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THE UNITED STATES AND THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN¹

by

Alexander Alexiev

In late December 1987 the war in Afghanistan, which has already lasted twice as long as the "Great Patriotic War," as the Soviets refer to World War II, entered its ninth year. With well over a million Afghans killed and about a third of the Afghan prewar population forced to flee their homeland, the Soviet-Afghan war easily qualifies as one of the most brutal guerrilla wars of our less than benign century.² Although prospects for an imminent termination are still uncertain, for the first time since the beginning of this war, there are definite signs that we are entering its endgame.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan also marked a watershed in Soviet relations with the West and especially the United States. It was seen by many, including the Carter administration, as an example of the kind of unacceptable Soviet international behavior that made friendly relations with Moscow all but impossible and signalled the end of the period of detente and arms control characterizing much of the 1970s. *Thoss. (TR)* Much has changed since then in and between the United States and the Soviet Union, and, following the recent summit in Washington and the successful conclusion of the INF treaty, the two superpower rivals seem to be poised for another round of detente.

As the carnage has continued unabated and the war has dragged on in a sort of bloody stalemate, its significance as a factor influencing Washington's attitudes toward the Soviet Union has gradually declined,

¹This paper is based partly on material published in the winter 1987 issue of *Global Affairs*.

²According to a scholarly study on Afghan population losses, recently conducted by a University of Geneva researcher under French government sponsorship, about 1.24 million Afghans, or roughly 9 percent of the prewar population, have perished in the war so far.



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except at the rhetorical level, and Afghanistan has clearly ceased to be considered an impediment to improving ties with the Kremlin. At the same time, U.S. involvement in the conflict has deepened over time, both in support of the resistance and in the effort to find a negotiated solution.

Thus, with growing evidence that the conflict may be resolved, one way or another, in the not too distant future, U.S. policy in Afghanistan remains a key factor that could influence, perhaps decisively, the outcome of the war. It is within this framework that this paper attempts to examine the origins and evolution of U.S. policies and attitudes toward the conflict and their likely implications for the ultimate outcome of the Soviet war on the Afghan people.

THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION AND AFGHANISTAN IN THE PRE-INVASION PERIOD

By the time a military coup brought a communist government to power in Kabul in April of 1978, U.S. attitudes toward the strategically located non-aligned country were characterized, by and large, by neglect and lack of interest. For a variety of reasons, ranging from a tacit acknowledgment of the Soviet geo-political preponderance in the area and unwillingness to compete with the Soviets in the Third World following the Vietnam fiasco, to the priority given to the U.S.-Pakistani relationship, Washington's influence and interest in Afghanistan had reached perhaps its lowest point. In the 1950s and 1960s the United States maintained a considerable presence and an active aid program (to the tune of some \$500 million) in the country, in an indirect but nonetheless very real competition for influence with Moscow; but by the mid-1970s, American political presence at all but the diplomatic level had been curtailed dramatically, and economic aid was cut down to an insignificant \$15 million in 1975. Ironically, this period of growing U.S. neglect coincided with two diametrically opposed political trends in Afghanistan that could have been influenced in a direction congenial to U.S. interests by a strong presence and an activist policy.

On the one hand, President Mohammad Daoud, who had overthrown King Zahir Shah in 1973 with the help of communist elements and on a somewhat pro-Soviet platform, had become progressively disillusioned with the Soviets and their home-grown proteges and began pursuing more genuinely non-aligned policies and experimenting with democratic reforms. On the other hand, having become convinced that Daoud could not be counted on to lock Afghanistan into the Soviet orbit, Moscow began greatly increasing its assistance to the Afghan Marxist elements, organized in the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and encouraged them to prepare for a revolutionary takeover. As a result there was a steady growth in the influence and visibility of the PDPA, which, though riven with factional strife between its Khalq and Parcham factions, was slavishly pro-Soviet, and a growing penetration of key institutions, such as the army, by Soviet-trained communist cadres.³

One of the inevitable results of the declining U.S. clout and interest in Afghanistan was the progressive failure of relevant State Department officials to correctly assess the implications of these important internal developments. By 1978, U.S. officials seem to have become remarkably ignorant of the volatility of the situation in Kabul and the significant inroads made by the communists. A little over a month before the successful coup, at a congressional hearing on March 16, 1978, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Adolf Dubs described the situation there as follows:

Internally, the political situation in Afghanistan is stable. President Daoud remains very much in control and faces no significant opposition.⁴

³According to a PDPA document published after the successful coup, some 20 key military bases and airfields had been completely infiltrated by PDPA sympathizers, usually Soviet-trained officers. See "On the Saur Revolution: The Political Department of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan in the Armed Forces of Afghanistan," *People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan*, p. 11, Kabul, May 22, 1978.

