INTRODUCTION

The USSR's strategy in Afghanistan almost succeeded. Following the withdrawal of their troops in February 1989, Soviet officials sought a negotiated settlement that would have provided their local allies with a significant chance to remain in power yet would have reduced the USSR's economic and diplomatic costs. By withdrawing its forces, Moscow purposefully transformed a war of liberation against an occupying power into a confused civil conflict between a seemingly flexible government and an increasingly divided opposition. The insurgents' foreign backers, disappointed by their poor military performance, wavered in their support. Only the unexpected collapse of the Soviet central government undermined Moscow's endgame in Afghanistan.

THE INCOMPLETE GENEVA ACCORDS

On 15 April 1988, in Geneva, Switzerland, various parties to the Afghan conflict signed four pacts: a Bilateral Agreement Between the Republic of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on the Principles of Mutual Relations, in particular on Non-Interference and Non-Intervention; a Declaration on International Guarantees Between the United States and the Soviet Union; a Bilateral Agreement Between the Republic of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on the Voluntary Return of Refugees; and, an Agreement on the Interrelationships for the Settlement of the Situation relating to Afghanistan, also signed by the Afghan and Pakistani governments. As part of this set of accords, Soviet officials consented to remove their military units from Afghanistan by 15 February 1989.

The Geneva accords were incomplete in several respects, and these gaps ensured fighting would continue. First, before the treaty signing Soviet officials had rejected an American proposal that both superpowers terminate their military assistance to their Afghan allies after the Red Army's withdrawal. Unable to obtain an agreement on such "negative symmetry," the US administration insisted on its right to arm the resistance as long as the USSR provided weapons to Kabul. Although Soviet officials never explicitly agreed to such "positive symmetry," they signed the accords fully cognizant of the American position. Not only had US officials previously explained their views to their Soviet counterparts, but the State Department also had submitted an official statement to the UN Secretary-General which asserted that "the U.S. retains the right, consistent with its obligations as guarantor, to provide military assistance to parties in Afghanistan." Second, none of the various resistance groups (commonly referred to as the mujaheddin) had participated directly in the negotiations, and many opposition leaders expressed open hostility to the resulting accords. Third, both the American and Pakistani
governments previously had dropped their demands for the establishment of an interim Afghan government before the Soviet troop withdrawal. Instead, they merely agreed that Diego Cordovez would continue his UN-sponsored mediation efforts. The failure of the accords to specify the nature of Afghanistan’s future government, combined with Cordovez’ inability to make much progress in his diplomatic rounds, meant that the Afghan disputants sought to resolve this question by force of arms.

It is of course questionable whether the peace agreement could have been any better from the West’s point of view. Gorbachev had refused to involve the USSR in attempts to alter the composition of the Kabul government, which he maintained on 9 February 1988 was “a purely internal Afghan issue.” He added that, “When it is hinted to us that the Soviet Union should take part in talks on the issue of a coalition government, or even talk to third countries, our answer is firm and clear: it is none of our business. Or yours, for that matter.” In addition, Soviet officials repeatedly had indicated their intention to withdraw their troops even without an international agreement, so fighting would have continued in any case unless the resistance or President Najibullah’s Kabul government had changed their policies.

Before leaving, the Red Army had turned over large quantities of military supplies to the Afghan government, fulfilling Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze’s vow to the Kabul government that the USSR would “not leave it in need.” Soviet military forces also stepped up their attacks against the guerrillas using advanced weaponry which they had failed to employ previously in Afghanistan, including long-range Scud missiles, Mig-27 airplanes, and Backfire bombers. Even after the departure of their forces, Soviet advisers continued to train the Afghan military. Soviet and Afghan officials concluded that if they could prevent a quick guerrilla victory, their fortunes would steadily improve. An Afghan government official correctly observed that, “Najibullah wins by not losing, and the mujaheddin lose by not winning.”

THE UNEXPECTED MILITARY STALEMATE

After the Soviet withdrawal, Afghan government troops proved unexpectedly successful at attaining their minimum objective of retaining control of the cities. The insurgents, so skilled at guerrilla warfare, were unable to defeat government forces in large-scale conventional warfare such as that surrounding the city of Jalalabad in the spring of 1989. With a few minor exceptions, such as the defection of the garrison at Tarin Kot in October 1990 and the seizure of Khost in March 1991, they sought in vain to force the surrender or desertion of major government positions through sieges and rocket attacks. Their inability to capture a major city prevented them from moving their Pakistani-based interim government, established in February 1989, to Afghanistan. Such a transfer would have assisted the government’s quest to gain official recognition from such countries as the United States. The insurgents’ failure to attain decisive military victories both alarmed their external backers and improved the government forces’ morale. Yet, despite their air superiority, the latter felt compelled to abandon much of the countryside to the various guerrilla groups.
The resistance organizations' inability to resolve their political and religious differences hampered their operations. Not only did divisions widen between the Iranian-based Alliance of Eight and the Alliance of Seven operating from Pakistan, with the Seven's provisional government in Peshawar refusing to join with the Shiite groups allied to Iran, but even the Pakistani-based Sunni groups disagreed on such fundamental issues as the structure of the future government and the role of religion in Afghan politics. Field reports indicated that guerrilla forces persistently failed to coordinate their operations and, more seriously, ambushed and assassinated one another's members. Frequent endeavors to form joint councils or other lasting alliances consistently failed. The insurgents confronted a collective action problem. Although it was in their common interest to depose the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), each faction preferred that its rivals bore the brunt of accomplishing this debilitating task. Guerrilla commanders also regularly ignored instructions from their nominal political leadership in Peshawar. These divisions within the resistance strengthened the government's hand. A leading guerrilla commander remarked that, "Najibullah is not surviving because he is strong, because people like him, or because people are willing to fight and die for him. . . . It's only because there is no political alternative."

