

Partners in Time: The CIA and Afghanistan since 1979

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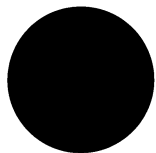
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Partners in Time

The CIA and Afghanistan since 1979

Charles G. Cogan

There is no question that the Afghan War, as the most significant of the regional conflicts of the 1980s, figures centrally in the debate over what led to the end of the Cold War. As Afghan expert David Isby puts it, "We'll never know if Leonid Brezhnev and the Politburo had not made the decision to intervene in Afghanistan—a decision that Soviet military officers contend after the fact was unwise—whether the Soviet Union would still be in existence today."¹

We do know, from the recent selective release of Politburo documents, that the Soviets were first asked to intervene in Afghanistan by the Afghan Communists in March 1979 and refused. "The entry of our troops into Afghanistan," Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin told the Afghan president in Moscow on March 20, "would outrage the international community, triggering a string of extremely negative consequences in many different areas."²

In the end, Kosygin did not sign the fateful document ordering the Soviet invasion. Reportedly opposed to the invasion, he missed the December 12, 1979, meeting at which all the other full members of the Politburo signed the order drafted by Konstantin Chernenko, then Leonid Brezhnev's most trusted aide. (Mikhail Gorbachev was not a full member and did not sign either.) Fifteen days later the invasion took place.³

It should be noted that the claim that the West "won" the Cold War is disputed by many, including no less an authority than George Kennan, whose angst was probably

more highly developed than that of the other "wise men" who guided U.S. policy in the post-Second World War period. Kennan asserts that "the suggestion that any United States administration had the power to influence decisively the course of a tremendous domestic political upheaval in another great country on another side of the globe [i.e., the Soviet Union] is simply childish." He contends that the extreme militarization of American policy strengthened hard-liners in the Soviet Union. "Thus the general effect of Cold War extremism was to delay rather than hasten the great change that overtook the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s."⁴

A more nuanced view, but one still somewhat akin to Kennan's, is that of the French historian François Furet:

Neither the "star wars" of Reagan, nor the less futuristic war—that of Afghanistan—nor the revolutions of eastern and central Europe are at the origin of the collapse [of the Soviet empire]. They could have hastened it somewhat, each in its own way, but the crisis preceded these events because, by the admission of the Soviets themselves—leaders and led—it was none other than the social system put in place by Lenin and Stalin.⁵

Aleksandr Yakovlev, Gorbachev's close adviser, responded similarly to a recent query as to whether the Reagan administration's

¹Interview with the author.

²Michael Dobbs, "Secret Memos Trace Kremlin's March to War," *Washington Post*, November 15, 1992, p. A32.

³*Ibid.*, p. A1.

⁴"Who Won the Cold War? Ask Instead, What Was Lost?" *International Herald Tribune*, October 29, 1992, p. 4.

⁵François Furet, *The Nature and Consequences of the Collapse of Communism*, The Eleventh Symposium of the Pioneers of Marbella, Paris, Institut Français du Livre Service et des Techniques Modernes de Distribution, p. 54.

higher spending in armaments, combined with its "Evil Empire" rhetoric, forced the Soviet Union into a more conciliatory position:

It played no role. None. I can tell you that with the fullest responsibility. Gorbachev and I were ready for changes in our policy regardless of whether the American president was Reagan, or Kennedy, or someone even more liberal. It was clear that our military spending was enormous and we had to reduce it. It was senseless to pursue the same policy. There have been better and smarter presidents. I can't say that Reagan played a major role. You can't take that seriously. It's just political propaganda.⁶

Nonetheless, the Soviet Union was seriously overstretched by trying to wage a war in Afghanistan while maintaining its far-flung military commitments in Africa and the Middle East and propping up the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. President Jimmy Carter responded to the Soviet empire's expansionary policies by sending arms to the Afghan resistance after the Soviet invasion on December 27, 1979. But strictly speaking, U.S. assistance to the resistance began, in a nonlethal way, the previous summer.