⁴See *Department of State Bulletin*, Vol. 78, No. 2014, May 1978.

The successful military coup, which installed in power a regime dominated by well-known Afghan communists, led by the PDPA chairman Nur Mohammad Taraki, was greeted with remarkable equanimity in Washington. Despite the new regime's open articulation of its Marxist and pro-Soviet ideology, the Carter administration refused to admit that the new Afghan government was indeed a communist one and continued to pursue business with Kabul as usual and provide economic aid.⁵

Not only was the administration unwilling to face the reality of the communist takeover in Kabul, but for a while it seems to have tried to make life easier for the new regime by encouraging Iran and Pakistan not to take a hostile stance toward it, perhaps in a futile hope of ingratiating itself with the new rulers. In another example, after the regime announced its intention to carry out a radical Marxist-style land reform, U.S. embassy officials offered to send regime officials to a University of Wisconsin land reform training center or provide assistance by American land reform advisors.⁶

The administration remained stubbornly wedded to its myopic policies for more than a year, even though soon after the coup it became

⁵Two weeks after the coup the New York *Times* approvingly noted: "Until now the Carter administration justifiably remains completely calm in connection with the coup in Afghanistan, where the leaders of the small communist party seized power in Kabul. . . . Ten years ago any communist victory would have been considered a clear defeat of the United States. Most Americans consider the world today more complex." The New York *Times*, May 10, 1978. According to another observer, the Carter administration "actively resisted declaring that Afghanistan was a communist country," since countries considered communist automatically became ineligible for U.S. aid. See Richard P. Cronin, "U.S. Policy Toward Afghanistan," in Hans Binnendijk (ed.), *Authoritarian Regimes in Transition*, Foreign Service Institute, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., 1987, p. 93. The administration was not alone in its refusal to face up to the reality of the situation. Thus the new rulers in Kabul were promptly declared "agrarian reformers" by the Washington *Post*, while a veteran academic observer argued obtusely that the takeover was the result of the Shah's efforts to "create a modern version of the ancient Persian empire." See Selig S. Harrison, "The Shah, Not Kremlin Touched Off Afghan Coup," The Washington *Post*, May 13, 1978.

⁶Binnendijk, op. cit., p. 91.

abundantly clear that the PDPA regime was dedicated to the establishment of an orthodox Leninist dictatorship. After consolidating its power through a series of purges, arrests, and executions of enemies real or imagined and settling internecine accounts in the PDPA, the regime embarked on a radical restructuring of Afghan society along the lines of the Soviet model, complete with a "vanguard party," a pervasive internal security apparatus, Party monopoly over the means of information, and an array of typical communist "transmission belt" organizations for workers, youth, and women. The direction in which the regime was headed was indeed unmistakable. Barely a month after the coup, the Soviet government daily *Izvestiya* noted with approval:

The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan is experiencing democratic transformations such as the country has not known in all the many centuries of its history.⁷

Soon after the takeover, the heretofore covert Soviet involvement was brought out in the open and thousands of Soviet "advisers" streamed into Afghanistan and began to occupy key positions in the administration of the new "People's Republic," particularly in the armed forces and the internal security services.

Then in the fall of 1978, in its zeal to create a model socialist society without delay and undoubtedly with Soviet approval, the Kabul regime introduced a series of radical reforms, beginning with the replacement of the traditional Islamic green flag of Afghanistan with a red one, that collectively amounted to a declaration of war on traditional Afghan society. The challenge was promptly taken and beginning in October massive armed rebellions erupted in the eastern part of the country and began to spread. In March of 1979, prominent religious leaders started calling for a *jiḥad* (holy war) against the regime. Two months later several provinces were partly under rebel control and fighting had commenced throughout Afghanistan.

