standing by either super-power are high, the super-powers lack adequate and agreed rules to manage crises in the Gulf region. Yet, the Soviet invasion and the Iranian-American crisis may arguably have brought about a greater understanding by the super-powers of each other’s interests in the area and their mutual limits of tolerance. If dangerous super-power competition is to be avoided, it may well be that the West should now attempt with the Soviet Union to evolve a set of ‘agreed ground rules’ concerning behaviour towards this vital region.”


Soviet intervention in Afghanistan

RICHARD S. NEWELL

At the end of 1979, turmoil in Afghanistan suddenly took on global implications. For the first time the Soviet Union invaded a Third World nation. The assault sent shock waves throughout the world community all but demolishing détente. The repercussions for Afghanistan’s Muslim neighbours were especially alarming. The results of the Russian move are being shaped by the reasons behind the decision to invade, the tenacity of Afghan resistance and the reactions of the international community. This article focuses on Soviet motives and Afghan responses to the intervention.

Hafizullah Amin had gained unrivalled control over the Khalq regime in the aftermath of Nur Muhammad Taraki’s abortive attempt to eliminate him in mid-September 1979. His triumph was to prove temporary; he faced dangers which would overwhelm him three months later. Popular resistance restricted his control of Afghanistan essentially to the cities. Without control over the population, his government was unable to lay a basis for a Marxist society through military conscription and educational indoctrination.

The Russians were a more immediate danger. His seizure of power had brought their hostility clearly into the open. They offered protection to Colonel Muhammad Aslam Watanjar, and other military heroes of the ‘revolution’ who had been aligned with Taraki. Many army units were under the influence of their Soviet military advisers. Amin was caught in between. Insurgent pressure forced him to rely increasingly upon Soviet help. By mid-December as many as 10,000 armed Russians were in Afghanistan as either advisers or members of special force units.


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Soviet patience with Amin had worn thin. On 6 October, his Foreign Minister, Shah Wali, complained to the Eastern bloc ambassadors accredited to Kabul that the Russians had been involved in Taraki’s attempt to remove Amin. The replacement of the Russian Ambassador, Alexander Pushkov, was demanded. Moscow complied with the appointment of Filkhat Tubeyev, a senior Communist Party member, early in November, but senior members of the embassy’s staff were retained in Kabul. This move made little difference. The Russians had earlier dispatched General Ivan Pavlovsky, a Deputy Defence Minister, to assess the danger posed by the Afghan resistance. His report was pessimistic about the Kabul government’s chances of survival, and he argued that the Soviet Army could quickly restore order.

In December, the Russians prepared for a military intervention. Amin objected, recognizing that he could then be easily removed. The disagreement degenerated into violence. What happened remains shrouded by conflicting reports circulated in the Kabul diplomatic community. General Viktor S. Paputin, a senior Soviet police official, was responsible for either getting Amin to accept military intervention or removing him. In mid-December negotiations failed and Amin dug in against the Russians. All accounts agree that on 19 December he vacated the Presidential Palace near the centre of Kabul and took up a defensive position with his elite guard at the Darulaman Palace six miles south of the city. Some accounts claim that by this time there had been a shoot-out between Paputin and Assadullah Amin, head of the Afghan Secret Police and nephew and son-in-law to the President. Paputin appears to have been mortally wounded; the Soviet press announced his death a few days after the invasion. Whenever Paputin was shot, the act doomed Amin and his regime. A Soviet airborne unit in place at the Kabul airport on 25 December assaulted the Darulaman Palace on the 27th killing Amin and a number of his closest aides.

On the same day, six Russian divisions crossed the Afghan border and lumbered south by armoured personnel carrier and lorry along the paved roads which the Russians had helped the Afghans build in the 1950s and 1960s. Several days earlier, paratroops had been landed at Afghan airbases to assure their control before Amin’s units could react. An airborne division which had landed at Bagram, 50 miles north of Kabul, secured control over the strategically vital Salang Pass tunnel commanding the main north–south highway. Confused by a variety of ruses and the suddenness of the Soviet moves, the Afghan army as a whole offered little resistance, although some units near Herat, Kabul and Jalalabad held out for several days. Within four days of the invasion, Soviet forces were effectively in control of Afghanistan’s major cities, airports, military bases and the roads between them.

