Afghanistan: Soviet Control Before and After the Invasion

Sarah Spalding
Lake Forest College

Follow this and additional works at: https://publications.lakeforest.edu/allcollege_writing_contest

Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation
https://publications.lakeforest.edu/allcollege_writing_contest/30

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Lake Forest College Publications. It has been accepted for inclusion in All-College Writing Contest by an authorized administrator of Lake Forest College Publications. For more information, please contact levinson@lakeforest.edu.
On December 27, 1979, the Soviet Union dealt the final blow to an already flagging detente with the United States. In what was seen by the then American President Carter and much of the international community as the most serious threat to world peace since World War II, Soviet troops began their assault on Afghanistan and its people. Although the Soviet Union has a history of invading other countries, and in fact invaded Afghanistan on a much smaller scale three times before 1979—in 1925, 1929 and 1930—it was its first attack on a Third World country since 1946.

Nearly five years after the Soviet invasion, Afghanistan is still occupied by its northern neighbor, and prospects for a withdrawal of troops in the near future are indeed not promising. In order to understand the invasion, and the continuing occupation, of Afghanistan it is necessary to understand the Afghan people and the evolving relationship between the two countries since the mid-forties.

After World War II, the United States gave small amounts of aid to Afghanistan but recognized that, given its proximity to the Soviet Union, it was in the Soviet sphere of influence. Although the U.S. had some interest in maintaining Afghanistan's independence, the American government saw the country as of little importance. Consequently, when Afghanistan requested aid in the 1950's from the U.S., Washington not only refused, but instead armed Pakistan, which at the time was Afghanistan's enemy, and a friend to the U.S. Naturally, the Soviet Union was quick to help out, thus considerably increasing its influence and fostering Afghanistan's dependence on it.

King Mohammad Zahir ruled over Afghanistan from 1933 to 1973. However, Prince Mohammed Daoud, the king's prime minister and cousin, was a more dominant figure in the government from 1953 to 1963. Though Daoud was ousted in 1963, he came back a decade later to establish the Republic of Afghanistan, of which he later became president and prime minister.

While Daoud had forged close ties with the Soviet Union when he was prime minister under the king, by 1975 he began moving increasingly toward greater independence from the USSR. Given the fact that paranoia has long been a characteristic of the Soviets' outlook on the world, "what to Daoud may have
been merely an attempt to become non-aligned may have appeared to the Soviets as a shift to the American-Iranian-Pakistani camp” (T. Hammond 41).

The communist party that had formed in Afghanistan in 1965, the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), had two main factions until 1977. They were Khalq, whose leader was Nur Mohammed Taraki, and Parcham, whose leader was Babrak Karmal. Both factions had friendly relations with Moscow. More than anything else, opposition between the two factions resulted from the hatred Taraki and Babrak had for each other, although ideological factors were involved as well. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the reunification of the factions in 1977 took place without sizable pressure from the Soviet Union (Hammond 49). Further, it would appear that the reconciliation occurred in preparation for the communist coup that would put Taraki into power. (The hypothesis that the USSR influenced reunification is by no means completely accepted. Bhabani Sen Gupta writes, “The Soviets, all available evidence suggests, had nothing to do with the April revolution in Afghanistan” (84).

In addition to alienating the USSR with his increasing independence of Moscow, Daoud had aroused opposition domestically as well. He was seen as ineffective and bumbling, and as discontent grew among the Afghans, Daoud adopted severe methods of repression, these serving only to increase resistance to him (Eliot 83-4). This strengthened communist determination in the Soviet Union and Afghanistan to oust Daoud and set up a communist regime.

The murder of Mir Akbar Khyber (a well-known Parcham ideologue) on April 17, 1978, and the subsequent funeral procession of some ten-to fifteen thousand marchers staged by the PDPA set plans into motion. Though the coup probably had not been planned for so early a date, Daoud’s arrest of leading leftists prompted the takeover (Arnold 66).

Ten days after Khyber’s death, Afghan troops took over Kabul where they met with little resistance except at the Presidential Palace. Even the Presidential Guard, however, had to surrender after twenty-four hours. Daoud was assassinated, and the Republic of Afghanistan became the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan two days later.