⁷*Izvestiya*, May 23, 1978.

As the resistance intensified, the PDPA regime became even more brutal and, at the same time, dependent on Soviet military assistance for dealing with the rebellion. Indeed, as the Afghan army began to disintegrate in the spring of 1979, the Soviets began playing a more and more direct role in combating the resistance. Soviet military advisers were placed in all Afghan units down to the battalion and sometimes company level, where they made all the decisions, while Soviet air force units brought into Afghanistan flew combat missions. The regime instituted a reign of terror, and a series of mass arrests and executions were launched as a response to the insurrection. The toll exacted from the Afghan people was frightful. The PDPA itself admitted in 1980 that 50,000 people, not counting the victims of bombardments, had disappeared during the eighteen months preceding the Soviet invasion; resistance sources estimate the victims of PDPA terror at 250,000.⁸

Throughout most of this period Washington remained largely silent about the massive human rights abuses and oppression to which the Afghan people were subjected. It was only after the abduction and murder of U.S. Ambassador Dubbs in March of 1979 that U.S. relations with the regime were downgraded and the aid program curtailed, though not completely eliminated. Even after that, however, the Carter administration refused to take a firm stand against the Kabul government, let alone provide moral and material support to those resisting it. In late March 1979, with much of the country in open revolt against its Marxist rulers and Soviet military personnel directly participating in operations against the insurgents, the State Department ordered the U.S. embassy in Kabul "not to apply the communist label in its political analysis of the regime."⁹ It was not until the second half of 1979 that some parts of the administration, such as the National Security Council under Zbigniew Brzezinski, began expressing concern over evidence of Soviet preparations for a massive intervention in

⁸M. Centlivres-Demont et al., "Afghanistan: La Colonisation Impossible," *Les Editions du Cerf*, Paris, 1984, p. 199.

⁹The *Wall Street Journal*, March 22, 1979.

Afghanistan and evidently prevailed over a reluctant State Department to issue what has been described as a "very vague warning to the Soviets not to intervene militarily" on August 2, 1979.¹⁰

Despite this and several other "warnings," U.S. attitudes continued to be characterized by remarkable timidity, and the administration refused to take any action that might have given Moscow reason to believe that Washington was seriously concerned about Soviet behavior in the region, rather than just making pro forma noises. Indeed, the administration behavior since the communist coup in Kabul and its response to an aggression-in-the-making could only have been interpreted in the Kremlin as a tacit U.S. recognition of Afghanistan as being in the Soviet sphere of influence, encouraging Soviet interventionist predilections. As late as mid-December 1979, at a time when U.S. intelligence services had overwhelming evidence that an invasion was about to begin, the State Department refused to characterize Soviet forces already inserted into the country as "combat troops" and Under Secretary of State David Newsome reportedly objected to a press backgrounder on the subject "on the grounds that this might be seen by the Soviets as U.S. meddling in Afghan affairs."¹¹

WASHINGTON AND THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR

The full-scale Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979 prevented the imminent overthrow of the Marxist regime in Kabul and enthroned a new hand-picked puppet as its head. Contrary to initial Soviet expectations, however, it failed to crush the rebellion and instead precipitated an even more bitter conflict between the invaders and the Afghan people that has continued to this day.

¹⁰Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1983, pp. 426-430. According to former Soviet soldiers interviewed by the author, the Soviets began contingency planning for an invasion by fleshing out Category II and III units in jump-off locations at Kushka and Termez as early as June of 1979.

¹¹See Elie Kedourie, "Disastrous Years," *Encounter*, Vol. LXIV, #4, p. 25; and "The Soviet Military Stake in Afghanistan: 1956-1979," *RUSI*, #3, September 1980, p. 35.

The invasion also effected a thorough, if long overdue, administration reassessment of Soviet intentions in Afghanistan and in the region in general and resulted in a strong condemnation of the Soviet action and the imposition of several economic and diplomatic sanctions. The strong U.S. reaction was due primarily to a decided change in President Carter's perception of Soviet objectives leading to a much gloomier overall assessment than had been characteristic of his presidency to that point.