Although the Kabul government also suffered from factionalism, Najibullah succeeded, particularly after an unsuccessful coup attempt in early March 1990, in removing important officials in the PDPA opposed to his moderate line. The government also reached local agreements (mostly truces) with many guerrilla commanders, thus further dividing the resistance. In late November 1990 Najibullah even held direct exploratory talks in Geneva with unidentified moderate resistance leaders — as well as representatives of the former Afghan King, Zahir Shah — in an obvious effort to further exploit fissures within the opposition. The President observed after the meeting that, "Such talks will continue, and I am satisfied with those I had."

**IMPROVEMENT IN THE USSR'S REGIONAL POSITION**

Moscow's diplomatic position in the region strengthened significantly after the Red Army's withdrawal. For example, even before the pull-out's completion, Indian officials had expressed their support for the USSR's view that only a coalition government, not force, could resolve the Afghan conflict. Alarmed by the prospects of a pro-Pakistani government in Kabul, in June 1988 former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi openly indicated his preference for a continuation of the PDPA regime rather than the rule of "the sort of fanatic fundamentalists who are the alternatives." After the completion of the Soviet military withdrawal, Indian officials strengthened their relations with the Kabul government. According to one regional expert, "They went out of their way to befriend Afghan President Najibullah in early 1989, at a time when the Soviets seemed ready to write him off." They also repeatedly criticized Pakistan and the United States for providing military assistance to the Afghan guerrillas.

Although they continued to aid various resistance groups, in part to counterbalance the influence of Saudi Arabia, Iranian officials moved towards
the USSR's viewpoint on the Afghan question shortly after the Soviet troops withdrew. According to Soviet sources, the Iranians expressed support for a nonaligned Afghan government which included elements of the PDPA.16 A Western analyst maintains that when they met in Moscow in June 1989, Gorbachev and Iranian leader Ali Akbar Rafsanjani "made an informal deal to ensure territorial stability in Central Asia."17 Editorials in the government-controlled Tehran Times subsequently praised Najibullah and suggested direct talks between Iran and the Afghan government.18 Najibullah remarked in November 1990 that Iran's policy had seen a "very positive change toward a political solution."19 The Iranian government's position accorded with its desire to improve relations with the USSR, reduce American influence in the area, and constrain resistance groups supported by Saudi Arabia.20

The USSR's relations with Pakistan, the resistance's strongest regional supporter, also improved. Realizing the centrality of Pakistan's support for the insurgents, Moscow continued to provide the country with significant economic assistance despite criticizing its government's policy towards Afghanistan.21 The Soviet government's relatively benign policy, combined with the guerrillas' military failures, resulted in a hesitant but noticeable moderation in Pakistan's policies towards Afghanistan. The head of the Pakistani army said in September 1989 that the resistance should negotiate with the PDPA if Najibullah resigned.22 Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif warned in April 1991 that the reduction in Western assistance to Pakistan compelled his government to reevaluate its regional policies.23 At approximately the same time senior intelligence officials from Pakistan met in Geneva with their Afghan counterparts to discuss a possible settlement.24 The Pakistani government subsequently endorsed a five-point peace plan proposed by UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar in May and supported by the USSR. The scheme envisaged a cease-fire, the termination of foreign arms shipments, an "intra-Afghan dialogue," and a transitional administration to supervise elections leading to a nonaligned Islamic government.25 A Pakistani envoy visited Moscow at the end of May to discuss the peace process with Soviet officials. Nikolai Kozyrev, the senior Soviet diplomat assigned to the Afghan question, ebulliently remarked that, "The mere fact that such talks were held after a three-year break can be regarded as a sign of the changing attitude of Pakistan towards unblocking the Afghan conflict."26 Although the Pakistani government (more precisely, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate) persevered in directing the resistance's military campaign, many officials evinced increasing interest in a political solution to the Afghan conflict and were patently disturbed by recent American policies in south Asia (particularly heightened American pressure in the area of nuclear nonproliferation).27

Many West European governments also wavered in their support for the resistance. During the final stages of the Soviet troop withdrawal, they had followed the American lead and recalled their diplomatic staff from Kabul, allegedly to guarantee their personal safety. Shevardnadze criticized the move as a "deficit of responsibility or a political demarche."28 Despite strong US objections, the French and Italian governments decided in 1990 to return
their diplomats to Kabul. Their decisions lessened the Afghan government's diplomatic isolation and strengthened its international legitimacy.