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8 The Economist, 3 November 1979, p. 53. 9 Ibid., 17 November 1979, p. 68.
8 Ibid., 4 January 1980. The newspaper published Soviet press reports of Paputin’s death as occurring on 29 December in Moscow. Later it reported that American intelligence analysts connected Paputin’s death with the Soviet effort to get rid of Amin, but were unable to reconcile divergent versions of the events. Ibid., 4 February 1980.
Soviet motives

While a definitive account of the process that led the Kremlin leadership to invade Afghanistan may never be written, it is clear that the Russians confronted numerous factors—global, Asian, regional and domestic—which affected their decision. Possible American retaliation and the fate of détente were obvious deterrents, as was the uncertainty of the attitudes of major Asian states, especially India, Iran and China. Muslim responses were certain to be negative, but their impact could be partially discounted by the instability and shifting rivalries within the Middle East. An invasion might also have a serious effect upon the benefits the Soviet Union enjoyed from trade with the Nato nations.

General global revolution could be anticipated at the murder of the leader of a universally accredited government that presented no external threat. Only the already committed could accept the Russians’ argument that they had acted according to their Friendship Treaty with Afghanistan. Its leader was dead because he had refused entry to the Soviet troops who killed him.

Perhaps the most painful cost for the Soviet Union has been the hostility and suspicion aroused among non-aligned nations which accounted for the overwhelming margin of condemnation in the 14 January resolution passed by the General Assembly of the United Nations: 104–18 with 18 abstentions. In view of a number of options which could have maintained Soviet interests in Afghanistan while avoiding the costs of invasion, the reasons for the decision to invade remain perplexing. One alternative would have been to continue the existing level of support to Amin through the winter and perhaps beyond. If his government had collapsed through an internal coup, or by being overrun by the resistance, the resulting anarchy would have given the Russians ample opportunity to intervene with or without military force.

Secondly, the Russians could have attempted to reach an understanding with nationalist groups in opposition to Amin. While adamant Islamic leaders might have refused to deal with them, all resistance leaders were aware that Soviet acceptance was essential to the viability of any future Afghan government. The establishment of a nationalist government need not have weakened Soviet security. A stable, nationalist Afghanistan would present less chance for outside intervention hostile to the Russians than a Marxist one in turmoil. Therefore, it is unlikely that security considerations were paramount in the Soviet decision.8

Even an insistence upon an extension of the Brezhnev doctrine into Asia by maintaining Marxist control of Afghanistan could have been accomplished without military intervention. There already was a sufficient Soviet military and poli-

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8 The Soviet ability to influence the political situation in Afghanistan short of a massive invasion renders disingenuous claims by the Kremlin leadership that it was acting defensively. For example, Mikhail Suslov speaking in Warsaw justified the invasion by reciting a list of threats against Soviet security interests: “The aggression of China against Vietnam; the Nato decision aimed at a new round in the arms race, the positioning of powerful American armed forces around Iran; the training and infiltration of armed rebel groups into democratic Afghanistan forcing the government of that country to ask the Soviet Union for help—all these are not isolated occurrences but links of a chain... As the Peking hegemonists threatened to “punish” Vietnam, so the United States has new begun to talk of “punishing” Iran and, more recently, even the Soviet Union.” Quoted in The New York Times, 15 February 1980.
critical presence to generate a coup against Amin. If the Parchamis had been incorporated into such a manoeuvre, they might have come to power without the stigma of being installed by a Russian army. Such an internal operation could have been risky, Amin had proved himself a master of intrigue. Yet by the end of 1979 he was totally dependent on the Russians for survival. A cut-off of assistance to units loyal to him would have eventually rendered him helpless. That the Soviet Union did not settle for such a mated line of action suggests a good deal about its motives and frame of mind in choosing to invade.

These motives and attitudes had evolved within the framework of a policy launched by Khrushchev in 1955. He changed the Soviet posture towards Afghanistan from one of general hostility to that of a donor of military and economic assistance. The policy had its overt and covert dimensions and the Soviet government was to display some ambivalence as to which approach it favoured. Overt aid programmes gave it influence in the governing circles of the Afghan monarchy and access to the expanding military officer corps. Soviet aid became so vital to the Afghan government that its dependence was translated tacitly into an assurance that Afghan foreign policy would not offend the Russians. The relationship provided a highly visible demonstration of Soviet generosity and neighbourliness towards a conservative Muslim nation incapable of defending itself against the Soviet Union. Such a policy also assured the Russians of more than 800 miles of secure border at a cost of approximately $50 million per year in economic aid—much of it subject to repayment.