Finally aware of the potentially disastrous geopolitical and strategic implications of the Soviet military thrust in this vital region, the administration declared the Persian Gulf region to be an area of vital interest to the United States and reiterated its commitment to help Pakistan resist outside aggression, first promulgated in a 1959 security treaty. The treaty also promised prompt consideration of a package of military and economic aid to Islamabad. Within this context, the stage was set for a modest covert aid program to the Afghan resistance, which seems to have been initiated shortly after the invasion.¹²

By the time the Reagan administration came to power in Washington in January 1981, the war had lasted for more than a year and the modus operandi of both the Soviets and their Afghan adversaries had settled into a more or less predictable pattern. Unable to decisively and quickly crush the resistance as they had hoped for, the Soviets settled for a longer-term campaign that was characterized by genocidal brutality and flagrant disregard for internationally accepted norms of warfare, such as those codified in the Geneva Conventions. These tactics included high-altitude carpet bombing, deliberate destruction of entire villages, reprisals against the civilian population and scorched earth policies that have resulted in the depopulation of vast areas of the country.

¹²The initiation of covert assistance to the resistance was revealed shortly after the invasion by Senator Birch Bayh, then chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. See Malcolm Wallop, "Covert Action," *Strategic Review*, winter 1984, p. 12.

Faced with this awesome display of violence, the Afghan mujahideen, armed with little more than their courage in the early stages of the war, seemed doomed to defeat like many others that had dared to take up arms against the Soviets before them. But courage and determination proved to be a potent weapon in this case, and the resistance persisted and grew.

Assistance to the mujahideen by the United States, China, Saudi Arabia, and other donors also gradually increased; and by 1984 some of the more glaring equipment deficiencies had been ameliorated and more than 100,000 armed guerrillas challenged the Soviets and the remnants of the regime army throughout the country. Nonetheless, it became clear fairly early in the war that the aid program left much to be desired in both its objectives and operational methods.

This was particularly true of the U.S. assistance effort, which was probably one of the largest. Despite Washington's numerous protestations of total support and determination to stand uncompromisingly by the Afghan freedom fighters, the reality of American assistance to the Afghan cause, both militarily and politically, was considerably less impressive than the rhetoric.

Perhaps the most serious problem was the apparent U.S. unwillingness to supply the resistance with truly effective modern weapons that would have allowed it to achieve its combat potential. Thus, for most of the first five years of the war, the mujahideen lacked any effective anti-air or long-range weapons. Despite the presence of vastly superior weapons in western arsenals, the resistance was supplied primarily with 1930s vintage anti-aircraft machine guns that were hardly a match for the heavily armored and deadly Soviet gunship helicopters. On the ground, the main mujahideen long-range weapon was the Soviet model 82 mm mortar, not known for either superior range or accuracy. As a result, the Soviets enjoyed virtually unchallenged dominance in the air and felt fairly secure in their bases behind large mined perimeters. Any lasting resistance gains under such circumstances were highly unlikely, as was exacting a truly steep price from the aggressors. The situation was no better with respect to some very

simple yet vitally needed tools of the guerrilla trade that any well thought out and effective assistance program should not have failed to provide. For instance, elementary equipment such as maps, binoculars, range finders, portable radios, and mine detectors were virtually unobtainable in 1984 and continue to be in short supply.¹³

The rationale given by administration officials for not supplying the resistance with effective weapons and other much needed supplies was usually couched in obtuse arguments about the need for "plausible deniability," and/or ostensible Pakistani reluctance to allow the introduction of Western arms. Further, concerns that such weapons could fall into the hands of terrorists have also been trotted out as a justification, as have even less plausible arguments regarding an alleged inability of the Afghans to handle sophisticated weapons.

