafizullah Amin, a Columbia alumnus.

An Afghan, now living in exile, cautioned against attaching a strong ideological colouring to either of the Afghan leaders. “I used to have lunch with Taraki and Amin every day for two years. Taraki, he is a weak, kindly sort of man. That’s why they made him president. But Hafizullah Amin is very sharp, a good speaker. He’s after the power.”

12. See, for example, various articles in the Kabul Times during April and May 1978.
It is hard to know the motives and goals of the new regime at the moment it seized power. Some suggest that Taraki and Amin, both members of the Khalq Party, moved according to a prearranged plan in consolidating their power and proclaiming their affiliation with Moscow. According to this view, the Khalq leaders (1) joined with the Parcham in a tactical alliance; (2) overthrew Daoud’s regime; (3) consolidated power in Kabul while disguising the extent of their ideological commitment to Communism; (4) executed the July 1978 purge of the Parcham and army officers sympathetic to their rivals; and (5) institutionalised their relationship with Moscow in the last months of 1978. Others hold that Taraki and Amin were forced into the hands of the Russians by the unexpected violence of the opposition against them. In this view, successive attempts by the new regime to assume direction of the rural areas provoked local resistance, first in remote Nuristan province and afterwards in Paktya and Herat. Thus Taraki was forced to seek Soviet backing, culminating in the defence pact of December 1978 with the Soviet Union, in order to secure the regime militarily against the growth of rural insurgency.

Whatever Khalq aspirations may have been before coming to power, the course of events in the wake of the coup, and the growth of Soviet influence, show a logic of their own. At first the regime assumed a posture of conciliation. Whether sincerely or not, the new government invited “all progressives” and “all victims of Daoud’s repression” to participate in the country’s development. Nevertheless, several pro-Western opponents of Daoud remained in prison with the change of regimes and misgivings about the possible Communist orientation of the new government began to surface in Kabul. However, Afghanistan’s well-spoken Prime Minister, Hafizullah Amin, rejected the Marxist-Leninist label for two good reasons. In the first place, the American Department of State had hitherto proved unwilling to invoke the automatic clause in the foreign assistance act (which prohibits aid to Communist countries) by calling Taraki’s regime Communist. While the United States thus preserved whatever diplomatic leverage it enjoyed in Kabul, Taraki and Amin salvaged the 15 million dollar American aid programme. Secondly, the Marxist-Leninist label would have further alienated the fundamentalist Afghan clergy, who equate the material philosophy of communism with atheism. For their benefit, then, the Khalq regime proclaimed itself socialist—a political hue common enough throughout the Muslim Middle East to be acceptable to the men of religion.

The argument, waged largely in the Western Press, as to whether Taraki’s regime was Communist or not soon became academic. One may well doubt whether the “scientific socialism” of Marx was fully understood by the Khalq—or, for that matter, by many self-proclaimed Marxist regimes in the Third World; neither private property nor private capital fell victim to the new regime. Yet in a manner familiar to other Communist dictatorships Taraki’s regime began to narrow its base of power and grasp for centralised, bureaucratic control over the masses.
One of the greatest problems facing the new regime was to assert its legitimacy over the masses of the people in the isolated rural districts that make up 90 per cent of the population. Members of the governing elite have little contact with the people, and their attitudes toward them run from the disdain entertained by the older elite to the fashionable condescension of the young leftists. The tribal, intensely proud, rural people reciprocate with fear, suspicion, and a chauvinistic attachment to their traditional way of life, expressed as attachment to Islam. In their view, the Kabul elite is very nearly kafir, unbelieving. The government presence in the countryside, a troika of soldier, schoolteacher and tax collector familiar from Tsarist Russia, is only an outward emblem of Kabul’s control. Real authority is shared with the local notables, tribal chiefs and village headmen, who function as middlemen between Kabul and the people. The mutual ill-will of the governing elite and the rural masses was traditionally tempered by the historical association of the dynasty with the local notables—from which class it had emerged.11 Expropriating the dynasty and its legacy of rural legitimacy, the Khalqi regime needed to find a way of winning the confidence of the ‘toiling masses’ so dear to their ideals. Instead they threatened them in the most palpable ways. In remote Nuristan, for example, immediately on seizing power they imprisoned the popular sub-governor—a local notable—and replaced him with a Kabul party member. This young radical interfered with the ritual performance of the Muslim fasting month, confirming the Nuristanis in their fears that the new regime was hostile to Islam. In the eastern provinces, strongholds of tribal and religious sentiment, the government sent teachers and soldiers to ‘liberate’ the tribal masses from their ‘oppressive’ khans and clerics. Subsequently, quite a few of these youthful ideologues were reported to have been killed by resentful tribesmen.

One can only question the realism of the Khalqi government in confronting popular sentiment so crudely. The lack of realism here may stem from the historical gulf between the ruling and the ruled of Afghanistan, but it also reflects the alienation of an increasingly Soviet-styled ruling clique seeking to maintain power through force.