The emphasis on time in the title of this essay is deliberate. The Soviets had the misfortune to run up against a tide of Islamic revivalism that began to sweep the Muslim world in the 1970s. (The United States was also a victim of Islamic fundamentalism. Its main antagonists were the Shiites of Iran. The Soviet Union's antagonists were Sunnis. These are very different expressions of Islam, as the Shiites, unlike the Sunnis, could be said to be members of a perpetual protest movement. Fundamentalism, it should be noted, is a slightly misleading term for a movement that is less concerned about the observance of religious law for its own sake than as the basis for an alternative to a system based on Western values. A better term is Islamism.) It was,

therefore, a particularly propitious moment for contesting the presence of a foreign power in a Muslim country. The Afghan resistance to the Soviet presence was propelled by Islamism, as well as by nationalism.

Time is also significant in the sense that the partnership, if you will, between the United States and the Afghan resistance was of limited duration and could only have been so. The long-range aims of a country in which Islamists were at least beginning to have a say would not be, could not be, wholly compatible with the aims of a Western nation. The primary goal of Islamism is to get rid of, or at least lessen, Western influence. A colleague of mine, still in the Operations Directorate of the CIA, in describing the nature of the limited partnership between Washington and the Afghan resistance, put it succinctly: "We took the means to wage war, put them in the hands of people who could do so, for purposes for which we agreed."

Finally, the issue of time crops up in the question of when the limited partnership between the United States and Afghanistan should have ended.

A Segmented Society

Afghanistan hardly qualifies as a nation-state, as South Asian expert Selig Harrison has pointed out.⁷ A look at the map reveals Afghanistan as a crossroads—a buffer state whose borders were defined by Russia and Britain over the course of their nineteenth-century rivalry in Central Asia, the period of the so-called Great Game. The country is bisected horizontally by the Hindu Kush range, and neither the northern nor the southern portion of the country is an endogenous entity. The northern half of the country is connected to the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union, in particular Turkish-speaking Uzbekistan and Persian-speaking Tajikistan, but also Turkmenistan. The Tajiks and the Uzbeks constitute the principal ethnic groups in the north.

There is a similar "spillover effect" in the

⁶"A Very Big Delusion," *The New Yorker*, November 2, 1992, p. 6.

⁷"La lente implosion de l'Afghanistan," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 1991, p. 16.

southern half of the country: the main ethnic group there, the Pushtuns, are spread across the border into Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. The Durand Line, drawn by the British in 1893 to separate Afghanistan from its Indian empire, cut the Pushtun homeland in two. The Pushtuns have been the ruling dynasty in Afghanistan since 1747, but they do not constitute a majority of the total population. Some estimates go as low as 30 percent,⁸ others as high as 50 percent.

Afghanistan is overwhelmingly Muslim, like all the countries surrounding it except Iran and China. A Shiite minority, some 15 percent of the population, live alongside an overwhelming Sunni majority. Because Afghanistan is a Sunni Muslim country, Muslim clerics have no political role, as they do in Shiite-dominated Iran.

Afghanistan is a segmented society—perhaps atomized would be a more appropriate description—where loyalties are strongest at the lowest common denominator. The monarchy was historically the only unifying factor in Afghanistan, but it was never a modernizing force. The modernizing elements that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s—whether they wanted to “communize” Afghanistan or Islamize it—did not support the hereditary rulers. The monarchy was in any case never more than a thin, anachronistic veneer holding Afghanistan together, and it had little local authority.

After the Second World War, Washington was primarily concerned with checking Soviet influence in Afghanistan, not least to protect its considerable investment in neighboring Pakistan, particularly its U-2 base at Peshawar, capital of the Northwest Frontier Province.

The situation in Afghanistan began to come unstuck in 1973, when Prince Mohammed Daoud overthrew his cousin, Zahir Shah, in a virtually bloodless coup. Daoud, who had been forced to resign as prime minister ten years earlier, was supported by army officers belonging to the Parcham, or

flag, faction of the Afghan Communist party, which went under the name of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. The Parcham faction was dominated by urban elites, many of whom were Dari- (i.e., Persian-) speaking. Shortly thereafter, as the Parcham faction began infiltrating the government in Kabul, some of the Islamists crossed the border into Pakistan and began agitating against the Daoud regime.