Under close scrutiny, none of these justifications made much sense then or now, and the failure of the conservative administration to match rhetoric with deeds in the case of Afghanistan demands an alternative explanation. The most likely explanation is to be sought in the mindset of important officials at various levels of the administration that had essentially written off Afghanistan as a lost cause from the beginning. Their arguments basically boiled down to the view that the Afghans could not possibly defeat the Soviets, and therefore a Soviet victory was inevitable and only a matter of time. To help the Afghans become more effective, according to this logic, would only provoke a Soviet escalation and lead to a worsening situation for the Afghans themselves. Such sentiments were encapsulated by a senior Carter administration official soon after the invasion as follows:

The question was, do we give them (the insurgents) weapons to kill themselves, because that is what we would be doing. There is no way they could beat the Soviets.¹⁴

¹³The author was able confirm this state of affairs first-hand in observing mujahideen units and in conducting numerous interviews with resistance commanders in mid-1984. At that time even one of the top resistance commanders in the country, Jelaludin Haqqani of Paktia province, used a hand-drawn map for conducting large-scale operations against the Soviets.

Even after the coming to power of the conservative Reagan administration, similar attitudes seem to have continued to permeate important layers of the foreign-policy and intelligence establishments as well. Thus while discussing the implications of a modern western anti-aircraft gun proposed for delivery by supporters of the mujahideen, a senior intelligence official was quoted in early 1985 as saying:

When this (weapon) gets in and if helicopters start getting shot out of the sky with regularity, we've got a problem. . . . A weapon like this could force the Soviets to become more indiscriminate in their use of force. They could begin much more bombing. It could change the equation radically.¹⁵

Implicit in the above argument is also the notion that the Soviets operated in Afghanistan under a set of self-imposed restraints. In the words of another administration official addressing the issue of better arms for the resistance:

One of the important things is restraint, and that includes restraint on our part and restraint by the Soviet Union. You have to consider what they have not done to Pakistan and others. . . . Afghanistan is on their borders, and you have to believe the Soviets could, if they chose, march in with sufficient troops to do the job.¹⁶

It is unnecessary here to dwell at any length on the egregious misperception of the realities of the Afghan conflict and Soviet behavior implicit in such thinking. Suffice it to say that already by 1985, the carnage wrought upon the Afghan people by the Soviet army was of such magnitude that, short of systematic genocide, it couldn't really get much worse. What is significant, however, is that such a mindset evidently carried the day within the Reagan administration for more than five years, resulting in an aid program that allowed the mujahideen to

¹⁴The Washington Post, January 13, 1985.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

fight and die without much hope of advancing their cause. And the reason for the eventual change of these policies was not an administration reassessment and admission of their inadequacy, but a forceful stand by the United States Congress for a larger and more effective support effort.

Beginning in the second half of 1984, the U.S. Congress and especially the Senate, where support for the Afghan cause was unanimous and truly bipartisan, became increasingly concerned about the seemingly ineffective assistance to the resistance. A resolution was introduced mandating a large increase in U.S. assistance and, more important, making the supply of effective weapons possible. Even though much of the debate surrounding this issue was conducted at closed hearings, it became clear that the administration was not only not happy about the Senate's initiative, but in fact opposed it. For instance, according to Senator Malcolm Wallop, then chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, both the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency expressed strong opposition to the resolution.¹⁷ Despite the administration's resistance, the resolution was passed by both houses of Congress in November 1984. As a result of this Congressional victory in April 1985, President Reagan signed a national security directive, NSDD 166, which stipulated that it was U.S. policy to help the Afghan resistance drive out the Soviet forces "by all available means." It was thus primarily Congress that cleared the way for a dramatic increase of U.S. assistance, reported to have reached \$680 in FY 1987. The increasing aid has permitted substantial improvements in resistance capabilities on the ground, and in the fall of 1986 in the air as well, with the first deliveries of sophisticated American anti-air missiles marking a watershed in the seven-year old war.

¹⁷Malcolm Wallop, "U.S. Covert Action," op. cit., p. 11.

GORBACHEV'S BLEEDING WOUND

The signing of the presidential directive coincided with the coming to power in the Kremlin of Mikhail Gorbachev. Hailed almost from the first day in office as the most promising Soviet leader in a long time, Gorbachev promptly initiated a series of reforms designed to arrest the seemingly inexorable decline of the Soviet system in the domestic realm and a concerted arms control and peace propaganda effort externally. Codified under the catchphrases "glasnost" (openness), "perestroika" (restructuring), and "new political thinking," Gorbachev's policies seemed to promise positive change in the Soviet Union.