The Khalqi government did respond to the rural opposition which by the summer of 1978 had become endemic throughout the East. Recognising the necessity of at least neutralising the opposition of the local notables to the regime, the government invited tribal khans and village chiefs to meetings in the provincial capitals, trying to quiet their increasingly vocal fears that Kabul had ‘gone Communist’. In deference to the sensitivities of the notables, party members stopped calling one another ‘comrade’, while the Kabul press began to report every government event as having included a ‘recitation from the Holy Koran’. As to the government’s plans for social and economic reforms, the Planning Minister, Sultan Ali Keshmand, gave assurances that ‘We have done nothing yet but put through what was planned’.14

13. Best discussion of this in Mike Berry, Afghanistan (Paris, 1974).
At the same time as Taraki and Amin backed off from their headlong collision with popular sentiment, the two Khalqi leaders moved decisively against rivals within their leftist front. In July, Cabinet members with Parcham affiliations were first posted abroad to diplomatic posts, then fired. Show trials were arranged for those Parchamis slow to leave the country. The demotion of two well-known pro-Soviet personalities, the Deputy Prime Minister, Babrak Karmal and the Defence Minister, General Abdul Qadir, led observers to speculate that the Khalqi’s regime would rapidly drift away from Soviet influence. Subsequent events were to prove otherwise.

Karmal had advocated a gradualist reform of the country—for all his vocal support for the Russians, he had recognised the realism inherent in Daoud’s programme of cautious reforms. Amin, on the other hand, urges rapid social reforms at whatever cost. With the purge of Karmal and also Keshmard—whose sunny reassurances about the direction of the government had proved useful in the government earlier in the summer—the Khalqi regime prepared to embark on an ambitious scheme of reforms.

If carried to completion these reforms would revolutionise Afghan society. None of the reforms are new in conception, having been drafted under previous royalist and republican ministers. But the earlier generation of reformers had been daunted by the difficulties confronting them. Anxious lest rapid social reforms should alienate their power-base of tribesmen, religious figures and landowners, the pre-revolutionary governments had always moved slowly on basic reforms, much to the frustration of the young leftists. Now speed is the order of the day. Land reform Proclamation VI, promulgated in July 1978, cancels all debts, returns all mortgages and frees all sharecroppers from financial obligations contracted in the last decade. Rural money lenders have been jailed, while newspapers have announced that large landowners have given ‘gifts’ of thousands of jannis of land to the revolution. 13

We may well wonder what is the reality behind all this. Rural credit, as in many poorer countries, is anuric because it reflects the scarcity of capital in the country. Without any alternative source of credit (the Agricultural Development Bank still being largely a figment of Kabul’s imagination), what will the farmers do for credit now that the local money-lending system has been crushed? Dislocations caused by land disputes and claims adjustments in the wake of reform are to be handled by a “Land Arbitration Board” in every provincial sub-capital. There are over a hundred of these sub-capitals in the country—without any cadastral records, without any trained personnel, and without the administrative infrastructure to control a massive transfer of land.

The activities of the boards in the three provinces where they have been established—all near big towns—seem to be limited to collecting testimonies from recently landed peasants about how happy they are with the revolution.

The zeal of the government’s action on behalf of the peasants seems at best

misplaced. Destroying the system of rural credit on which small farmers rely for seed has curtailed plantings this year and threatens shortages a year hence. Already observers predict a short fall of 500,000 tons of wheat in 1980. The Soviet Union and India have pledged only 100,000 tons. 16 As ill-conceived as any land reform in the Middle East, this Proclamation VI may be a formula for disaster.

Nor is the land reform necessarily of much significance. In this arid, mountainous country, land is "dirt cheap" and access to water is the source of wealth. Powerful landowners and tribal chiefs regulate the distribution of irrigated waters according to a time-honoured, if self-serving, pattern. If the government means to step in and supplant the khans and the waterlords—as they are called—they would have to establish water boards in the countryside. The Bolsheviks did just that in their takeover of Central Asia, though they only had to control two rivers, the Oxus and the Jaxartes. Can the Afghan regime with its lack of trained cadres establish a water board for the thousands of seasonal rivulets that nourish the agricultural land of the millions of small farmers? If they do not, the land reform remains a dead letter.

In another utopian move, the government announced the formation of rural co-operatives with government-salaried staff. While other developing countries might have studied the problems of co-operatives before implementing their plans, Kabul opened its first co-operatives in August of 1978, four months after the revolution. The waiting days under Daud had made them impatient.

These activities rapidly undermined whatever legitimacy the Khalqi regime may have gained from its conciliatory gestures to the restive rural areas. The Afghans may be characterised as being highly susceptible to rhetoric, but even in Afghanistan actions speak louder than words. Whether "communist", "progressive", "anti-Islamic" or "truly Islamic", the Khalqi regime aimed to extend its bureaucratic control over the countryside, and the countryside aimed to resist. While the Kabul press hailed the success of the land reforms in Herat, Jelalabad and Kabul—that is, the major urban areas—no official reportage came from the rural areas. On the other hand, reports began to surface telling of massacres of party workers by tribesmen and of Kabul air-strikes against rural insurgents in the eastern provinces of Nuristan, Nangrahur and Konar.