While remaining secretary-general of the PDPA, Taraki became president and prime minister of the new regime and Amin and Babrak Karmal were given important positions in the Cabinet and the Revolutionary Council. From the very start of their reign, the new leaders repeatedly claimed to be non-aligned and non-communist, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. For example, the constitution of the PDPA states that the party’s ideology is Marxist-Leninist and advocates “expanding and strengthening Afghan/Soviet friendly relations and such relations between Afghanistan and the socialist fraternity...” (Constitution of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, as quoted in Hammond, 232).
Perhaps Taraki claims to be non-aligned in the hope that Afghanistan would continue to receive aid from the United States. Washington did in fact continue giving aid after the coup. Assistance was severely curtailed, however, after U.S. Ambassador Adolph Dubs was killed in February, 1979, after having been held hostage by opponents of the regime. Flagrantly disregarding concern for Dub's life, Afghan police opened fire, killing the U.S. Ambassador and two captors. Foreign Minister Amin made no apologies for what had happened, an act fueling Washington's anger over the incident. Nevertheless, some small amounts of aid were still sent to Kabul (Hammond 64-5).

The rule of the communists may be characterized as inept and inhumane. The Taraki/Amin regime attempted to impose socialist reforms on a very traditional, deeply religious people (the population is nearly 100% Muslim), that could not accept the proposed changes, much less in the short amount of time they were expected to do so. In addition to the obstacle of an obvious lack of support, the regime had purged nearly all former administrators and replaced them with PDPA members with little experience. Additional factors complicated the implementation of the reforms. "As a country known for its high mountain ranges... its vast ethnic and linguistic diversities, and its still insurmountable communications hurdles, Afghanistan has been least amenable to effective central control..." (Agwani 9). Add to all this the many incidents of torture and arrest without specific charges, and it was inevitable that the Afghan people would revolt.

Within just a few months of the communist takeover, various rebel uprisings cropped up in many provinces. In March 1979, freedom fighters actually took over the cities of Nuristan and Herat. While communist officials attempted to quiet the mujaheddin (holy warriers), their efforts were met with increased resistance. Clearly, the Afghan army was not able to deal effectively with the situation, prompting the Soviet Union to increase its guidance and aid to the communists. Moscow was certainly not pleased with the Taraki/Amin regime's failure to establish firm communist control in Afghanistan.

Though Taraki was President, Amin was largely responsible for introducing the policies that incited rebellion. The Soviets apparently recognized this and desired his downfall. In September 1979, Taraki met with Brezhnev in Moscow and Amin's demise presumably was discussed. Amin evidently learned of Taraki's plan; on the day after Taraki's return to Kabul, Amin fired three cabinet members crucial to the President's support. This made Taraki's plans almost impossible to carry out. Yet, he asked Amin to come to the Presidential Palace. Shooting broke out on Amin's arrival, but he managed narrowly to escape with his life and return later to arrest Taraki and assume the presidency. Afghanistan's first communist president was not heard from again.
The Soviet Union was undoubtedly unhappy with this ironic turn of events, although Amin received formal congratulations from Brezhnev on September 19th. “The decision to intervene was taken probably in September after Amin had overthrown and killed Taraki...and still totally failed to contain the insurgency which controlled at least one half of Afghanistan’s 28 provinces” (Sen Gupta 85). Indeed, Amin’s problem with the Afghan freedom fighters was ever-present, despite his feeble attempts to portray himself as sympathetic to Muslim traditions and beliefs. The Afghans were not to be so easily convinced in light of his previous stands, and continued their opposition. The Soviet Union apparently attempted to do away with Amin when they sent Lieutenant General Paputin to Kabul. Initially, he was trying to persuade Amin to invite Soviet troops to intervene in Afghanistan. Amin refused, and it is possible that Paputin tried to kill him in a shooting incident in Amin’s palace in December (Hammond 98). At this point the Soviet Union presumably felt that a massive invasion was the only possible option.

By the end of November, United States intelligence had noted Soviet military activists close to the Afghanistan border, but their objectives could not be determined. Within a relatively short time, however, there could be no mistaking Moscow’s intentions. It was an impressive operation. The central communications complex was taken over. Batteries were removed from Afghan tanks to make certain that there would be no resistance. On December 27, leading Afghan dignitaries were invited to a reception at which they were all arrested. For days troops had crossed the border: by December 26, thousands of troops had arrived (Arnold 95). The following night Soviet troops descended on Darulaman Palace, Amin’s home. After considerable resistance, Amin was shot and killed.