In 1977, the two rival factions of the Communist party, the Parcham and the Khalq (khalq means “masses”), reconciled, and in April 1978 the party staged a coup d'état that resulted in Daoud's death. The Khalq faction was supported by the army and was dominated by Pushtuns from the Ghilzai confederation and eastern Pushtuns.⁹

A Homegrown Coup

Although the coup appeared to be homegrown, Washington was concerned that yet another country had gone Communist. None-theless, the United States maintained its diplomatic relations with the new government in Kabul. However, on February 14, 1979—coincidentally the same day as the first, temporary, overrunning of the U.S. embassy in Tehran—the U.S. ambassador in Kabul, Adolph Dubs, was kidnapped by terrorists and later died under circumstances that have never been completely explained. Although Washington did not replace its ambassador, it undertook no action at the time aimed at overthrowing the Communist regime.

The government of Nur Mohammed Taraki set about a vigorous program of comunization shortly after it took over. This program challenged not only traditional Afghan political sentiments but also the new Islamist movement, which ran across ethnic lines and was dedicated to lessening Western influence in Afghanistan and forming an Islamic government in Kabul. In March 1979, a revolt in an army unit in Herat signaled the spreading discontent with the Taraki regime.

⁸James Rupert, “Nouvelle donne en Afghanistan,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 1992, p. 24.

⁹The Ghilzai confederation is one of two major tribal confederations of Pushtuns; the other is the Durrani. The Ghilzai confederation is located between Kandahar in the southwest and Kabul; the Durrani is centered around Kandahar.

That same month, Taraki appealed secretly, and unsuccessfully, for direct Soviet intervention. By July 1979, the Communist government was beginning to lose control of the country. At this time, Jimmy Carter signed a presidential finding on covert action that began a modest program of propaganda and medical aid to the insurgents. The United States channeled its aid through the Pakistani authorities. This very modest beginning to U.S. involvement came more than a year after the Communists had come to power in Afghanistan.

In the fall of 1979, Taraki was overthrown by a rival Khalq faction leader, Hafizullah Amin, and then put to death on Amin's orders. But the internal situation did not improve under Amin. Moreover, he began showing signs of independence from Moscow. This only heightened the Soviets' suspicions—which were unfounded—about Amin's supposed American connections (he had once had some sort of loose association with the Asia Foundation). In the event, Amin did not survive the Soviet invasion that came on December 27. Ostensibly intervening at the request of the sitting Afghan government, the Soviets then killed the head of that government and installed their own president—Babrak Karmal of the rival Parcham faction. Thus, from the start, the Soviet intervention was fatally flawed.

Anatomy of a Victory

The swiftness of Jimmy Carter's reaction to the invasion of Afghanistan reflected the depth of his disillusionment with the Soviets. Just days after the Soviet invasion, Carter signed a new presidential finding on covert action to supply lethal weapons to the Mujaheddin, through the Pakistani authorities, for the purpose of harrassing the Soviet occupation forces in Afghanistan. The first arms—mainly .303 Enfield rifles—arrived in Pakistan on January 10, 1980, fourteen days after the Soviet invasion.

The overall characteristics of the so-called Afghan covert-action program are generally well known:

The United States supplied funds, weapons and general supervision. Saudi Arabia matched United States financial contributions, and China's government sold and donated weapons. But the dominant operational role on the front lines belonged to Pakistan's ISI (the Interservices Intelligence Directorate), which insisted on control.¹⁰

Carter gradually increased the level of aid to the insurgents, and Ronald Reagan expanded it considerably. In the mid-1980s, the success of the Mujaheddin, combined with more aggressive tactics by the Soviet forces, set in motion a significant escalation in U.S. involvement, which was authorized in a March 1985 national security decision directive.¹¹

The year 1985 marked a divide in the war: for the first time it appeared possible that the Soviets might be forced to withdraw from Afghanistan. In Washington, the objective changed from "making the Soviets pay" to "making them get out." Congressional interest in the covert-action program continued to increase and, by 1986, the first significant non-Soviet weapons were brought into play, notably the American Stinger, a hand-held, "fire and forget" anti-aircraft missile. This removed the fig leaf of deniability covering the U.S. involvement—that all weapons used by the Mujaheddin were Soviet weapons retrieved from the battlefield. The Stinger became operational in Afghanistan in September 1986 and immediately began to take a toll, especially on Soviet helicopters, which were the key element in the Soviets' stepped-up aggressive tactics against the Mujaheddin.