In Nuristan, successive provocations through the summer of 1978 led the locals to attack the sub-provincial capital, rescue their old governor from jail and take on a regiment of regular army troops sent to punish them. In a surprise upset, the Nuristanis threw back the government, capturing enough arms and ammunition to equip all military-age men in the district—that is, aged between ten and seventy—and the revolt became official. 17

Kabul took the uprising seriously. Planes bombed Nuristan in July and

17. Details based on conference at Asia Society (New York) chaired by Dr. Chris Brummer; notable speakers were Kabrul Nazarizad, Dr. Richard Steam, who had recently come from the rebel area.
August 1978, while the equivalent of a division moved in to isolate the rebel province. Stirring up ancient tribal enmities against the Nuristanis, the government also committed irregulars to the fight, promising rival tribesmen they could do what they liked to the Nuristanis once they were beaten. The progressive government even proclaimed a ‘jihad’, or holy war, against them. Fighting raged from mid-summer until mid-winter, when snowfall ended operations. The Nuristanis managed to hold the narrow defiles and high passes that led into their provinces, and celebrated this stalemate over the Kabulis by declaring themselves independent.

The last two months of 1978 saw the Afghan regime consolidate its ties with Moscow. Whether planned, or whether induced by the revolt in Nuristan, the congruence of Soviet attitudes with those of the Khaliq made such a consolidation inevitable: the course they pursued domestically since coming to power had left them no option but to move closer to Moscow.

In November the Afghan Cabinet travelled to Moscow to meet in joint session with the Politburo. Meanwhile, in the countryside peasants were organised for voluntary labour in road construction (King Zaher Shah had abolished corvee labour by the peasants in 1968 amid liberal acclamation). Demonstrations of workers, peasants, students, soldiers and civil servants took place in the provincial capitals, and ministries, barracks, schools and factories were closed down to encourage attendance. Taraki’s birthplace was designated a national shrine (although why the self-proclaimed ‘son of a poor shepherd’ should prove to be from a substantial farmstead is less than clear).

During Taraki’s visit to Moscow, he took part in commemorating the anniversary of the Great October Revolution, making the obligatory pilgrimage to Lenin’s tomb and giving a singular speech over Afghan television. Defending twenty years of inconclusive Soviet aid to Afghanistan, Taraki had this to say: ‘The Soviet Union extended unconditional aid. Although some were not pleased, the aid was so beneficial to the toilers that no one could object’. He went on to praise relations with the Soviet Union, preparing his listeners for the announcement, on December 5, that Afghanistan and the Soviet Union had signed a defence pact.18 The first country to seek Soviet aid, back in 1953, now joined Cuba, Angola and Ethiopia in having a mutual defence pact with Moscow.

This pact came just in time, as the level of opposition to the regime throughout the eastern provinces was now approaching that of an epidemic.

The counter-revolution

The success of the Nuristanis in resisting government authority had encouraged the mood toward a general uprising in all the peripheral provinces that had traditionally maintained a sullen independence from Kabul. The tribes of the Sarhadd, opposite Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province, declared themselves against the Khaliq regime in the first months of 1979. The chiefs

of the largest tribes, the Mohmand, Afridi, Waziri, and Yusofzai, met in a jirga (council) to co-ordinate their activities. These chiefs were joined by refugees from Kabul, representing dissidents of all colours: royalists, republicans, high-ranking army officers, and even apolitical technocrats anxious to overthrow the Khalqi regime. A notable presence in the tribes is that of Afghanistan’s most distinguished religious leaders, fleeing what is widely viewed as a bloody purge of Afghanistan’s influential clergy. Closely connected with the ancien régime by kin ties and political alliance, these pirs, or saints, are highly regarded by the tribal people. They are thus doubly distrusted by the Khalqi regime. The pirs, like the tribesmen, are Sunni Muslims, the official sect of the country—although Shia also exist. Responding to Taraki’s proclamation of a jihād against the ‘Made-in-London Muslims’ (a reference to the cosmopolitan education of many of these pirs), the pirs called for a jihād against Taraki and backed themselves up with the support of the Sarhaddi tribesmen.

The tribal jirga called for a direct assault on Kabul. Prudent counsels in the jirga reminded the chiefs of the experience of the Nuristani under the government’s air-strikes. In the mountains, such bombing had terroristic effects; against tribal levies, massed for assault, it would be devastating. Others noted the defection agreement between Kabul and Moscow, and pointed out the large numbers of Soviet military advisers in the base at Jelalabad, just a few kilometres down the road. Up to the present, therefore, despite routine designation of such and such a day as ‘D-Day’, guerrilla warfare of varying intensity has been the rule.