Support within the United States for the guerrillas also waned. Faced with a recession at home, the end of the Cold War, the support of many resistance groups for Iraq during the Gulf War, a rise of drug trafficking in guerrilla-controlled areas, and a military stalemate in Afghanistan, even some of the resistance's strongest Congressional backers began to endorse a reduction in US military assistance to the guerrillas. An official in the Bush administration explained "that the voices calling for an end to the program are getting louder and that every year it gets harder and harder to justify assistance in the absence of results."30

RESOLVING DISPUTES OVER EXTERNAL MILITARY ASSISTANCE

Soviet officials continued to decry American aid to the resistance. One commentator observed in Izvestia that, "Washington's present policy with respect to Afghanistan is another manifestation of the chronic 'disease' of the thinking of some right-wing figures [there]. One can call it an 'imperial mentality.' It displays itself in pretensions of trying to impose on other countries and peoples arrangements pleasing to Washington."31 Soviet officials claimed that Pakistan and the United States were violating the Geneva accords by continuing to provide the insurgents military support.32

With respect to their own policies, Soviet officials initially insisted that the many bilateral understandings existing between the USSR and Afghanistan, as well as the Geneva accords, granted them the right to continue supplying the Kabul government with military assistance.33 Once the government's success in the ground war became clearer, however, Soviet officials concluded that "negative symmetry" would best promote their interests. As soon as the USSR had completed its military withdrawal, and had finished delivering large stocks of weaponry to government forces, Gorbachev personally wrote to Bush to request that both countries terminate their military aid to their Afghan allies.

In a sharp policy reversal, US officials now rejected the idea of a mutual arms cut-off, though American negotiators had originally proposed the concept. The administration claimed it had to match the ordnance the USSR's departing military units left government forces, as well as the military advisers and additional defense assistance the USSR continued to supply Kabul. Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee in February 1990, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf observed that, "People have been asking how Najibullah could be holding out so long. Well, he's holding out because he's getting an absolutely unbelievable amount of Soviet aid."34 Although analysts might doubt whether Moscow actually had much of an independent impact in sustaining the regime when other factors (such as divisions within the resistance and rivalries among their external backers) also bolstered it, an on-the-spot observer stressed the importance of Soviet policies in upholding the Afghan government and thereby justifies this article's focus on the USSR. "Moscow's commitment in economic and military aid to the Kabul regime has been vastly underestimated
by the West and by Pakistan," Ahmed Rashid wrote in late 1989. "The flow of
Soviet food, fuel and weapons has played a determining role in sustaining the
Afghan economy and allowing President Najibullah to conduct his political
strategy of maintaining public morale and winning over the mujahideen."

In 1990 observers gauged the level of annual Soviet economic and military
assistance to the Afghan government at about two to six billion dollars, and they
estimated that the United States provided approximately 300 million dollars a
year in defense support to the insurgents. They believed that Saudi sources
supplied an amount roughly comparable to that of the United States.

American officials also acknowledged that they initially had opposed a
superpower arms cut-off because it would have inhibited the guerrillas from
obtaining their expected military victory. As one of them explained to The
Washington Post, "If you favor negative symmetry, you favor a coalition
government approach. Negative symmetry would assure that the Kabul govern­
ment becomes a permanent factor." Once they concluded in late 1990 that the
guerrillas were unlikely to soon achieve a military triumph, American officials
reversed their position yet again and agreed in principle that the superpowers
should terminate their defense assistance programs. By this time, however,
Soviet officials had upped the ante. Also noticing the improvement in the Kabul
government's military position, they maintained that other countries, particu­
larly Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, should halt military shipments to the insur­
gents. In addition, they indicated that they expected a cease-fire and an intra-
Afghan dialogue to accompany such an arrangement. Subsequent negotiations
focused on these and other issues, including the effective date of the cut-off and
verification procedures.

SOVIET-AMERICAN NEGOTIATIONS ON OTHER ISSUES

Aside from the question of arms deliveries, the most divisive point
requiring resolution was what to do with Najibullah and the PDPA. Until 1990
US negotiators maintained that, as a condition for commencing negotiations,
the President and his party had to leave office. The resistance also refused to
join a coalition government with the PDPA, participate in any elections
organized by the regime, or hold direct talks with PDPA representatives. The
farthest they would proceed in public was to talk with UN and Soviet mediators
who were also in contact with the Afghan government.