In Afghanistan, however, as it soon became clear, there was little "new political thinking" to be noticed. On the contrary, it appeared that Gorbachev had given his military carte blanche, and the fighting intensified dramatically. Instead of one large offensive a year, as had been the case before, in 1985 the Soviet forces conducted as least half a dozen large-scale assaults on the resistance. These were marked by considerably improved counter-insurgency operations and accompanied by greatly expanded high-altitude carpet bombing and scorched earth tactics.

The escalation of the military campaign also involved a striking intensification of Soviet/Kabul sponsored terrorism directed against the resistance and its supporters in Pakistan and cross-border raids and bombardments of Pakistani territory.¹⁸

The year as a whole was without a doubt the bloodiest and most difficult of the war for the mujahideen. Still, the Soviets, operating militarily at the maximum level of effort the existing infrastructure would allow, came nowhere close to inflicting crushing blows on their elusive adversary and must have begun asking themselves whether a military solution is indeed possible. It is perhaps this realization

¹⁸According to U.S. officials, four out of five incidents of state-sponsored terrorism world-wide in 1987 took place in Pakistan and were directed against the Afghan resistance. See Michael Wines, "Terrorist Incidents Increase over 1986," *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 1987.

that prompted Gorbachev to start referring to Afghanistan as a bleeding wound in early 1986.

Then, in the fall of 1986, after another intensive but indecisive Soviet campaign, the tide began to turn against the Soviets militarily with the arrival of effective Western anti-aircraft missiles in the resistance arsenal.

The delivery of the U.S.-made Stingers, and smaller numbers of the less effective British Blowpipe missile, has changed the nature of the war in several important ways. First, the remarkable effectiveness of this weapon system, reported to have achieved kill ratios of close to 50 percent, has denied the Soviets uncontested domination of the air and has severely limited the scope and effectiveness of their air operations. This has greatly enhanced the operational effectiveness and survivability of resistance units, apart from providing a major boost to mujahideen morale. Second, the mujahideen have started extracting a steep price from the Soviets in terms of aircraft lost and casualties. According to a conservative estimate, the introduction of the missiles has resulted in the loss of an additional 270 Soviet aircraft in the past year estimated to cost about \$2.2 billion.¹⁹

The losses of highly trained air crews and the corresponding degradation of Soviet counterinsurgency operations that depended on air superiority are also likely to be very significant. Undoubtedly, the increasing combat capabilities of the mujahideen have contributed to a Soviet realization that they cannot win the war by military means, an important psychological watershed, which is the first step on the road to defeat.

The Gorbachev leadership has faced a deteriorating situation also on two other fronts in its efforts to find a solution on Soviet terms. A concerted effort to secure a modicum of popular acceptance of the Kabul regime and divide the resistance through a campaign of "national reconciliation," initiated with great fanfare in early 1987, has not

¹⁹For details see Aaron Karp, "Blowpipes and Stingers in Afghanistan: One Year Later," *Armed Forces Journal International*, September 1987.

succeeded, and the vast majority of the Afghan people remain as staunchly opposed to the puppet regime as ever. Lately, a tone of desperation has started creeping into Soviet assessments of the viability of the regime, reflected in Moscow's attempts to distance itself from Kabul ideologically by denying that it is a socialist regime. The regime itself, undoubtedly under Soviet orders, has taken to extolling Islam and even denying its Marxist underpinnings in a futile, belated attempt to gain legitimacy and coopt some of its adversaries.

Just as important, there is considerable evidence of mounting popular disaffection with the war inside the Soviet Union. Under the impact of growing casualties (some 30,000 killed and perhaps four times as many crippled) and increasingly open discussion of the failure of Soviet policies in Afghanistan, courtesy of *glasnost*, various manifestations of unhappiness, including demonstrations and draft evasion, have become commonplace. According to a recent opinion survey, a majority of Soviet citizens now favor an unconditional withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan.²⁰

While one should be cautious in gauging the effect of public opinion on official policy in a totalitarian society, this development indicates a growing domestic political cost to the Kremlin leadership, alongside the mounting economic and military costs of the conflict. All in all, it would not be an exaggeration to say that for the Kremlin, the cost of continuing involvement is becoming progressively steeper, perhaps intolerable, as hopes for a military defeat of the resistance fade further away.