As is the case with most actions by the Soviet Union, there is much speculation and debate about the USSR’s reasons for its invasion. Though it is impossible to know exactly what their considerations were and how they weighed the importance of each, one can theorize about possible motives. One such motive is basically ideological in nature: the Brezhnev Doctrine. It puts forth the view that, once a country becomes communist, it must remain that way, and the Soviet Union must do anything possible to assure its continuity in the event of a threat to the regime. Moscow obviously perceived the possibility of Amin’s overthrow by the increasingly effective freedom fighters, and saw the need for intervention.

A related reason for the invasion may be the Soviet Union’s desire to surround itself with subservient communist regimes. This defensive stance is somewhat understandable, considering previous invasions of the USSR by hostile neighbors. At the same time, it is not an acceptable reason for invasion. As Thomas Hammond points out, this argument would be “...the equivalent of saying that any country has the right to attack its neighbors in order to make itself more
secure” (134). As has already been noted, the USSR has had a history of invading other countries as well as being a victim of others’ invasions. Thus the 1979 invasion may be seen as just another in a series by an expansionist and imperialistic country.

Certain geopolitical considerations are thought to have been contributing factors in the USSR’s action in 1979. Russia’s supposed drive for warm water ports is one consideration. According to this theory, championed by Palmerston, Russia invaded Afghanistan in order to get closer to the Indian Ocean. This may be largely seen as a distortion by the West of the 1940 negotiations between Molotov and Ribbentrop. The invasion seen as a move toward the Gulf and its oil is a more serious possibility and threat to the United States. Because Soviet fighter-bombers are so close to the Strait of Hormuz, the USSR could conceivably blackmail the Gulf-oil-dependent West. However, this view “... overviews the several alternative and attractive possibilities which the Soviet Union has of enhancing its oil supplies without... antagonizing the United States... which would inevitably lead to a major confrontation” (Darmodaran 22).

The fact that detente was already waning by December 1979 unquestionably made the decision to invade easier for the Soviet Union since it probably felt it did not have that much to lose. While the USSR had done its share in weakening the detente, Moscow can accuse the U.S. of doing the same. In the U.S.’s growing involvement in Vietnam some twenty years earlier, one may find another reason for Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. Although there are many differences between the two situations, they may be likened to each other in that involvement in both cases grew gradually. In both cases, when it appeared that superpower aid to a smaller country was not producing the desired effect, and native armies were not strong enough, the decision to intervene militarily came about. Thus, the Soviet Union got sucked into its decision because of its increasing involvement in Afghanistan’s affairs.

Finally, although the Soviets surely realized that their action would arouse criticism from countries all over the world, they almost certainly did not anticipate the overwhelmingly negative response they received. In particular, the Soviets did not expect the United States to react as strongly as it did. There were several reasons for this. First of all, the Iranian hostage crisis so totally gripped U.S. attention that perhaps the Soviets felt attention to their intervention in Afghanistan would be diminished by comparison. Reaction to the USSR’s action would be lessened further, the Soviets reasoned, if the United States decided to intervene in Iran. The Soviet Union was also aware that many people in the United States were still recovering from the Vietnam experience. Few Americans seemed to support America’s involving itself in the fight against communism, thus leading Moscow to assume that the U.S. would not try to stop
the USSR militarily. In addition, Moscow saw President Carter as rather weak and indecisive. Perhaps the strongest basis for the USSR’s anticipation of a weak U.S. response was the fact that recent events in Afghanistan had elicited little reaction in Washington. Aid still found its way to Afghanistan after the communist coup and after the murder of U.S. Ambassador Dubs. The message seemed to be one suggesting very limited interest in Afghan affairs; the Soviet Union indeed had little warning of what was to come.

President Carter, furious over the Soviet intervention, responded immediately with strong verbal condemnation and sanctions against the USSR. The Carter Doctrine, set forth in a State of the Union address on January 23, 1980, sought to contain Soviet expansionism in the 1980’s. Concern over the geostrategic position the Soviet troops had assumed with respect to the Persian Gulf led to Carter’s asserting that the United States would, if necessary, use military force to repel a bid to gain control of the Gulf region (Sen Gupta 8). In addition, the SALT II treaty was withdrawn from consideration by the Senate, grain shipments to the Soviet Union were severely cut back, Soviet fishing in U.S. waters was curtailed, export of high technology was stopped, the Moscow Olympics were boycotted and a new emphasis was placed on strengthening our military. There were numerous other steps taken to punish the Soviets as well (Hammond 123-24).