Soviet officials rejected such demands. They termed a proposal by the
British Foreign Secretary that Najibullah and the PDPA surrender their posi­
tions "gross interference in the affairs of a sovereign country." After Soviet
troops had completed their withdrawal, Shevardnadze indicated at a press
conference in Pakistan that the PDPA was prepared to accept a "far-reaching
compromise" but it "did not intend to capitulate." Soviet representatives
expressed support for a coalition government or council, composed of "all strata
of Afghan society, including the PDPA." They termed the Peoples' Demo­
cratic Party of Afghanistan "the most outstanding and well-organized force in
Afghan society." In December 1989 the USSR dispatched a delegation to
Kabul to help overcome splits within the PDPA. Soviet officials supported
Najibullah's endeavors to win over the moderate opposition through a policy of "national reconciliation." For example, the Foreign Ministry openly hailed his November talks at Geneva.\textsuperscript{46} They also encouraged the Afghan government to continue its domestic reform program which, if successful, could garner the regime further support among the population. In 1990 the Afghan government modified its constitution to permit other political parties to contest elections (and hence renounced the PDPA's monopoly of power). Najibullah also appointed individuals who were not PDPA members to a majority of cabinet posts (including the Prime Ministership). The PDPA itself was rechristened the \textit{Hezb-i Watan} ("Fatherland Party") in July 1990, and now required its members to practice Islam. The Afghan government introduced reforms in the economy and other areas as well.\textsuperscript{47}

Soviet officials also repeatedly called for a cease-fire, which of course would have left their allies in control of Afghanistan's urban core, and urged a greater role for the United Nations in the resolution of the conflict.\textsuperscript{48} In addition, they apparently considered granting the former king a role in any settlement. In late November 1989 Shevardnadze met with the monarch in Rome.\textsuperscript{49} The following November, according to Afghan sources, Gorbachev was in personal contact with the king during his own visit to Italy.\textsuperscript{50} Soviet officials claimed to desire "an unallied and neutral Afghanistan, hostile to no one."\textsuperscript{51} They proposed international talks among the USSR, Pakistan, Iran, and other countries to resolve the war and help determine the country's international status.\textsuperscript{52}

Although seeking a negotiated settlement, Soviet officials promoted an outcome favorable to their local clients. This trend became particularly evident after Najibullah successfully overcame the March coup attempt and clearly became the stronger local power.\textsuperscript{53} Najibullah now appeared capable of maintaining stability in Afghanistan. Soviet officials did not want to lose him unless a comparable stable government, enjoying a wider base of support, could emerge. After Secretary of State James Baker indicated during a trip to Moscow in February 1990 that the United States had accepted Najibullah's temporary continuation in office, Soviet representatives affirmed that the Afghan people should determine their future government in national elections supervised by the United Nations and the Islamic Conference. But they initially balked when American representatives demanded that Najibullah transfer during the electoral process much of his powers, including control over the armed forces, the media, and the secret police, to an interim authority consisting of representatives from diverse sectors of Afghan society.\textsuperscript{54} In April a senior Soviet official, alluding to the Afghan government's superior military position, stated that the failure of the resistance and Washington to negotiate directly with Najibullah showed they had not yet appreciated "present realities."\textsuperscript{55} Kozyrev said in June that, "The American demand for Mr. Najibullah to resign and hand over power to an interim government is totally unrealistic. It would be capitulation, and that would be impossible."\textsuperscript{56} In August 1990 Soviet and Afghan officials yielded on this issue and agreed to the establishment of a coordination body to implement the elections, but did not want to delegate the extensive powers Washington desired. (Although Yuli M. Vorontsov, Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations, reportedly had proposed in July to his US counterpart that Najibullah

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relinquish control of the military, the media, and the secret police to another authority, Soviet officials never formally repeated what perhaps was the diplomat's personal suggestion. After Najibullah met in August with senior Soviet officials (including Gorbachev) in Moscow, a TASS account reported that,

The Soviet spokesman pointed to the importance of the fact that President Najibullah confirmed his intention to create a coordinating body, which will function during the transition period and in which all Afghan political forces will be represented. In addition, the Afghan government has announced its agreement to transfer to this coordinating body some ministerial functions and even subordinate to it some units of the Afghan army and Interior Ministry troops on condition that armed rebel units will be subordinated to it, too.

Soviet officials continued to maintain that a cease-fire should precede a military aid cut-off, and that the termination of arms shipments should occur before the formation of the interim authority. They argued that the latter had to include Najibullah.

Diplomatic progress during the rest of 1990 and the first part of 1991 was minimal. Although Baker and Shevardnadze discussed the Afghan conflict at their meetings in August and December 1990, American officials were distracted by events in the Middle East while their Soviet counterparts were preoccupied with domestic issues. The sporadic direct talks between Soviet and resistance representatives succeeded neither in determining a future Afghan government nor in freeing the USSR's prisoners of war. The shuttle mission of Benon Sevan, Personal Representative of the UN Secretary-General, also proved fruitless. The guerrillas' unexpected seizure at Khost encouraged the Bush administration to stand fast. A State Department official, euphoric over the insurgent victory, justified maintaining a firm position: "If the Soviets see they are throwing good money after bad, we hope the Soviets will come to see that a political settlement is necessary."

