OVERVIEW

AFGHANISTAN AND THE END OF THE COLD WAR

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Historians debating why and how the Cold War ended have divided into two warring camps.

On one side are those who argue that the West prevailed through four decades of geopolitical containment and military deterrence, culminating in the American military buildup during the presidency of Ronald Reagan and in the stepped-up support for anti-Communist insurgencies proclaimed in the Reagan Doctrine. Many proponents of this view attribute the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan primarily to American military pressure, with a passing nod to the bravery of the Afghan resistance. Carried to its extreme, this interpretation gives the CIA's covert operation in Afghanistan credit not only for ending the Cold War but also for bringing about the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Arrayed against this dominant school of thought are George Kennan and like-minded Soviet specialists who emphasize the profound changes that were taking place within Soviet society during the Cold War, the failure of the ossified Communist system to respond to these changes, and the resultant emergence of new leaders committed to domestic reform and retrenchment abroad. Containment, deterrence, and military pressure, in this view, were necessary to hold Soviet power in check but had relatively little to do with the reversal of Soviet policies initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, including the withdrawal from Af-

ghanistan. Indeed, Kennan has declared that "the general effect of cold war extremism was to delay rather than hasten the great change that overtook the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s."[1]

The Kennan position, which this book supports, is solidly grounded in extensive historical studies that were largely ignored amid the polemics of the Cold War years.[2] Viewed in the perspective of this research, *perestroika* came as the climax of a protracted process of political change that had been building up for decades in response to the economic dislocations and social tensions created by rapid urbanization and industrialization. In Lenin's day, only 16 percent of the Soviet populace lived in cities; by 1960, that figure had more than tripled. Between 1950 and 1984 the number of students enrolled in universities jumped from 1.2 million to 5.3 million, spawning a new elite of technocrats with middle-class values and attitudes. Nikita Khrushchev was the first Soviet leader to respond to the pressures building up from below for a more resilient and adaptive political system. His de-Stalinization attempts were blocked but not reversed. Similarly, although Alexei Kosygin's economic reforms during the 1960s failed, his concept of a "socialist market" was never repudiated. The ailing Yuri Andropov, during his brief tenure in office, failed to consolidate his control but was sensitive to the turbulence beneath the surface and consciously paved the way for Gorbachev.

As Martin Walker has observed, "Mikhail Gorbachev did not come out of nowhere. He was a product of the surging growth in Soviet education and in new professions, and of the new social mix that resulted . . . of booming black markets, changing lifestyles, new class divisions and new social expectations. . . . The country went through a social revolution while Brezhnev slept."[3]

Just as Brezhnev's decision to invade Afghanistan was one of the last spasms of a dying Stalinist old guard, so the withdrawal marked the triumphant emergence of a new generation of leadership. The account that follows puts the last decade of the Cold War in a new light by showing the importance of *perestroika*—and diplomacy—in bringing about a withdrawal often explained almost entirely in terms of military pressure.

At the same time, this account makes clear that Soviet objectives in Afghanistan were limited from the start. Moscow did not launch its invasion as the first step in a master plan to dominate the Persian Gulf, as most observers believed at the time. Rather, after stumbling into a morass of Afghan political factionalism, the Soviet Union resorted to military force in a last desperate effort to forestall what it perceived as the threat of an American-supported Afghan Tito on its borders. Differences surfaced soon thereafter within the Soviet leadership over the wisdom of this decision, leading as early as 1983 to serious probes for a way out that were rejected by an American leadership bent on exploiting Soviet discomfiture. The advent of Gorbachev in 1985 immediately resulted in the intensified pursuit of a settlement more than eighteen months before the introduction of the Stinger missile often credited with bringing him to the bargaining table.

Despite the widespread stereotype of a Soviet military defeat, Soviet forces were securely entrenched in Afghanistan when the Geneva Accords were finally

signed on April 14, 1988. The Red Army did not withdraw in the wake of a Waterloo or a Dien Bien Phu. Confronted by a military and political stalemate, Gorbachev decided to disengage because the accords offered a pragmatic way to escape from the growing costs of the deadlock and to open the way for improved relations with the West. *Perestroika* was the indispensable prerequisite for the withdrawal, and diplomacy, reinforced by military pressure, made it happen.