Many regions of the country have settled down into a Hobbesian ‘state of nature’, like the rugged Hazarajat in the centre of the Hindukush, where a local governor issued rifles to his retainers and declared war on the distant government. He has not, like his Nuristani counterparts, declared himself independent from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the behaviour of these local rebels is more reminiscent of the warlords of the Chinese Civil War than of the more co-ordinated Islamic Revolution of Iran. The fragile mosaic of social groups in Afghanistan underscores this segmenting effect. The rebel bands are isolated by their mountains, like the Hazaras, by linguistic and cultural identity, like the Nuristanis, or by bitter memories of political rivalries, like the Pathan khans of Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province. It should not be forgotten that the Khalqis are all Ghilzai Pathans, long-time rivals of the Durrani Pathans, including the former royal family and many of the present rebel clans.

The unity of the rebels based near the Pakistani border hangs precariously on the efforts of traditional go-betweens to maintain a constant dialogue between the suspicious, jealous leaders of the revolt. Recent reports of a unification of several factions into a National Front (ANLF) may be more


26

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
apparent than real, if the following anecdote is any indication. A partisan of the
Galliani-led Islamic Party of Pakistan, Jamaat-i-Islami said of the ANLF’s
leader, Sayyedullah Mujadidi, ‘his father was a great man, but the son is not
to his stuff’. Mujadidi replied to the affront, ‘Who is this Galliani? He is a
nobody. We know what he is’. A third spokesman of the ANLF said of
Engineer Gulbadin Hikmatyar’s, Hizb-i-Islami movement, ‘that Tajik has no
more chance of ruling Afghanistan than a Negro has of becoming American
President’.

Despite the fragility of the coalition of the several rebel groups, fighting in
the North-West Frontier Province has become more and more in earnest
throughout 1979. The Pakistani-based rebels, feeling the squeeze of
Islamabad’s pressure to stop guerrilla activity in the refugee areas, have fought
tenaciously to gain bases within Afghan territory. Kabul has responded by
launching air-strikes against the rebels using napalm. Indirect confirmation of
the number of air attacks launched by Kabul is given by Pakistan’s complaints
that nearly a hundred overflights into Pakistani airspace have resulted in
Pakistani villages being bombed. Fleeing the bombing in Afghanistan, the
number of refugees in the North West Frontier Province has swelled to over
300,000.

While the rebel groups struggle for a toe-hold in Afghanistan and call for
immediate assault on Kabul, a long-run perspective on their campaign offers
neither so grim a prospect as they presently face, nor yet one so optimistic as
their spokesmen suggest. It is true that the rebels cannot muster a direct
assault on the capital, given the sheer fire-power of the government troops
armed with the heaviest model Soviet gun-boat helicopters. On the other hand,
a long war of attrition sidesteps their opponents’ superior fire-power, making
an issue of the relative staying power of the two sides. The Khalqis’ conscript
army has been wrecked by mutinies since the fighting started. Whole units
have reportedly deserted, along with their equipment. Except for elite security
units in the capital—where nearly half the army is tied down—the fighting
determination of the troops is questionable. There is evidence, however, that a
long war of attrition might be acceptable to the rebels. The main business of
the tribes, besides herding, is smuggling. The fact that official Afghan-
Pakistani trade is conducted under restrictive currency agreements has created
a black market for all sorts of consumer goods sought in both countries.
Nomad smuggling serves that market, reaching a greater volume as
government control wanes. Since the outbreak of fighting, smuggling has
flourished. The tribesmen have, therefore, the means to pursue the war. At the
same time, customs receipts, generally one half of the government’s revenues
in normal times, have fallen dismally, undermining the Khalqis’ capacity for
prolonged conflict.

The tribal rebels have strong disincentives to end the conflict on the

Khalqi’s terms. Like most Middle Eastern governments, the Khalqi regime has plans for “rationalising” the pastoral industry of Afghanistan. Together with the World Bank it has opened a livestock slaughterhouse in Herat and set up a field service veterinary group for the nomads of neighbouring provinces. (Although the plan was conceived under Daoud’s regime, its implementation has begun under the new government.) The plan envisages the government as the sole buyer, at a fixed price, of the nomads’ livestock, with the government having the responsibility for marketing it. So far there have been few, if any, takers. The concept of the plan is to deprive the nomads of their free market, cut off the lucrative smuggling trade with meat-hungry Iran, impose government taxes, impose military service and governmental administration on tribal life, and eventually settle them on the government’s terms. Free pastoralism is not possible in a socialist state, however useful an adaptation it represents to the marginal ecological niche of most of Afghanistan. Following the Soviet lead in abolishing pastoralism, the Khalqi regime hopes to settle the nomads in the next five years. The nomads, many of whom are refugees from Stalin’s genocide of Central Asian pastoralists in the 1930s, are fully capable of understanding the implications of the government’s mood.

Fighting for their economic and social existence, the nomads are bound to be more tenacious than their lacklustre performance in the jihad to date suggests. Behind them is a significant history of resistance against regimes that threatened them on bread-and-butter issues. When the reformist Amani regime in the 1920s tried to impose taxes and regular military service on the tribes, the grandfathers of these men swooped down on Kabul and ousted the reformers. Their fathers participated in the Jalalabad revolt of 1949, when the tribes forced the government to cancel its reforms by attacking and destroying the army base in Jalalabad. In 1963 when Pakistan closed its borders to the tribes in response to Daoud’s Pakhtunistan policy, the stranded tribesmen rebelled and in effect provoked the coup d’état which ended Daoud’s first decade in power.