Soviet officials advanced a similar logic. Kozyrev argued that Moscow's arms deliveries actually promoted the attainment of a political settlement: "The opposition respects strength and, seeing that its attempts to settle the problem by military means are futile, it will have to agree to compromises and peaceful negotiations." The USSR intensified its arms deliveries.

THE COLLAPSE

The failure of the August 1991 coup attempt in Moscow broke the impasse. Many of the Soviet officials subsequently purged were closely associated with Moscow's hardline policy in Afghanistan. As in so many areas, even before the foiled coup Boris Yeltsin had adopted an independent policy toward Afghanistan by meeting directly with resistance leaders and by vowing to curtail arms deliveries from his Russian republic to the Kabul government. He and the Russian Foreign Minister, Andrei Kozyryev, repeat-
edly indicated they wanted to reexamine Soviet policies in Afghanistan, particularly the aid program.66

Soviet officials now made several important concessions. They agreed in mid-September to a cessation on 1 January 1992 of “lethal material and supplies” to the Afghan combatants from the United States and the USSR. Although the superpowers urged other countries to follow suit, the termination of Soviet and American arms deliveries was not conditional on their participation. The USSR in effect curtailed all weapons deliveries to the Afghan government while permitting countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to continue to arm the resistance. In addition, while still insisting that “neither we nor the Americans can force Najibullah to resign until he decides this himself,”67 Soviet officials stopped insisting that a cease-fire precede and the establishment of an interim authority follow the arms cut-off. Instead, the Soviet-American agreement merely called for a cease-fire and indicated that the United Nations should take the lead in supervising free elections and the transition to “a new broad-based government,” a process which should reflect “an intra-Afghan dialogue.”68 UN officials are currently seeking to hold a multinational conference to resolve the conflict.

The issue that presently preoccupies Russian officials is the fate of the estimated 75 to 300 Soviet prisoners-of-war in resistance hands.69 Some resistance leaders refuse to release their POW’s until certain conditions are met. Stipulations cited in the media include a halt to all Russian military aid to the Kabul regime, the release of guerrillas captured by the government, the resignation of Najibullah, official Soviet recognition of the mujaheddin, and postwar reparations to compensate Afghanistan for the damage inflicted by Soviet policies.70 Representatives from four of the seven resistance parties based in Peshawar visited Moscow from 11-15 November 1991. The two sides issued a joint communique in which, in return for a commitment by the participating resistance organizations to commence releasing groups of Soviet POW’s by 1 January 1992, the Russian government reaffirmed its pledge to curtail its arms shipments after this date, denounced the 1979 Soviet invasion, expressed support for an Islamic transitional government to implement the UN peace plan, called on the Islamic Conference and the UN to supervise the anticipated national elections, and pledged to withdraw its military personnel from Afghanistan.71 (Resistance leaders subsequently accused the Russian government of violating the agreement.72) Financial assistance from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the ruling Watan party also ended after the coup attempt.73 In an largely unsuccessful endeavor to free Soviet POW’s, Russian Vice President Alexander Rutskoi visited Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in mid-December. In what surely foreshadows a growing role for the Central Asian republics in the Afghan conflict, Rutskoi called for a joint commission consisting of representatives of all the countries in the region (including Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tadzhikistan, Turkmenistan) as well as the Afghan resistance to monitor the implementation of the UN peace plan.74 In his meetings with Afghan officials, the Russian Vice President pledged continued economic and technical aid for the government and stated his intention to urge Afghani-
Stan's neighbors to block all military assistance to the Afghan combatants. But
their joint communique made no reference to any future Russian military
coopration with the Kabul regime, regardless of other governments' policies.75

EXPLAINING MOSCOW'S POLICY

Soviet policy towards Afghanistan between 1989 and early 1991 is
puzzling. During this period the USSR gracefully abandoned Eastern Europe,
dismantled much of its conventional military establishment, and wrote off its
clients in Ethiopia, Nicaragua, and elsewhere. Yet, the USSR vigorously
exerted itself to sustain its Afghan allies.

The reason for such odd behavior is that Soviet officials were torn by
conflicting objectives. On the one hand, they desired to reduce the economic
burden of propping up the Kabul government with military assistance and
especially food aid, most of which arrived by costly air transport. The Soviet
public had expressed increasing hostility towards the provision of economic
assistance to Moscow's Third World allies. One Western diplomat based in
Pakistan observed, "I can't see that the Soviets are going to keep pumping in
food and fuel to Kabul when there's not bread on the table in Leningrad and
Minsk."76 A negotiated settlement would have reduced the USSR's costs by
prohibiting additional arms transfer to Afghanistan and by increasing the
prospects that international agencies and foreign governments would have
provided economic assistance to the Kabul government.