As it operated elsewhere, the covert side of the Soviet policy involved the fostering of a Marxist movement within Afghanistan’s nascent modernist intelligentsia. What eventually developed was a classic instance of two-level penetration. By the early 1970s a semi-clandestine Marxist movement was preparing to seize power from a government which enjoyed excellent relations with the Soviet Union. The coups which finally brought Afghan Marxists to power do not appear to have been engineered by the Russians. Their support of Daud and of Taraki does not necessarily indicate complicity. Publicly they appeared to be equally pleased with Amin after he removed Taraki; later events have shown how disturbed they actually were. The Afghan experience in that sense confirms the difficulty of controlling national Marxist movements which the Soviet Union also has had with China, Yugoslavia, Albania and Romania. The crisis in Afghanistan at the end of 1979 was the result of events which the Russians helped to create, but which had passed out of their control. Only when finally confronted by Amin’s defiance and his probable collapse, did they act to seize control directly.

What was remarkable about this intervention was how clumsily and naively it was carried out. The operation bore the marks of haste and improvisation. Propaganda justifications, e.g. that the United States and China were about to attack Afghanistan, totally lacked credibility. Unseasoned reservists were sent into a theatre of widespread guerrilla war with minimal or misleading briefings, without such practical aids as maps and with little apparent notice of where they were.

The force sent in was adequate to seize and hold the cities and key installations, but not sufficient to suppress a general rebellion in a country as large and difficult as Afghanistan. It is likely, therefore, that the Soviet aim was limited to removing Amin and installing Babrak Karmal with the expectation that the Afghan army could deal with the insurgency. Yet, the act of intervention itself virtually assured that the new regime could not cope with the internal resistance now further inflamed by its total reliance upon the Russians. Hence, once their forces were in the country, only the Russians themselves were capable of suppressing the resistance.

The incompatibility of these moves suggests that the Russians, who were well informed about conditions in Afghanistan, moved suddenly, perhaps in a spasm of anger after Papuvin was shot. The earlier massing of troops was carried out to exert pressure on Amin. It appears that in their fury the Russians moved the troops in before preparations were complete. The invasion thus appears to have been the culmination of a paradox in which Soviet gains in influence over Afghanistan were accompanied by a loss of control over events. The more desperately their Marxist clients needed them, the less leverage the Russians could exert—a phenomenon not unfamiliar to Americans in other situations.

This pattern of events strongly suggests that the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan had little to do with extending power into the Middle East and beyond. Opportunities arising from control over Afghanistan were, of course, too obvious for the Russians to miss. They would be in a position to restrict the American role in the Middle East, probe the chronically unstable political situations in Iran and Pakistan, gain concessions from intimidated oil states. Nevertheless, the Russians appear to have moved when and how they did in response to events within Afghanistan itself. They could not avoid considering such global and regional factors as the probable loss of trade with the United States and its allies and the breakdown of the SALT II process. Such setbacks were discounted: the Russians saw declining American interest in maintaining détente in the Senate’s resistance to the SALT treaty, the arming of Nato with a new generation of nuclear warheads, and the continued warning of Sino-American relations. To the Russians the Americans were becoming less forthcoming precisely at a time when their hands were tied in the Middle East primarily as a result of the Iranian revolution, especially after the taking of the hostages on 4 November 1979.

Moreover, previous American policy towards Afghanistan suggested that the United States would not react strongly to even a marked increase in Soviet influence. It had deferred to the Russians as the predominant influence in Afghanistan since the mid-1950s. The United States continued to recognize the Khulq regime despite its apparent complicity in the killing of the American Ambassador in February 1979. Thus the Russians had reasons for being sceptical about American warnings against an invasion after the massing of troops was detected in December.

Muslim resentment is another matter. It is the strongest deterrent against Soviet expansionism in the Middle East. Therefore, what happens in Afghanistan will be crucial for the future role of the Soviet Union in the region.

Afghan resistance

Afghan resistance to the Russian intervention was violent and nearly universal. Within the first week, there were a number of fatal attacks on Soviet soldiers by civilians wielding rocks, knives and other crude weapons. Insurgent groups continued their hit-and-run attacks on road traffic and small government outposts. Spokesmen for the opposition groups quartered in Pakistan vowed to fight until Afghanistan was cleared of Russians. Most eloquent of all were the general strikes staged in Herat, Kandahar and Kabul. Despite their vulnerability against reprisal, whole neighbourhoods in these cities shouted their defiance of the Communists and their allegiance to Islam from the rooftops. Many spilled into the streets to demonstrate their opposition, only to be shot down by Soviet armour and helicopters.