The tribes of the Sarhad number somewhere between two and three million pastoralists. If the inflated number of the “official” Afghan population is reduced to the best guess of the SUNY demographic team—suppressed by the Afghan government—from 17 million to 11 million, this nomadic group accounts for a substantial part of the population. Add to this the fact that these are the richest, the best organised, the best armed—in a country where the average adult male is a walking arsenal—and the most politically acute, and the scale of the problem facing the government and its Soviet backers can be well appreciated. The Sarhadi tribes have been the kingmakers of Afghanistan from a logic that goes beyond tribal lore and tradition. They have been the political muscle of every Afghan regime, or else the Achilles heel, from the first unified monarchy in 1747 to Daoud’s last tenure as president. And they know it. One Waziri chief expressed it this way: “We live in the mountains, a difficult life. But we conquered Nuristan for Abarrahman Khan. We beat the British with
sticks and stones in our hand. We overthrew Baccha Saqao for the King, and we made him get rid of Hashem Khan, his uncle. For we are the true Afghans'.

Faced with a rebellion of a quarter of the population, the best that the Khalqii regime can do is hold the fort—Kabul, with its population of 600,000 together with the other major urban centres, Kandahar, Herat, and the industrial Kondor corridor, comprising an additional 434,000. Significantly, in this latter area along the Soviet border, the new regime has recognised Turkic—the common language of the hitherto culturally repressed Turkic population—as the official language. Undoubtedly, scopeage of prosperity from the Soviet Union, plus a generous ethnic policy, and the fact that the industrial north is more amenable to Soviet-style planning policies than the rest of the country, will help solidify the regime's hold on this region. But the territory adjacent to the Soviet border should hardly be a problem for the government.

The fact is that the experience of tribal rebellions elsewhere in the Middle East suggests how tenacious and unnamable to settlement they can be. In Iraq, for example, the Kurds managed to hold out for fifteen years against the Baghdad government despite the leftist Baghdadis' considerable Soviet backing. Likewise in the Sudan the Equatorial provinces kept up a civil war against the government in Khartoum for over twenty years. The fact that both of those conflicts ended with capitulation by the rebels disguises a more significant point. Both Baghdad and Khartoum experienced sudden about-faces in the course of the wars, with the hard-liner, pro-Moscow cliques deposed from power and conciliatory regimes installed in their places. In both cases the Russians, seeing which way the wind was blowing, accepted the inevitable and helped bring about the compromise.

Of course, Afghanistan is not Kurdistan or South Sudan. It shares an 800-mile-long border with the Soviet Union, which makes the Soviets both extremely concerned about and quite capable of aiding their friends in Kabul. But there are other differences between Afghanistan and Iraq or Sudan which are in the mujahedin's favour. Neither in Iraq or the Sudan was a crucial, dominant part of the population engaged in the conflict, nor did they have the ideological support of religion in their struggle. The Kurdish insurrection was identified by many Kurds as a personal power play on the part of Molla Mustafa Barzani. The secessionist tendencies of Southern Sudan were laid at the door of imperialist plots against African integrity. But in Afghanistan there is no such ambiguity about the issues at stake.

Trouble for the wider region

The civil war in Afghanistan developed a wider aspect from the start, when the Nuristani insurgents sought refuge from government air strikes inside the

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24 Letter in the author's possession.
25 Based on discussion with Eden Naby (Harvard).
Pakistani border, in the Chitrals region. The refugees took up residence with
tenuously traced kinsmen, thus muting the official problem of passport control.
As the uprisings spread, the number of refugees within Pakistan swelled to
75,000 by the winter of 1978–79, imposing a considerable strain on the
resources of the border area, and causing a tricky diplomatic problem for the
Pakistani government.

Between Peshawar and the Afghan city of Jalabad runs a more nominal
border, the Durand line, crossed yearly by millions of nomads on the annual
migrations. Bisecting this border at the Khyber pass is a single paved road. The
jurisdictions of Islamabad and Kabul even in the best of times extend no further
than this road. The tribes of the Sarhadd and Pakistan’s North West Frontier
Province rule themselves, without regard for the niceties of international
diplomacy, and it is in their domain that the refugees have pitched camp. The
presence of these Afghan refugees in this limbo of sovereignty poses Islamabad
a ticklish problem. If it tries to administer its own nominal territory, it must
inevitably clash with the tribes—something which the cautious military
government of General Zia-ul-Haq seeks to avoid. If, on the other hand, it
ignores the activities of the tribes and the refugees in the tribal area, it opens
itself up to the charges of the Soviet Union and Afghanistan that it is abetting
counter-revolution. Islamabad has avoided either extreme. A “hands off” policy
vis-a-vis the refugee camps allows the rebel leaders discretionary freedom to
pursue their political objectives. Since the border is ill-defined at best, Pakistan
can be selective in its assertion of jurisdiction over the rebels’ activities. On the
other hand, this laissez faire policy towards the rebels leaves the refugees’
human problems up in the air, dependent on local charity and on scarcely
adequate emergency measures taken at low-levels of the Provinicial
government. Pakistan has been scrupulous in not giving grounds for any
Soviet allegations that it provide more than the bare minimum humanitarian
assistance.