Soviet public opinion also affected Moscow's policies towards the
conflict in other ways. Even for reasons unrelated to the economic cost of
sustaining their Afghan allies, many Soviet observers seemed dissatisfied with
the USSR's continued involvement in the war despite the removal of the Soviet
expeditionary force. Some authors evinced cynicism when describing the
conflict. For example, a Soviet analyst in New Times observed that,

People in the Soviet Union may think that the war in Afghanistan
is one between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries, be-
tween progressive and conservative forces, between those who
want to keep the nation in the past and those who steer it towards
a brighter future. This impression has nothing to do with reality.
The war in Afghanistan is a struggle for power waged by
different clans. Few people believe in the ideological banners,
be they red or green, which are used as a camouflage of this
struggle.77

Other authors expressed bitterness: "No matter how we try to explain our
military supply line to the Najibullah regime, the main victims of 'made in the
USSR' [weapons] are women and children, ordinary citizens."78 For many, the
war no doubt rekindled horrendous memories of the death of numerous Soviet
soldiers in senseless battles.

An additional factor motivating Moscow's desire to reduce its presence
in Afghanistan was that Soviet officials desired to remove this troublesome
reminder of an era of East-West confrontation, a conflict which still aroused anti-Soviet sentiment among some Western circles. *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, complained in July 1990 that, "It is preposterous for the Soviet Union to be pouring billions of dollars worth of military supplies into Afghanistan while pleading with the West for aid." At practically every meeting between senior Soviet and American officials since 1979, Afghanistan was a topic of negotiations.

A complete end to the fighting would have further improved the USSR's image in the West and increased its chances of obtaining additional economic assistance at a time when, because of the perceived conservative reaction preceding the August coup, doubts were increasing about the Soviet government's commitment to domestic reform.

Although the above considerations pushed Soviet officials towards a negotiated settlement of the Afghan conflict, other factors prevented them from abandoning the Najibullah regime completely. They correctly perceived that the United States eventually would lose interest in the conflict. Shortly after the Soviet troop pull-out, a commentary in *Izvestia* laid out a preferred scenario whereby the United States, "having lost faith in the opposition's possibility of winning a military victory, adjusts its policy with respect to Afghanistan to the opposition's detriment." Soviet officials also may have hoped to neutralize the resistance's other main external supporters, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, by diplomatic means.

Another trend which encouraged Soviet officials to hold fast on Afghanistan was the increasing possibility that moderate resistance leaders and their foreign backers would reach some kind of agreement with the government. In meetings with Soviet observers, Najibullah stressed his commitment to reform his regime to make it more acceptable to the Afghan people and the international community. The Geneva meetings and other government-resistance contacts, combined with changes in Iranian and Pakistani attitudes toward the conflict, suggested that Najibullah could convince some of his domestic and foreign opponents to deal with him.

Soviet officials might have hoped the Afghan government would gain additional popular support once Soviet troops departed the country. A diminution in the USSR's overt presence should have made Afghans perceive Najibullah less as a Soviet puppet and thus enhanced his popular support. Indeed, a major factor differentiating Afghanistan from Eastern Europe was that the Afghan government enjoyed the support of some sectors of the population. Technocrats, women, communists, and others fearful of a resistance committed to an Islamic government seemed to prefer, if not Najibullah himself, at least his policies.

Soviet officials also desired to preserve a forward defense against the spread of Muslim fundamentalism in the USSR's Central Asian republics. They repeatedly stressed that, given Afghanistan's proximity, the USSR had a legitimate interest in its domestic situation. As Shevardnadze explained,
We are not indifferent to the fate of Afghanistan and the Afghan people. . . . That country is our neighbor, a traditional and close partner. . . . Therefore there is nothing strange in the fact that, although we have withdrawn our forces, we are by no means indifferent to future developments in Afghan affairs. . . .

When Baker pointedly asked Shevardnadze in July 1989 why the USSR continued to supply the Afghan government with such assistance, the Soviet Foreign Minister replied: "Because Afghanistan is next door." Kozyrev told TASS in February 1991 that an "extremist regime" in Kabul would present a serious threat to the stability of Soviet Central Asia. Tadzhiks, Turkmens, and Uzbeks are found in large numbers along both sides of the Soviet-Afghan frontier. The Soviet media frequently complained about the alleged efforts of Afghan agitators to proselytize Islam on Soviet territory. In June 1991 an Afghan pilot inadvertently revealed the vulnerability of the USSR's southern border to military attack when he mistakenly bombed a village in Soviet Tadzhikistan. The incident caused Tadzkik representatives to demand stronger border security from the Soviet KGB. Nor was the perceived threat from Islamic fundamentalism linked just to Soviet Central Asia. Following increased tension with Armenia, Azerbaijani demonstrators displayed portraits of Iran's Iman Khomeini to symbolize their identification with radical Islam. Najibullah himself pointed out to Soviet observers that a guerrilla victory would produce instability on the USSR's southern borders and encourage anti-Soviet agitation among Soviet Muslims.