Most of the countryside has remained outside Soviet control. Military units initially sent in were not intended to confront resistance beyond the main cities. It was not until the end of February that the Russians were prepared to take action against the areas of most active rural resistance. Their attacks have been concentrated against the Pushtun regions adjacent to the eastern border with Pakistan. These had actually begun with probing actions near Jalalabad after the Russians had put down an Afghan army unit which had mutinied there. The late winter attacks were aimed at destroying concentrations of Pushtun insurgents who were in control of the extensive region. Joint air and armour assaults were launched against the lower Kunar valley which was serving as an insurgent supply artery from Pakistan. The irrigated land along the valley floor was seized and the villages were bombarded causing heavy civilian casualties. Survivors fled to Pakistan, adding to the more than 700,000 refugees being sheltered there by the beginning of spring. Regrouping after the onslaught, the insurgents returned to occupy the hills overlooking the Kunar River to harass the Soviet troop concentrations below with attacks by night.

Similar attacks have been mounted against the Laghman area north-east of Jalalabad and further south in Pakita, the proverbial heartland of Pushtun resistance against all outside influences. In the latter case, air and ground attacks have been launched from Gardez and from Kandahar. Scorched-earth tactics have been employed against the population, which suffered heavy losses from the massive rocket and high-speed machine gunfire of the MI-24 assault helicopters when flushed from their homes or defensive positions.

These attacks have demonstrated the Soviet ability to destroy Afghan armed resistance when it is concentrated in the more accessible farming areas near Kabul and Kandahar. Without adequate ground-to-air weapons, the insurgents must restrict their own attacks to night raiding in small groups. The Russians appear to be calculating that by breaking the Pushtun resistance they may shatter the will of the rest of the population to continue fighting.

Thus, within a few weeks, the Russians had a firm grip on Afghanistan’s strategic urban core and proved they could devastate seats of major opposition, but they had yet to bring the majority of the population under effective control. Such an achievement depended upon the determination of the insurgents to continue resisting and the willingness and ability of the Russians to commit forces
large enough to complete a campaign of annihilation throughout Afghanistan. Given the extent and difficulty of the terrain and the tenacity already displayed by the opposition, such an effort might require forces three times larger than the 80,000 to 100,000 troops engaged by the end of the winter.

The Parcham government

Shortly after Amin's execution 'for crimes against the noble people of Afghanistan', Babrak Karmal was installed as the newly elected President of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and leader of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). A Pashtun native of Shewaki, near Kabul, Karmal had been educated in German-assisted schools and studied law at Kabul University where he became active in radical politics. He spent several years in jail during Daud's prime ministry, and worked in the Planning Ministry from its founding in 1957 until he was elected to the national Parliament in 1965 as a leader of the PDP. His personal differences with Taraki and Amin contributed to the splitting of the Marxist party into the Khalq and Parcham factions. He led the Parcham faction which figured prominently in the coup of July 1973 and the first phase of Daud's republican rule. Parcham rejoined Khalq in 1977 and Karmal was appointed Deputy Prime Minister in the first Marxist Cabinet in April 1978. Losing out in a power struggle, he was sent as Ambassador to Prague the following July and then denounced as a traitor by Taraki. His activities and whereabouts from September 1978 to late December 1979 have not been revealed, but he was obviously under Soviet protection.

Despite the violent events that brought him to power, Karmal bases his authority upon the 'revolution' of 7 Saur (27 April 1978). This argument permits him to claim that the authority of his government stems from an internal seizure of power by Afghans, rendering irrelevant such subsequent events as the arrival of the Soviet military and their execution of Amin. This tortured explanation was essential for a government totally dependent upon a foreign power. The circumstances have required that it devote virtually all of its energy to winning popular acquiescence.

The Parcham government's strategy for winning support emphasizes the claim that Amin had betrayed the revolution. It is now to be put back on track by the new leadership. It has sought to broaden its support by appointing some Khalq faction survivors, some non-Marxist progressives and a powerful bloc of military officers to senior posts. Abrupt and drastic change is to be avoided and reconciliation is to be a major goal. Karmal declared, '... the Government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan is established on a national united front under the leadership of the working class and all the toilers of Afghanistan... While under the circumstances it is not our direct duty to practise socialism [italics added], the new government... deems it its historic national duty to... perform the following urgent duties:

1. Proclaim the release of all political prisoners.

(ii) Abolish all anti-democratic and anti-human regulations and ban all arrests, arbitrary persecutions, house searches and inquiries.

(iii) Respect the sacred principles of Islam ... protect family unity and observe legal and lawful private ownership.

(iv) Revive ... revolutionary tranquility, peace and order in the country.

(v) Insure ... conditions conducive to democratic freedoms such as the freedom to form progressive and patriotic parties.