Pakistan’s caution is consistent with its complex policy constraints. The
General Zia’s new non-aligned foreign policy, Islamabad’s departure from the
Central Treaty Organisation, the Russians’ huge steel mill project in Karachi,
are all factors which enter into the Pakistanis’ calculations. The danger of
Afghanistan’s polarisation transmitting itself to the Pakistani political scene
is another factor. The Communist Party of Pakistan openly supports the Khalq
regime and echoes Moscow and Kabul’s accusations that Pakistan has joined
in an ‘imperialist’ plot against ‘progressive Afghanistan’. In Peshawar, where
the party of Communist-sympathising Abdul-Ghaffar Khan is powerful, armed
clashes between the Islamic rebel groups and the Pakistani leftists have taken
place. But polarisation on the Left is only part of Pakistan’s worries. The
Jamiat-e-Islami has urged the government to do more for the refugees, while

25. Based on discussions with Pakistani officials, of record. The attitudes of the left and right of Pakistan can
be observed in the division that has arisen in Muslim Students Association in New York—split over the issue of
whom to support in Afghanistan.
indirectly intriguing for military aid to the Islamic rebels. The Jamaati-Islami is an important backer of General Zia's military government, having played an instrumental role in bringing down Ali Bhutto's government in 1977. The mouthpiece of militant Islamic sentiment in this ideologically Islamic country, its power is growing, and it may step into the lead when General Zia's government steps out. Its insistence that the government act in support of the Islamic rebels in Afghanistan could turn into a destabilising domestic issue, further limiting Islamabad's ability to cope with the crisis.

Perhaps the gravest constraint on Pakistan's freedom of action is the attitude of the United States. The killing of the American ambassador to Kabul, Adolph Dubbs, on February 14, 1979, promptly cooled Washington's previously correct relations with Afghanistan. Suspecting official Afghan, as well as Soviet, complicity in the tragedy, Washington protested sharply and shaved off 11 million dollars of planned aid to Afghanistan. The ambassadorial position remains vacant. Recently a former Under Secretary of State, Harold Saunders, expressed official American displeasure at the growing violence in Afghanistan and the Soviet role in it. Yet the Department of State is quick to point out that its continued recognition of the Khalqi regime is not in question. Officially, Washington has had no contact with any of the rebel groups in Pakistan. Wary of becoming involved in anything remotely resembling foreign intervention in a country abutting the Soviet Union, the United States has restrained itself to criticising the Soviet role in Afghanistan. As to the possibility that America is engaged in covert action in support of the rebels, a senior policy maker noted recently that the CIA had to inform in advance seventeen congressional committees before committing covert activities. "If the CIA were there," he concluded, "I think we would all know about it by now."

Even if the United States were interested in exerting influence on the Afghan problem, through its old ally Pakistan, both policy and legal constraints intrude. On the one hand, America is wary of relying on the shaky military government of General Zia, preferring to let the dust settle on a solution of Pakistan's three-decade search for political institutions before coming out in support of an existing regime. On the other, with Pakistan's announced intention to develop nuclear capabilities in excess of the limits allowed by treaty, the United States has been bound by law to end all military aid. Conflict has arisen in Washington policy circles between those concerned with American security ties with South Asia and those responsible for anti-proliferation policies. But the fact of the law itself will make it almost impossible for America to resume its close military relationship with Pakistan. Pakistan is unable to intervene decisively in the Afghan crisis; and, in turn, the United States lacks the leverage necessary to influence the region's actors. Both countries have, therefore, assumed a position of non-interference.

Not so Afghanistan's neighbour to the west. Rumours of Iranian support for the counter-revolution fly hard and fast in the wake of talks between representatives of the Afghan Islamic groups and members of the Ayatollah
Khomeini's entourage.\(^{27}\) The avowed purpose of these talks was to secure transit for Afghan workers stranded in Iran to join the rebel forces in Pakistan. In fact, during March 1979 several thousand Afghans crossed from Iran into the province of Herat, sparking off an uprising there against the government. Air strikes against the quaint medieval town of Herat brought the revolt to an end with heavy casualties. In a reverse movement, as many as 8,000 refugees fled Herat for Iran.