Soviet officials also were concerned about damaging their credibility. They reportedly expressed apprehension that discarding Najibullah would tarnish their relations with other allies. Unmatched concessions also would have further undermined the USSR's already weak negotiating position with the United States. One writer in Pravda, though acknowledging that the USSR possessed an interest in a quick end to the Afghan conflict, hastened to add "so that our foreign-policy department more decisively and convincingly [sic] conducts its negotiations with the American side on this issue," that a superpower agreement is not a "one-way street."

Unlike in Eastern Europe, where Western countries made clear they would not seek to exploit the Soviet withdrawal to undermine the USSR's legitimate security interests, in Afghanistan the United States and its regional allies seemed determined to establish a stringently anti-Soviet government adjacent to the USSR's vulnerable southern border. Reacting to American insensitiveness in this regard, as well as a desire to sustain a friendly buffer state, Soviet officials resolutely pursued what they perceived as an equitable outcome to the conflict.

Another factor encouraging continued support for the Afghan government was that, before the failed coup, some Soviet officials probably feared that additional concessions on Afghanistan would have caused hardliners at home to suggest they were not adequately caring for Soviet interests. One of the reasons Shevardnadze resigned as Foreign Minister in December 1990 was allegedly his
frustration with the Soviet military's insistence that the USSR persist in backing Najibullah.92

The power of the Afghan veterans in this respect should not be underestimated. While many soldiers wanted nothing more than to forget the conflict, others were concerned that their sacrifices were not rendered worthless by a Soviet decision to abandon Afghanistan to the insurgents. In the USSR Supreme Soviet, whose ranks included a number of Afghan veterans, a lobby claiming to represent the half-a-million soldiers who fought in Afghanistan insisted that their members desired continued "internationalist aid" to Kabul.93 Such sentiments were particularly strong among the sixty thousand officers who had served in Afghanistan.94 Defense Minister Dimitri Yazov and the other former Afghan veterans participating in the First Army Conference of Internationalist Fighters in Moscow on 22 May 1991 called for additional Soviet military and economic aid to prevent the victory of Islamic fundamentalism.95 The last commander of Soviet forces in Afghanistan, Boris Gromov, exploited his position as Deputy Interior Minister to promote continued Soviet assistance to the Afghan government.96

Finally, the analyst should not overestimate the cost to Moscow of sustaining the Afghan regime. Compared with the economic and diplomatic burden of propping up its East European allies, the Afghan regime's needs were minimal. The most extensive deliveries involved conventional weapons, a commodity of which the USSR enjoyed a rare healthy surplus. Indeed, Schwarzkopf told the Senate that a substantial portion of the military equipment Moscow delivered to Kabul came from Eastern Europe.97

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

The problem facing efforts to establish peace in Afghanistan is that so many groups can veto a potential settlement. Although the focus of this article is on past Soviet policies in Afghanistan, in the future local and regional actors will have the greatest impact on the outcome. As one US official lamented, "They can't deliver their Afghans, and we can't deliver ours."98 Despite the Soviet-American agreement to halt arms deliveries to their Afghan allies, and the subsequent collapse of the USSR, experts believe that the local combatants could continue to fight for at least several years thanks to their extensive stockpiles.99

Najibullah certainly will seek to remain in power. Downplaying the Soviet-American agreement and the increased contacts between the Russians and the resistance, he told Agence-France Presse: "Let the Afghans decide their own destiny without outside interference."100 Pointing to the pattern in Nicaragua, where the Sandinistas remained in office during the campaign, Najibullah also firmly dismissed proposals that he relinquish his post unless defeated in an election.101 In his own peace proposals, he has repeatedly called for a cease-fire, consultation among all Afghan groups (perhaps extending to the temporary incorporation of resistance leaders into his government or a joint commission/transitional council), the return of the approximately five million Afghan
refugees, a termination of all foreign military assistance to the combatants, free elections under United Nations supervision, and the holding of a multinational conference to review Afghanistan's international status. Since the failed Soviet coup, his government has received aid from other countries, including India, Iran, and perhaps China. Government officials also hope that the West, replicating their policy shift toward Cambodia, will soon reassess its strategy and embrace their regime as a bastion against Islamic fundamentalism in the region.

Resistance leaders for their part continue to insist in public that they will neither negotiate with Najibullah, agree to a cease-fire with the Kabul regime, nor enter into a joint government with PDPA members. They have explicitly dismissed peace proposals that would permit Najibullah to remain in power during the election campaign, even if he transferred important powers to some other authority such as the proposed coordination body. Pir Syed Ahmed Gailani, a leader of one of the moderate resistance factions, stated in mid-January 1992 that he would meet directly with the Kabul government "for the sole purpose of arranging a transfer of power. Other than that, we have nothing to talk about." Even if the current regime should collapse, it is questionable that a stable order would soon emerge throughout the country. Local field commanders, heads of government militias, and regional governors have established powerful satrapies and would probably vigorously resist a resurgence of central control. The king, often seen as a compromise transition figure, is old and perhaps out-of-touch because of his long exile in Italy. In addition, hostile divisions along ethnic affiliation have intensified since the Soviet withdrawal. As a European diplomat wryly observed, "The problem with Afghanistan is that everyone wants to be king but the king himself."