The level of U.S. aid to the Afghan program is believed to have risen to over \$400 million annually at the height of the program in fiscal years 1987 and 1988. According to the *Washington Post*, the level of U.S. covert-action aid in FY 1989 was \$350 million, and in FY 1990 it dropped to \$300 million. At the beginning of FY 1991, that is, in October 1990, Congress cut the aid by another \$50

¹⁰Steve Coll, "Anatomy of a Victory: CIA's Covert Afghan War," *Washington Post*, July 20, 1992, p. A12.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. A1.

million to \$250 million.¹² Overall U.S. covert-action funding for the war, as of September 1989—that is, nearly ten years after the war began—was estimated at nearly \$2 billion.¹³ This figure is probably on the low side.

Negotiations for settlement of the Afghan War, the so-called Proximity Talks between the Afghan government and Pakistan that took place in Geneva under the auspices of U.N. secretary general Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, slowly began to jell in the face of the strengthened position of the Mujaheddin on the ground. In February 1988, the Soviets announced that they would pull out all their troops by the middle of February 1989. On April 14, 1988, they were guarantors, along with the United States, of an agreement that had the effect of confirming this decision. We now know that the decision to withdraw was taken internally by the Soviets much earlier, at a Politburo meeting on November 13, 1986, chaired by Mikhail Gorbachev. During the meeting, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko uttered the key phrase: "Today our strategic goal is to end the war. . . . [We should] end it in such a way that Afghanistan will be a neutral state."¹⁴

The Soviets held to the timetable for withdrawal, but after the last Soviet soldier left the country on February 15, 1989, they introduced massive amounts of weapons and money to shore up the Afghan Communist regime—a sort of Russian version of the Nixon Doctrine. At the head of this regime was Mohammad Najibullah, the former head of the Afghan secret police (Khad) and likely a long-time KGB agent, who had been installed by the Soviets in place of Babrak Karmal in 1986.

In the period immediately following the Soviet withdrawal, the United States reduced its covert aid to the Mujaheddin. This action coincided with the unsuccessful and costly

Mujaheddin attempt to capture Jalalabad in the spring of 1989. After this semi-hiatus, which lasted until the fall of 1989, covert aid to the Mujaheddin was stepped up again.

By this time, the U.S. government was operating under the March 1985 National Security Decision Directive Number 166, which "augmented" President Carter's earlier finding. This directive not only authorized increased aid to the Mujaheddin, with the goal of forcing a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, it included diplomatic and humanitarian objectives as well, including guaranteeing self-determination for the Afghan people and the safe return of the millions of Afghan refugees to their homeland, goals that the United States had enunciated since the beginning of the negotiations at Geneva in 1982.¹⁵ Those running the Afghan program believed that Najibullah had to be removed from power in order for the Afghans to exercise their right to self-determination. This principle was maintained even as the Mujaheddin became increasingly disunited after the departure of the Soviets and could not have been said to constitute a real national alternative to Najibullah's government.

Progress toward the objective of toppling Najibullah was very slow indeed, much slower than expected, until the abortive coup in Moscow in August 1991. The following month, the Russians and the Americans agreed to cut off aid to both sides in Afghanistan as of the end of the year—this was the so-called agreement in negative symmetry.

It was clear by early 1992 that Najibullah could not last without Russian arms and, even more important, Russian money. The various resistance leaders realigned themselves in hopes of taking power after Najibullah's fall. The Uzbek mercenary leader Abdal Rashid Dostoom, whose forces had gradually become a mainstay of the Najibullah regime, threw in his lot with Ahmed Shah Masood, the Tajik resistance leader known as the "Lion of the Pansher"; while on the other side, a number of officers from the army, particularly Ghilzai

¹²George Lardner, Jr., "Afghan, Cambodia Aid Cut; Conferees' Report Sets Out New Rules for CIA Operations," *Washington Post*, October 24, 1990, p. A7.

¹³Bill McCollum (R-Fla.), "Afghan Endgame: The CIA Has Bungled It," *Washington Post*, September 10, 1989, p. C1.