If Moscow was unprepared for American reaction against the invasion, the impressive determination of the Afghan people to resist Soviet domination must have come as a surprise as well. The Afghan freedom fighters put up massive resistance in 1979, and have sustained that effort for nearly five years. Despite Babrak’s attempt to Sovietize Afghanistan by relinquishing important decision-making to the Soviets and patterning Afghan institutions after those in the USSR, Afghan people have united to form a national liberation movement. Though the “rebel groups are divided along linguistic, cultural, tribal, ideological, and political lines...all have the common objective of ridding their country of Soviet influence (Hammond 157).

These mujaheddin are fighting a jihad (holy war) against the atheistic Soviets. They are extremely resourceful, attacking enemy troops in any way they can. Many of their guns are obtained from deserting Soviet and Afghan soldiers, others are provided by the United States, China, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other countries. Weapons, nonetheless, are in short supply, and the mujaheddin are often powerless against superior Soviet arms. Afghan villages have been bombed, crops destroyed by fire, water sources have been contaminated. Chemical warfare has been used extensively by the Soviets. “The number of Afghans actually killed by chemical attacks, said the State Department, might be ...more than 6,000” (Hammond 162). Despite all this, the resistance has only grown and become more
determined and better organized. “The men...are fighting not only for their home but also for their companions throughout their once faction-ridden homeland. The Soviets, it seems, have succeeded only in uniting the resistance they had hoped to shatter” (Schultheis 27).

The continuing Soviet occupation in Afghanistan has assumed the strange equality of a stalemate that the Soviets appear to accept willingly. Despite the optimism that some feel about a Soviet withdrawal of troops, the probability of this coming about is not very high. Simply put, “Russia cannot defeat the tribesmen, yet it cannot withdraw without losing all that it has fought for” (U.S. News & World Report, 10). Withdrawal would mean an ideological retreat and would weaken the USSR’s strong, tough image. The Soviets would also lose the strategic position they now have with respect to the Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and border countries.

For the same reasons, the chances of Afghanistan becoming neutral and non-aligned as it was before the 1978 coup seem slim at best. Jagat Mehta has proposed that the Soviets now see that the invasion was a mistake and that Afghanistan should become neutral once again (J. Mehta 139-53).

At the same time, however, Moscow has lost large amounts of money and lives in an effort to control the country. This would appear to have all been for nothing if Afghan neutrality were to be the solution. Even if the Soviet Union could accept what they would view as a tremendous loss of face, the idea of Afghanistan becoming truly neutral after what they have suffered at the hands of Moscow is far-fetched.

While it does not seem likely that Soviet troops will withdraw, Moscow probably will not want to send more troops in, either. Considering the sad state of the Soviet economy and its labor shortages, the USSR cannot afford to deploy additional manpower. Perhaps the Soviets have also learned something from the American involvement in Vietnam.

It seems that, for the time being, the Soviet Union will continue to occupy and force itself upon Afghanistan, while the Afghan people will continue to fight back. But while it is true that the resourceful freedom fighters have surprised the world with their determination, one has to wonder how long they can continue their crusade, given their shortage of weapons and the overall military superiority of the Soviet Union. As Hammond puts it, “The people of Eastern Europe...are anticommunist and anti-Soviet, but this has not prevented the communist regimes...with Soviet support, from maintaining themselves...Afghans will probably suffer the same fate” (Hammond 195).

Indeed, the Afghans will continue to suffer. One Afghan refugee in Pakistan, one in the more than four million who have fled to Pakistan and Iran because the Soviets have destroyed their villages, speaks for his displaced countrymen:
I don’t know what will happen to the mujaheddin in Afghanistan. The Russians have no concept of human life... The people who lived in the valley were very poor. But they were happy with their families, their children. Now their life is no more, it has been crushed, destroyed by the Soviet armies. For what? (Frumkin 61)

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Shrivasta, B.K. “The United States and Recent Developments in Afghanistan.” In Misra.