The international environment is also not very propitious for peace. Despite the suspension of Soviet and American arms shipments, private sources (perhaps with discreet official backing) in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have not halted their deliveries, and the Iranian government still sends weapons to its Afghan allies. Furthermore, the secular leaders of the newly-independent Central Asian republics have expressed concern about the prospect of an Islamic fundamentalist government in Kabul. They might back Najibullah or other anti-resistance forces to prevent such an outcome. The foreign ministers of several of these republics visited Kabul last fall and trade between Central Asia and Afghanistan is increasing. Afghan government officials now stress the historic and ethnic ties between Afghans and Central Asians, and suggest they are prepared if necessary to develop military ties between their government and their northern neighbors.

CONCLUSION

The USSR’s strategy in Afghanistan proved remarkably successful. The Soviet government’s decision to withdraw its troops, but still provide extensive aid to the Kabul government, redefined international perceptions of the conflict. For many observers, the USSR’s military removal of support transformed a struggle for self-determination against an occupying power into a civil war
between a flexible government and an intransigent, foreign-sponsored, guerrilla movement. Because Moscow’s call for a coalition government appeared more reasonable than the resistance’s insistence on total victory, other governments were forced to modify their position and accept an electoral solution in which Nadjibullah could participate. The military stalemate and the changing attitudes of other countries resulted in the USSR’s influence in Afghanistan becoming more secure with each passing month. Only the unplanned collapse of the Soviet central government’s authority after August 1991 undermined the strategy.

Endnotes


3. Cited in Charles P. Wallace, Los Angeles Times, 16 January 1989. According to the article, Shevardnadze also declared: “If a war is imposed on the Afghan government despite the common sense and logic of national interest, [the Soviet Union] will be forced to counter this with a force of arms, and it has this force. The present regime has every opportunity to withstand, and in case the war goes on, the Soviet arms supplies will also be continued.”

4. AP, Los Angeles Times, 6 November 1988; and Afghan Information Centre, Monthly Bulletin, no. 93 (December 1988), p. 9. Claiming that Pakistan and the United States were violating the Geneva accords by supplying arms to the guerrillas, then USSR First Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh acknowledged that “the Soviet Union is now delivering to the military forces of Afghanistan additional and more powerful means of destruction.” Cited in AP, Los Angeles Times, 6 November 1988.


14. AFP, 8 June 1990.


17. Roy, p. 43.


44. This is Shevardnadze's description at his press conference in Pakistan (*TASS*, *Pravda*, 9 January 1989).


57. For more on this episode see: Martin Fletcher, The Times, 16 July 1990; David Rogers, Wall Street Journal, 16 July 1990; Michael Dobbs, Washington Post, 1 August 1990; Lionel Barber and Lejla Boulton, Financial Times, 1 August 1990; and Francois Sergent, Liberation, 1 August 1990.


61. Cited in H.D.S. Greenway, Boston Globe, 5 April 1991. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Robert Kimmitt said "that the time has come to move beyond the current phase to get to a point where there can be a legitimate act of self-determination of the Afghan people themselves.” Cited in Clifford Krauss, New York Times, 2 April 1991.


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69. For various estimates of the number of Soviet prisoners of war held by the resistance see: Yuri Gankovsky, "People from Peshawar," New Times, no. 41 (1990), p. 21; Reuters, 15 July 1990; AP, 25 July 1990; N. Burbiga, Izvestia, 26 October 1990; V. Skosirev, Izvestia, 2 November 1990; V. Bol'shakov and V. Baykov, Pravda, 4 November 1990; and Stanislav Babayev, Sovietskaya kultura, 23 November 1991. The uncertainty results from the presumed death or conversion of some former POW's, and the guerrillas' lack of a central command structure or information clearinghouse.


71. For descriptions of the agreement see: A. Ivan'ko, Izvestia, 16 November 1991; V. Sneigirev, Trud, 19 November 1991; "Moscow Warns up to the Rebels," Asiaweek, 6 December 1991, p. 30; Reuters, 21 December 1990; AFP, 21 December 1991; and AFP, 24 December 1991. The declaration also called for a cease-fire, stated that the transitional government would continue to accept the 1978 treaty between the USSR and Afghanistan, and announced that the two sides would form a joint commission to implement the agreement. Reuters, 24 November 1991 says that Afghan officials expressed concern at the dialogue, but Najibullah endorsed the meeting. V. Pritula and A Pravov, Pravda, 18 November 1991.

72. AFP, 26 December 1991.

73. AFP, 19 October 1991.


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82. Eduard Shevardnadze, Izvestia, 14 February 1990.


94. Hauner, p. 104. See also: Roy, p. 48.


100. Cited in AFP, 8 December 1991. See also his remarks in Remi Favret, Le Figaro, 5 June 1990; Imre Karacs, The Independent, 1 August 1990; Reuters, 21 November 1990; and TASS, 26 November 1990.