According to recent travellers in the region, the frontier towns of Tasabghur, Torbat-e Heydar and Jam display a flurry of Afghan refugee activity. Although the local committees of the Islamic Revolution initially treated the Afghans as Soviet agents provocateurs, co-operation between the various Islamic groups has taken shape. There has been no direct Iranian intervention in the fighting, despite Soviet and Khalq allegations to that effect, for the Iranian army in the province is a shadow of its former self. Rather, the Islamic committees are organisng relief for the refugees, selling arms to the rebels, and raising money through the bazaars of Mashhad. Iranian newspapers are full of stories sympathetic to the rebellion, while leaflets and radio broadcasts attacking the Khalq flied Iran and spill over into Afghanistan.

A delegation of Afghan clerics, both Shii and Sunni, has ventured to Qom to take up their cause with their Iranian counterparts. The most prominent of the Shiiites, Sheikh Mohsen of Kandahar, has taken up residence in Qom and leads the local bazaar committee to raise money for the rebels. His hosts, the college of Ayatollahs which dominates Iranian politics, agree on few things, but they are united in condemnation of the present regime in Kabul. When Ayatollah Khomeini promised Taraki the fate of the Shah if he should continue to 'oppress Islam', the Afghans responded by calling Khomeini a 'maniac'—and subsequently, the Iranian press expressed its satisfaction when Taraki's death was reported. Meanwhile, in Kabul, a purge against the local Shiite minority has been reported. Kabul's Shiite Qizilbash families provided many officers to the ancien regime. Now these have joined the Khalqs' other enemies in prison, while wall graffiti read, 'death to Khomeini', and 'death to the Shahs'.

The role of the Iranians in the whole affair is most elusive, given the fluid state of that country's politics in the wake of the Shah's downfall. Historically, Iran has always sought a secure, if not dominant position in Afghanistan. The Shah's plans to replace the Soviet Union as Afghanistan's biggest trade and aid partner followed this precedent. There is no reason to think that the present Iranian regime will not try to turn the troubles in Afghanistan to advantage, holding out the prospect of future ties to an Islamic 'Islamic Republic', if only security and stability are forthcoming.

The view from Moscow

It is to be wondered whether Moscow shares the doctrinaire inflexibility of

\(^{27}\) See various articles in Etidol, Tehran Journal, Fun Times, published between June and September 1979. For a defeat, see Khalq view of the Afghan conflict see Mashroo (Tehran) in the same months.
its protégés in Kabul. After thirty years of active Soviet participation in the internal development of Afghanistan, one would think that the Russians would have foreseen many of the problems now facing the Khalki regime. In question too is the extent of unconditional support which they will extend to an indigenous Communist party, such as the Khalki. It is not at all clear how the Russians view the options of the Khalkis now, or how far they will go in trying to extricate them from their difficulties. But the record of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan does not promise encouraging flexibility on Russia's part in a resolution of the conflict.

It is easy for a super-power to forget that its backing may be the kiss of death to a policy or a leader in a xenophobic country. It is easy for citizens of a super-power to stroll down the streets of a Third-World capital and be comforted by the sight of so many familiar pieces of material culture. The Russians in Kabul see the Volga car; the Americans in Tehran saw pizza parlours. To this extent, the Soviet Union is no more myopic about Afghanistan than super-powers are generally.

Yet Soviet myopia is more specific, and has more specific causes. To begin with, whatever the faults of American aid policies in Afghanistan, most Americans active there came away with a better grasp of the rural realities of the countryside than that enjoyed by high-level members of the Afghan government. The Russians, in contrast, had no large-scale rural programmes. The differing foci of the two countries' academic and cultural ties are also significant. While the Russians cultivated Pushto literature, trained the Pushtun military elite, but gave relatively little attention to the Pushtun nomads—or any of the country's many other ethnic and tribal groups—the United States sent many scholars to investigate tribal and ethnic cultures, often in conjunction with rural development programmes. It is perhaps not so surprising, therefore, that Americans are rather better informed about the lives of Afghanistan's 10 million herdsmen, farmers and tribesmen than are the neighbouring Russians; the latter do, however, know the tribalised, military and civil Pushtun elite of Afghanistan—though these people are only a small and unrepresentative sample of their countrymen.

But the Soviet Union's perceptual difficulties in Afghanistan run deeper than this, and go back to the historical genesis of Communism in Central Asia. The Bolsheviks carried out a lightning conquest of Central Asia in the 1920s, subjugating the local elite, and building an oasis of Soviet-style development in the midst of the steppe, all in an environment historically and culturally linked to Afghanistan. The very success of the Soviet Revolution in Central Asia creates a perceptual problem for their successors in dealing with present-day Afghanistan.

In Central Asia the Bolsheviks found a country of latifundia, of extreme class division between the peasants and the often absentee landlords. The power of the central government was as extensive as it was despotic. By toppling a few autocratic khans, the Bolsheviks simply took over the state
administration and rechristened the system ‘socialist’. Expropriation of water rights and grazing rights was more gradually executed, though not without much bloodshed and an exodus of refugees to Afghanistan.

A Soviet anthropologist warned the Bolsheviks about the different conditions to be found in the kingdom below the Oxus. In Monich’s ‘Letter from Turkestan’ (1927) we read,

‘Landlords greater than these (owners of 100 acres) can be counted on one’s fingers. As one leaves Turkestan, the domain of small landholders increases. Yet nowhere does the peasantry experience such horrors as where it is economically independent. . . feudal landlords moderate the hard treatment of the peasants by the officials’.