The one area in which the cost to Moscow has not yet become exorbitant is the international political realm. And it is in this area that the Soviets have made a last ditch effort to achieve a solution of the conflict at least partially on their terms. A sober assessment of their present predicament may have convinced the Soviets that the only

²⁰The poll was conducted by the Sociological Research Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in collaboration with the French polling organization IPSOS: 53 percent of the respondents were in favor of a total withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, while 27 percent opposed such a move. See Christopher Walker, "Poll Reveals Most Russians Want Afghanistan Pull-Out," *The Times*, London, November 2, 1987.

promising way for them to extricate themselves from the quagmire of Afghanistan, while accomplishing their minimal objective of maintaining a friendly regime in Kabul, is to secure tacit U.S. cooperation. It is in this light that current Soviet initiatives for a negotiated solution begin to make sense.

Gorbachev's calculus in this respect is simple and straightforward. He has proposed a settlement that would lead to a cutoff of resistance weapons and supplies in return for a gradual withdrawal of Soviet forces in a year or so. The Soviets have made two major preconditions: that such an agreement be guaranteed by the United States and Pakistan and that the cutoff takes place at the very start of the staggered Soviet pullout.

Such an arrangement, the Soviets believe, would allow a substantial weakening of the resistance, while sizable numbers of Soviet troops continue to be deployed in the country. It is not generally known, for instance, that Soviet combat operations in Afghanistan are conducted by special counterinsurgency units that make up less than 20 percent of the Soviet contingent. The rest are engaged primarily in security and logistic chores and are of lesser military importance.

The Soviets know that an agreement of this sort is certain to be considered a sellout by the resistance, which has not been allowed to participate in the negotiating process. The mujahideen are not likely to abide by any of its provisions, thus creating a real potential for conflict between the resistance and its erstwhile patrons, while presenting Moscow with a ready excuse to renege on the deal if things did not work out to their satisfaction. A violent mujahideen reaction would be a certainty if the deal involves any effort to block them off from their sanctuaries in Pakistan, as resistance supporters fear. The collapse of an ostensibly reasonable deal, underwritten by the United States, because of perceived mujahideen intransigence, would also undermine public support for the resistance, both in Pakistan and in this country, that has been a source of much of its strength.

Although, it may sound preposterous that the Soviets would hope to get with U.S. help what they have failed to achieve on the battlefield, their rationale may not be totally without foundation.

To begin with, it has been clear for some time that the administration has decided not to let the conflict in Afghanistan interfere with other issues on the superpower agenda, dominated as it is by a new round of summit and arms-control euphoria. The unwillingness of the Reagan administration to link progress on arms control and better relations with the Soviets in general to a just solution of the Afghan conflict is a direct indication of this change. It is worth remembering that the war in Afghanistan is not only a continuing example of the kind of Soviet behavior that the liberal Carter administration considered incompatible with arms control and good relations, it is also of direct relevance to Soviet compliance with international treaties. It has been proven beyond reasonable doubt by international investigative bodies, including U.N. representatives, that the Soviet forces in Afghanistan have systematically and continuously violated all provisions of the Geneva Conventions on warfare.²¹

The failure of the U.S. administration to make Soviet misconduct in Afghanistan an issue in superpower relations could, and probably has, encouraged the Soviets to believe that they can achieve their key foreign-political goals with regard to the United States and the West without having to modify unacceptable behavior in third areas. To that extent, such attitudes are likely to stiffen Soviet resolve to persevere in the conflict.

Similarly, Washington has been remiss in mounting a serious effort to delegitimize the PDPA regime in international forums and, in fact, by maintaining diplomatic relations with it, continues to bestow a modicum of legitimacy on what is arguably the least legitimate regime in the world today.

²¹For a recent exhaustively documented report on Soviet violations of international conventions in Afghanistan submitted to the United Nations by U.S. representatives, see "Report of the Independent Council on International Human Rights on the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan," Washington, D.C., November 17, 1987.