¹⁴Michael Dobbs, "Dramatic Politburo Meeting Led to End of War," *Washington Post*, November 16, 1992, p. A1.

¹⁵Steve Coll, "Anatomy of a Victory: CIA's Covert Afghanistan War," *Washington Post*, July 19, 1992, p. A24.

Pushtuns from the Khalq faction, went over to the Mujaheddin faction led by the Islamist Pushtun leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. In early 1993, the Shiites, represented in the Wahdat movement, formed an "objective" alliance with Hekmatyar that seemed unlikely to last.

In April 1992, Kabul fell to the opposition forces, composed mainly of Masood's and Dostoom's fighters. There have been three subsequent battles for the city: the first in September 1992, the second in January-February 1993, and the third in May 1993. Following the second round of this inter-Afghan fighting, Pakistan, represented by Hamid Gul, former chief of the Interservices Intelligence Directorate, became active in a mediation effort aimed at bringing the various Mujaheddin groups together.

The nationalist and religious sentiment that had built up against the Soviets quickly evaporated after the last Russian soldier left in February 1989, and ethnic factors once again came to the fore. The Peshawar alliance of the seven resistance parties fell apart. The two main partners in this alliance, both of them Islamist, were the Tajik-based Jamiat of Bur-nahuddin Rabbani and his main commander, Masood, and the Pushtun-based Hezbe-i-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

A tectonic shift of alliances into a more or less north versus south pattern has taken place. The Pushtuns, particularly the Ghilzai, and many military officers from the former Najibullah regime seem to be regrouping around Gulbuddin. On the other side, the Uzbek Dostoom deserted the Najibullah regime in favor of the Tajik Masood, but this is not a firm arrangement. Alliances are very unstable as the factions continue to maneuver, and no one leader has been able to fully control Kabul. The forced reelection in December 1992 of the Tajik political leader Rabbani to the Afghan presidency seems to have worked to his disadvantage for this very reason.

Afghanistan is, in a sense, a mirror of the post-Cold War era. The fall of the Communist regime in Kabul has given rise to general interethnic and intertribal conflicts in the country and, indeed, in the Central Asian

region as a whole. Meanwhile, external actors—Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran—seek to gain influence over Afghanistan.

The Most Significant Conflict

Although the U.S. involvement in the Afghan War has concluded, the debate about the wisdom and the success of U.S. policy continues. Some accuse amateurs in the CIA of letting the infamous Interservices Intelligence Directorate (ISI) of Pakistan handle everything. ISI, the argument goes, gave most of the weaponry to the fundamentalists, who, as was abundantly clear early on, were going to install a fundamentalist and anti-American regime in Kabul at the end of the war. ISI, notoriously corrupt, siphoned off a substantial portion of the weapons and either sold them or kept them for other battles, most notably in Kashmir and the Punjab. The CIA neither monitored the inflow of weapons nor arranged to get weapons into the hands of the good commanders in the field. Meanwhile, the main recipients of the arms—the political parties in Peshawar—were engaged in a brisk traffic in drugs, and Washington overlooked Pakistan's nuclear program because it did not want to antagonize an ally. And finally, the CIA was so unimaginative and so cautious that it was slow to provide the insurgents with non-Soviet (i.e., non-deniable) weapons, thus delaying for months, if not years, the departure of the Soviets. Although there is some truth to all of these accusations, in the final analysis, the policy worked.

There are several points that should be made about the unique nature of the Afghan War—which was the most significant of the regional conflicts that occurred in the 1980s. First, and foremost, Soviet troops were involved, not as a protecting force but as an invading and occupying power. This was what made the Afghan War, in Steve Coll's words, "a final reckoning of the Cold War." All the other regional conflicts of the 1980s—during which the Soviet empire gradually eroded as other countries on the margins of the empire, from Poland to Central Asia, took inspiration from the Afghan experience—were proxy wars on both sides.

Second, on the American side, it was the CIA's war. There was no one else involved, except for some of the trainers, who were co-opted Special Forces officers. There were no American military forces involved and no American soldiers killed. There were, from time to time, unofficial requests by officers at the Pentagon that the American military be allowed to participate directly, prompting one CIA officer to say, "The strategic lesson of the Afghan War is don't go there." The number of CIA operatives was very small; no more than a hundred people were involved in the Afghan effort. Slightly less than half of them worked at CIA headquarters; the remainder were in the field in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Third, the Afghans themselves were very used to fighting—as they had proven in the nineteenth century against another foreign occupier, the British, in the course of two wars.