The social role of the khans of Afghanistan today in most of the country remains as Monich describes it, while the rapaciousness of the local officials increases as each coup shortens the tenure and security of the petty bureaucrats. Where the central government interferes in rural life, the tribal khan is the best protection against tyranny. Where government is non-existent, the tribal khan assures against anarchy. Far from being the ‘parasitic’, ‘feudal’ class that the Bolsheviks encountered in Central Asia fifty years ago, the khans of Afghanistan are vital to the social survival of their people.

It is Moscow’s insensitivity to this, its confidence in bureaucracy and centralisation as the solution to the problems of development and political integration that may blind it to the challenge it faces in Afghanistan.

This is not to say that the Russians have no room to manoeuvre. Tactically they have a free hand over the Khalqis, as demonstrated by their open consultation with members of the ancien régime, including the former King Zahir Shah (condemned to death in absentia by the Khalq government) and the Grand Vizier, Nur Ahmad Etemadi (now reported to have been executed by the Khalq in Kabul). Such moves have been widely interpreted as an attempt by the Soviet Union to expand the base of the regime. But no new faces have come forward to co-operate with the Russians, as a generation of leaders have chosen apolitical apathy rather than involvement with the Soviet Union. At the same time, Russian feelers towards the former king and the royal vizier underscore their narrow understanding of the problems facing them. The rebels in Peshawar greeted the news of the Soviet-Zahir Shah dialogue with incredulity. In exile for seven years, alienated and isolated from Afghan politics, the former King is almost as indifferent towards the future of Afghanistan as the rebels and the Khalqis are towards him. But the Russians, relying on their Pushkin-elite contacts, cannot come up with any alternatives.

The Khalqis, for their part, have grown suspicious of Soviet commitment to their revolution. Some Khalqis have expressed concern that the Soviets will

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wait to see how the chips fall before doing anything more for the Khalqi regime. They claim, for example, that many of the millions of dollars of aid pledged by the Soviet Union to Kabul have yet to materialise; if the Khalqi should falter, the story goes, the fault will rest with the Russians. But it may not be the external opposition to the Khalqi government which is tying up Soviet aid so much as the internal struggles in the Khalqi party, from which the Soviet Union must remain aloof. Though it may initially have favoured the Parcham party, with its closer ties to Moscow, the Soviet Union gracefully accepted the purge of the Parchamins and the emergence of the Amin-Taraki duo in the summer of 1978. It acquiesced in several ministerial changes which advanced the power of the strong-man Amin, and it made no overt move when the ousted Taraki was killed. The Russians lack a power base in Afghanistan outside the purged Parchamins and the rapidly contracting Khalqi Party. Were they to shift support back to the Parchamins, there would be little mutual trust and credibility for any Soviet-Afghan leftist relationship. Therefore, without committing themselves firmly to supporting the Khalqi government, the Soviet Union can do little actively to replace it.

It is widely agreed that the Russians are unhappy with the Khalqi, and yet the Soviet Union may be preparing to intervene massively with a military force. Indeed, it may be no contradiction to say that the Russians may find it necessary to secure a regime they do not completely support. Strategically their policies in Afghanistan have inflexible parameters. The civil war in Afghanistan causes special concern to them because it is precisely here, in Afghanistan, that the Muslim nationalities of the Soviet Union look onto the Muslim world. The Russians have long pursued a policy of stabilisation on their southern frontiers, interrupted by Stalin’s postwar attempts to extend the frontiers seaward. As discussed by Enders Wimbush and Alexandre Bennington in their recent work, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union*, the Soviets have been reluctant to stir up ethnic and religious conflicts in Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan, for fear of domestic repercussions. Particularly with regard to the teakettle of Kabul, the Russians have always been alive to the threat that the kingdom should prove ungovernable. Now, with more confusion and instability in the ‘Northern Tier’ of Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan than in any year since 1946—the heyday of Communist activity in the region—the Russians are faced with the prospect of a broadly anti-Soviet, Pan-Islamic movement threatening Central Asia. Hence their need for a stabilisation of the situation.

André Fontaine, writing in *Le Monde*, pictures the Russians ‘devant un choix delicat, soit intervenir massivement dans la guerre civile... soit abandonner à son sort le régime tres impopulaire...’. For a super-power, the choice is always delicate, for there can be no simple answer to any policy dilemma. As the fighting winds down during the winter months, the Russians
will probably try a little of everything—support for Amin, support for an alternative, massive intervention, selective compromise. In the end they may succeed in preserving their position in Afghanistan through determined intervention and forced communalisation of the countryside. Or they may keep the Khalqi regime just barely afloat, an island of Marxist ideologues in a sea of hostile peasants. The tragedy of the small country, confronted with the superpower, is that this ‘delicate choice’ must be made in Moscow, not in Kabul.