(vi) Pay serious attention to youth ... "12"

This transitional 'united national front' government thus has promised both reconciliation and continued revolutionary change. Reforms initiated by Taraki and Amin have been endorsed, but with the assurance that they will be enforced gradually and with regard for Afghan social and cultural sensibilities. To this end Taraki has been rehabilitated as a revolutionary martyr who had launched the 'new model revolution', while Amin is vilified as its perverter. Taraki's death is attributed to orders from Amin; a confession of a soldier alleged to have participated in the execution makes no mention of Taraki's being wounded by gunshots; instead, it is claimed he was strangled.10 Amin is depicted both as a monster and a traitor to the revolution willing to take support from the United States, China and conservative Muslim states. The charges against him have been larded with a singularly bombastic invective. In announcing Amin's downfall Karmal said, "Today is the breaking of the machine of torture of Amin and his henchmen, wild butchers, usurpers and murderers of tens of thousands of our countrymen fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters, children and old people."11

Its talent for phrasemaking notwithstanding, the Karmal regime has few instruments for establishing its bona fides with the people. The few committed Afghan Marxists have been decimated by Amin's purges and assassinations. There were probably less than 3,000 survivors, both Khalqis and Parchamis, to staff the party and the government.12 So far they have operated more as an Afghan facade ineffectually covering the operational control assumed by Soviet advisers in nearly all government ministries.

Similarly cosmetic has been the co-option of non-Marxists into the Cabinet. One survivor from Daoud's republican government, Muhammad Khan Jalalzai, was reappointed Minister of Commerce. Two other appointees, Muhammad Ibrahim Azim and Fazul Rahim Mohmand, appear to have no history of Marxist activity. Some Cabinet members are latecomers to the Marxist party, most notably the new Foreign Minister, Muhammad Dost, who had served as secretary to Muhammad Hashimi Maiwandwal, a moderate nationalist Prime Minister in the late 1960s. Karmal's government has also announced the appointment of three far more prominent moderates: Rawan Farahdi, secretary to the Cabinet during the constitutional era, and Samad Hamad and Muhammad Siddiq Farhang, both of whom played key roles in the drafting of the 1964 liberal Constitution and served in subsequent governments. They have been appointed advisers to the new


government, but evidence that they can exert influence is entirely lacking. Such personal manoeuvres have been accompanied by gestures and declarations also designed to generate public acceptance. Much publicity attended the release of political prisoners on 6 and 11 January, including the presence of foreign newsmen. The gesture partially backfired. Puli-Charkhi, Kabul’s largest prison, was mobbed by relatives of the inmates who rioted when many prisoners did not appear. Karmal later announced that all political prisoners had been released despite numerous cases of missing inmates. A new Constitution was promised incorporating respect for Islamic beliefs and institutions, protection of the family as a unit and acceptance of the principle of private property. 36

There was little the government could do to back such words with substantial deeds. A declaration of amnesty for deserters appears to have had little effect upon the melting away of the Afghan army. The claims of restoration of civil rights were offset by reports of constant arrests inside Kabul and the detention and torture of suspects by the party militia. This was dramatized in the aftermath of the week of anti-government demonstrations and strikes in Kabul in late February. Several hundred persons, largely of the Hazara Shiite minority, were reportedly arrested by the militia with an unknown number executed.

These announcements of conciliatory policy fell on deaf ears in the turmoil of revolt and protest which greeted the military takeover by the Russians. The government’s inability even to control the capital city in late February indicates the feebleness of its position. Its weakness is aggravated further by vicious struggles for power and survival that continue between party members and factions. In mid-February these resentments flared up into another gunfight between Cabinet members which left Sultan Ali Keshmand, a leading Parchami (Vice President of the Revolutionary Council, Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Planning) dead.37

For all its rhetoric on behalf of the ‘new model revolution’ and against its enemies, foreign and domestic, the most concrete accomplishment of the Parcham government has been the redesigning of the national flag. It now includes the green of Islam alongside the red of Marxist revolution.

Six months after the invasion, Afghanistan’s future remains primarily a matter of Soviet intentions and capacities. The Soviet Union has the means to reduce armed resistance to a minor nuisance. Drastic repression would involve massive direct manpower and heavy economic costs and is likely to earn the lasting resentment of the Islamic states and much of the Third World. Such a price need not keep the Soviet government from gaining new influence in the Middle East on the basis of having exercised power effectively, even if ruthlessly. Should the Russians falter for lack of nerve or due to outside pressure, protracted guerrilla resistance is possible. But to survive it will require outside support. So far, that has shown no sign of developing.