Fourth, as I noted above, the Soviets were going against the tide of regional history—the rise of Islamist sentiment among the Afghan elites.

Fifth, there was Pakistan. As a senior CIA operations officer recently noted, "There are three significant routes into landlocked Afghanistan: through the Soviet Union, through Iran, and through Pakistan. You take your pick."¹⁶ Pakistan ineluctably became the base area for the Afghan resistance. The Pakistani border constituted a sort of psychological Yalu River, behind which the resistance could regroup in a relatively safe haven, and in the midst of which was found a sympathetic population, in the Pushtun-dominated Northwest Frontier Province.

Sixth, the United States had a history of cooperation with Pakistan in the military and intelligence fields that had largely survived the adverse political winds of the bilateral relationship. ISI—which essentially ran the Afghan War—was, as a senior CIA operations officer said recently, the most efficient, and the least corrupt, organization in Pakistan,¹⁷ a statement that probably raises more questions

than it answers, especially in the light of the "devil's advocate" arguments I have presented above. But it is nonetheless true. Incidentally, the chief of ISI through much of the war and the great implementer of the Afghan program, General Akhtar Abdal Rahman Khan, was himself of Pushtun origin.

And then there was Mohammed Zia ul-Haq.

I was privy to what I would call Zia's "template speech" to William Casey, then director of the CIA, in the bungalow in the Rawalpindi Cantonment where Zia kept his residence as army chief of staff. This was the first meeting between Casey and Zia and it took place, I believe, in April 1981. Casey's trips were an annual exercise. They occurred in the spring, usually in April—with Casey in the role of wheeler-dealer to the world. As the CIA division chief for the area, I went along on all of them. There were two obligatory visits: to see the Saudi king and to see Zia. It was vital to insure that both were still interested in and supportive of the Afghan program. (I remember writing an imaginary note to Casey, dated May 2, 1982: "Well, you've had your Canossa. But it succeeded very well.") With Zia, it was most particularly a question of his continuing resolve to attack the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. I don't think any of us, especially the Soviets, could have predicted Zia's remarkable steadfastness on this issue.

At their first meeting, Zia more than impressed Casey, who came away muttering how the American press had distorted the image of the man. (Casey was struck in particular by the affection and patience Zia showed toward his handicapped daughter, who kept wandering into the living room.) Zia had a red template, a rough triangle, that he placed on a large area map spread out on his coffee table. The template covered the southern third of Afghanistan, and its tip was placed on the point where the Afghan border meets that of Iran and the province of Baluchistan. The tip was only three hundred and fifty miles from the Indian Ocean—graphic testimony to Zia's reading of Soviet aims.

Zia was a believer. He was also a cal-

¹⁶Interview with the author.

¹⁷Interview with the author.

culating infighter from a modest family based in what is now India, and in this way he differed from the landed aristocracy that constitute most of Pakistan's elite. Zia covered his actions with a moral gloss that was highly convincing to Western audiences. "He gave me his word as a military officer!" exclaimed one Western interlocutor after having returned from a meeting with Zia convinced that the latter would not manufacture a nuclear weapon. All this in no way detracts from Zia's central role in the Afghan War. Without Zia, there would have been no Afghan War, and no Afghan victory.

Pakistan is a two-speed society. There is a cleavage between the elites and the masses that is quite exceptional. That the Afghan program was pulled off in spite of a latent anti-Americanism among a vast majority of Pakistanis is testimony to the power of Zia and the military elites. Ironically, the effect of the reign of Zia's predecessor, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, whom Zia caused to be put to death, was to radicalize the Pakistani masses and condition them to anti-American attitudes.

Zia had a figure of speech that he frequently used, and which is cited in General Mohammad Yousaf's book about the Afghan War, *The Bear Trap*. Zia was fond of saying, "We must keep the pot boiling at a certain temperature. We must not allow it to boil over." The metaphor, of course, concerned the arms program, which could not be so provocative, or so blatant, as to invite a major Soviet reaction against Pakistan. We took this admonition seriously, in part because we were not too sure of Zia's control over the situation and, indeed, the air attacks across the Pakistani border and the assassinations carried out in Pakistan by the Afghan secret police, the Khad, were very worrisome to us.