As the evidence begins mounting that the Soviets have all but conceded defeat and may be forced out one way or another, there appears to be a considerable softening of the U.S. position on a negotiated settlement, indicating an implicit willingness to help the Soviets "save face" and avoid the full consequences of their failure. The administration has already agreed in principle to guarantee the putative settlement, even though the resistance is not represented in the negotiations and is not likely to feel bound by any agreement that does not meet with its approval. Furthermore, Washington's original stand that a cutoff of resistance supplies would occur only after the Soviets have withdrawn has now been substantially modified in a direction more in line with Soviet demands. It has agreed to stop supplying the mujahideen two months after the beginning of a Soviet pullout. Recently, the administration seemed to go even further toward meeting Soviet negotiating objectives by implying in a statement by White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater that a cutoff may be imposed at the beginning of a Soviet withdrawal. Such an arrangement has been hinted at also by Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze in early 1988.²²

At least some administration officials seem to believe that, following a Soviet withdrawal, you could have an interim government in Afghanistan with communist participation.²³ Such illusions may prompt the administration to agree to and guarantee a settlement that is totally unacceptable to the resistance. The administration needs to be reminded that what eventually became the Soviet-Afghan war started as a spontaneous rebellion by the Afghan people against an oppressive

²²According to Fitzwater, "Once they begin to withdraw the troops, then under the Geneva accords there would be a withdrawal of support to the rebels. . . . They would happen essentially at the same time--the same time being a multi-month period." *Washington Times*, December 16, 1987. Three weeks later, Shevardnadze stated: "Once an agreement has been signed at Geneva, all sides will have an obligation to stop outside interference in Afghanistan's affairs." *Los Angeles Times*, January 7, 1987.

²³An administration official was recently quoted as saying, "You can't have this issue resolved without some role for the PDPA." *New York Times*, November 12, 1987.

communist regime that has not changed much, except rhetorically, and continues to be completely dependent on the Soviets for its survival. It is unrealistic to expect that, after fighting for eight years and being on the verge of defeating the invaders, the Afghans would accept even a token presence of Moscow's puppets in any future government. More disturbing still are recent intimations from Moscow that a deal to cut off the resistance from its bases in Pakistan may indeed have been struck. A January 11, 1988, Pravda article mentioning May 1, 1988 as a possible date for the start of Soviet withdrawals, if an agreement is signed by March 31, states unequivocally: "This two month period is not accidental. It is needed to give Islamabad time to demolish the dushman bases on its territory."

The administration must realize that the only way to stop the bloodshed in Afghanistan is a unconditional Soviet withdrawal, preferably with the Kabul regime in their baggage train. To that end, the only meaningful role for the United States to play is to work with the mujahideen to guarantee the Soviet troops safe passage out of the country. Washington should also make it clear to Moscow that they could not count on the United States to help them avoid defeat any more than the Kremlin was helpful in insuring an orderly U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. In the meantime, Washington should increase its military and humanitarian aid to the resistance and do everything possible to increase the international political cost to continued Soviet involvement. Soviet hopes of securing American help to get out of their current predicament may well be the only reason they haven't yet decided to bite the bullet.

A Soviet unconditional pullout would undoubtedly involve humiliation for the Kremlin. Such an outcome, however, should be the objective of U.S. policy, not just to embarrass the Soviets but because it may, paradoxically, create preconditions for a more lasting improvement of relations with the West. An unambiguous Soviet defeat in Afghanistan may finally disabuse the Kremlin leadership of its intrinsic belief in the unlimited political utility of military power--a belief that has been the primary rationale of the Kremlin's expansionistic predilections

since Lenin. It is often forgotten amidst today's arms control euphoria that the root cause of the West's historical conflict with the Soviet Union is not the arms race or nuclear weapons, but Moscow's traditional tendency to promote its political and ideological objectives by force of arms and intimidation. Should the Soviets gradually realize the diminishing utility of this approach, and perhaps begin a genuine exercise in "new political thinking" after Afghanistan, a Soviet defeat may just augur a new and more promising era in East-West relations.