But it gradually became apparent that our concerns about Zia's stability were exaggerated. It has also become clear that our concerns about a Soviet intervention in Pakistan were also exaggerated. As is so often the case, this was the result of intelligent people possessing imperfect information. At the Politburo meeting of November 13, 1986, Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, the armed forces chief of

staff, declared, "We have deployed fifty thousand Soviet soldiers to seal the border [between Afghanistan and Pakistan], but they are unable to close all channels through which arms are being smuggled across the border." Even though Akhromeyev added that this inability was due in part to the fact that "not everything was done that could have been done," it seems clear from the recently published documentation that the political leadership in Moscow never intended to extend the war into Pakistan.¹⁸

America's Responsibility

What were the lessons of Afghanistan, both for the Russians and for the Americans? To begin with, it is useful to recall a statement attributed to the late General Douglas MacArthur on the fall of China: "For the first time in our relations with Asia, we have endangered the paramount interests of the United States by confusing them with an internal purification problem in Asia."¹⁹ MacArthur might have said the same thing of himself, when he later pushed the forward policy in North Korea. The Johnson administration might have said the same thing of itself with respect to Vietnam.

It is very difficult, however, for a superpower to show restraint to the point of appearing to retreat. In the peaceful but dangerous competition between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War, the perception was that the side that did not move forward would decline. I can remember very well the decade of the 1970s, which I spent almost entirely in the field, and the frustration we felt out there as we saw the Soviets advancing in one country after another with seeming impunity, especially after the fall of Vietnam.

What took place in Afghanistan after 1979 was the last gasp of the Soviet empire as it overextended itself. It stumbled into an Afghan civil war more out of ideological inertia than real conviction, feeling compelled to invoke the Brezhnev Doctrine as the Kabul

¹⁸ Dobbs, "Dramatic Politburo Meeting," p. A16.

¹⁹ William Manchester, *American Caesar* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), p. 536.

government was losing control of the country. The Soviets believed that they could not let a Communist government fall, especially one with a border contiguous to the Soviet Union. The Afghan Communist party, however, had not grown from the same seeds as those Communist parties that had sprouted in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, and it was riven by ethnic and tribal factionalism. The Afghan Communists, like many of their Third World brethren, saw communism essentially as an effective way of gaining power and holding on to it.

Prisoners of their own expansionist doctrine, the Soviets deployed elite troops to Afghanistan with sophisticated weapons and aircraft and built up a major base in Shindand in southwestern Afghanistan that had nothing to do with maintaining internal security. Rather, their actions seemed to have a strategic objective—establishing an “unsinkable aircraft carrier,” as the French Afghan expert Olivier Roy called it—thereby alarming the West and closing out détente definitively.²⁰ The undoing of this disastrous decision took years. As the former Soviet foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, who headed a special Politburo commission on Afghanistan that was set up in November 1986, said in an interview in 1992, “The decision to leave Afghanistan was the first and most difficult step. Everything else flowed from that.”²¹

Elsewhere, I have referred to Afghanistan as the Soviet Union’s “one-quarter Vietnam,” in the sense that there were fifteen thousand Soviets killed in Afghanistan, compared to fifty-eight thousand Americans in Vietnam.²² By conservative estimates, the Soviets and their Afghan clients lost more than a thousand aircraft during the war, as well as several thousand trucks, artillery pieces, and tanks. Shevardnadze said in July 1990 that the war had cost the Soviet Union 60 billion rubles or about \$96 billion.

It is difficult for Americans to accept

that much of what happened to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan mirrors what happened to the United States in Vietnam, where the superpower underestimated a resolute, indigenous foe on the one hand, and grossly miscalculated the capability of its client on the other. The difference, of course, was that American society could survive and shake off its terrible error, which was of a magnitude considerably greater than the Soviets’ in Afghanistan, whereas Soviet society, which was flawed from within, could not survive for long after the retreat from Afghanistan. Initially, the orderliness of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the surprising staying power of Najibullah seemed to mitigate the severity of the Soviet defeat. But the failed coup of August 1991 in Moscow pulled the Soviet empire down and with it what was left of the Soviet position in Afghanistan.

As for the United States, we can say that, just as our misreading of Soviet intentions led the CIA to be extremely cautious about introducing other than “battlefield credible” (i.e., Soviet) weaponry to the Mujaheddin, so our overestimation of the Soviet regime’s power led us to support the Mujaheddin after the Soviets’ departure in February 1989. When the Najibullah government did not fall, as had been almost universally predicted, it seemed that victory had been snatched from the United States at the eleventh hour: not only were the Mujaheddin unable to overthrow Najibullah, but the dominant fundamentalist strain in the movement—an estimated 85 percent of the Mujaheddin—seemed to be turning increasingly against the United States. This unsatisfactory ending was rectified, to a degree, by the failed coup in Moscow in August 1991.

But here it is important to recognize what constituted victory in Afghanistan, or what should have constituted victory. We had already had significant success in getting Soviet troops out of Afghanistan. Should the United States then have stopped arming the Mujaheddin, that is, at the moment the last Soviet soldier left the country? This is the argument I made two and a half years ago:

²⁰ *The Lessons of the Soviet-Afghan War*, Adelphi Papers No. 259, pp. 13–14.

²² Dobbs, “Dramatic Politburo Meeting,” p. A16.

²³ “Shawl of Lead: From Holy War to Civil War in Afghanistan,” *Conflict* 10 (Fall 1990), p. 200.

Was it not sufficient to confound the Brezhnev Doctrine, to cause the Soviet troops to withdraw? The Soviets had “come to the aid of a sisterly Communist state” and were now pulling out. The United States had more or less tolerated the Afghan Communist government from its advent in April 1978. Was it necessary, or advisable, in February 1989 to insist on what was a sort of psychological crossing of the 38th Parallel? Why did the United States have to lock itself into a policy of continuing aid to the Mujaheddin until Najibullah had left the scene? Was this decision, seemingly militarily feasible at the time, actually politically blind in the absence of a credible alternative to the Kabul Government?²³

The argument made at the time was that we had a moral duty to arm the Mujaheddin, especially given the fact that the Soviets continued to supply Najibullah after the departure of their troops. Moreover, Afghanistan was a matter of some importance to our principal allies involved in the conflict—Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

The deeper issue here is the American need to be responsible for, and at the center of, everything that happens in the world. This desire to be present, and to have our presence felt everywhere, is in some respects a reflection of a pervasive and historical American messianism, combined with a half-century of awareness of the power that we can bring to bear in almost any situation. In another respect, it is atonement for the “sin” of American isolationism of the 1930s, which, if it had persisted, might have led to the death of Western and, indeed, American, democracy. In still another respect, it is a reflection of the Cold War syndrome—which was, as I noted earlier, the belief that the side that did not move forward was the side that would decline.

It is time, in my view, for the United States to shake free of such Cold War thinking. Before it is too late, we must resist our messianic impulses, the urge to bring our power to bear everywhere. We should accus-

tom ourselves, and others, to the idea that there are large parts of the planet over which, to put the words of sociologist Claudio Véliz in context, “[the United States] has no or only tenuous control, an intimation that is particularly annoying to some members of the U.S. intelligentsia unaccustomed to the rigors of indifference and generally far happier when hated than when ignored.”²⁴

When Washington tried to implement the peaceful transition to a postwar government in Afghanistan through the good offices of a specially appointed ambassador, Peter Tomsen, its effort came to naught. The United States was only a partner in time in Afghanistan. When its moment passed with the departure of the Soviet troops, the United States was no more able to put together a polity in the ghost town that Kabul had become than it can in Dushanbe or, alas, in Mogadishu. Nor should it try. For not only will widespread interventionism, free from the trammels of the Cold War, lead to a dangerous overextension of American forces and resources, it will draw upon us more hatreds and jealousies. In most cases, we would be well advised to maintain a prudent distance, in the words of Douglas MacArthur, from the “internal purification problems” of others. ●

²³ Ibid., p. 198.

²⁴ “The Wilder Shores of Politics,” *International Journal* 37 (Winter 1981–82), p. 7.