To say that the Afghan war brought the Soviet Union to its knees and led to the unraveling of the Soviet system, as some observers do,[4] turns reality on its head. It was precisely because Andropov and Gorbachev recognized the shortcomings of the Soviet system that they began to question the relevance of the Soviet model for other countries, notably Afghanistan, and to search for a way to disengage. What was happening in the Soviet Union itself led to a new way of looking at Soviet domestic priorities and to "new thinking" in foreign policy. Disengagement from Afghanistan was the logical first step. The sudden breakdown of the Soviet state three years later and the overthrow of Gorbachev resulted from his inability to keep pace with the accelerated pressures for change that his own reforms had generated, especially pressures from the non-Russian republics for a looser confederation than he had envisaged. To be sure, the Afghan debacle contributed to the psychological malaise that made the unraveling of 1991 possible. But *perestroika* and the dissolution of the Soviet state were both part of the same historical continuum of domestic social and economic transformation. Our analysis goes far to validate the view that the Cold War would have continued to wind down even if the 1991 collapse had not occurred.[5]

The record presented here modifies and in some cases destroys altogether many of the distorted images of the Afghan war years fostered by the disinformation that emanated from the Soviet Union, the United States, Pakistan, and the contending Afghan antagonists.

In place of the stereotype of a monolithic Soviet leadership bent on expansion, Part I reveals that an agonizing internal debate over whether to intervene raged beginning in March 1979. Politburo minutes reveal that the same leaders who decided on intervention in December were keenly aware of its hazards nine months earlier. New evidence presented here underlines the bitter turf warfare that raged between rival Soviet intelligence agencies over how to salvage a faction-ridden Afghan Communist regime and, in particular, over which Afghans to support. This internecine conflict enabled Afghan Communist leader Babrak Karmal to feed Soviet fears of American links with his rival, Hafizullah Amin, thus tipping the scales in the Soviet debate in favor of intervention. Significant differences also existed within the Soviet military establishment. While party commissars in the armed forces favored intervention, the General Staff was more cautious, urging that Soviet forces be used only to secure cities and key installations, with combat operations left to the Afghan Army. Memoirs by Soviet generals and Afghan resistance leaders alike show that the Red Army did initially attempt to remain in its garrisons but was drawn into combat by increasingly frequent resistance offensives.

Similarly, the stereotype of a benign American commitment to peace and

Afghan self-determination masked a more complex reality. The United States government was itself divided from the start between "bleeders," who wanted to keep Soviet forces pinned down in Afghanistan and thus to avenge Vietnam, and "dealers," who wanted to compel their withdrawal through a combination of diplomacy and military pressure. In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance proposed to President Jimmy Carter that the United States offer to neutralize Iran and Pakistan in exchange for a Soviet withdrawal. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was able to kill the idea in one of the least-noticed but most important of his many clashes with Vance. Brzezinski wanted the Soviet Union to be cast in the role of defendant before the court of world public opinion. For this reason, Moscow consistently sought to avoid U.S.-Soviet negotiations on Afghanistan, while agreeing as early as 1980 to accept United Nations mediation that would nominally be between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with Moscow and Washington in the background.

As Part II shows, the United States did its best to prevent the emergence of a U.N. role, actively working to replace Pakistani leaders who sought an Afghan peace settlement with others who were ready for a Pakistani role as a conduit for aid to the Afghan resistance. Once the U.N. process started, Washington gave nominal support to the negotiations but refused to become even superficially involved. Gorbachev's emergence encouraged the "dealers" in Washington to work for greater U.S. cooperation with the U.N. diplomatic effort that is the focus of this book. But the "bleeders" fought against the Geneva Accords until the very end, arguing unsuccessfully that the United States should insist on the replacement of the Afghan Communist regime as a condition for signing the agreement.

Could the withdrawal have come sooner?

Part III shows that Andropov's overtures for negotiations in 1983 were serious. However, he faced significant opposition from Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Soviet Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov, and the Afghan Communist leader Karmal, who were strengthened by Reagan's "evil empire" speech in March and the negative American attitude toward the Geneva negotiations. Pakistani opponents of a settlement were also bolstered by the American stand. A positive American posture would have enabled Andropov to move more aggressively, though it is open to debate, given his failing health, whether he could have followed his initiative through to a conclusion.

Gorbachev, too, could have overcome the opposition to disengagement in Moscow and Kabul much more rapidly with American help. The Reagan Administration was slow to recognize that he wanted to disengage and divided over whether to push the U.N. mediation effort. Parts IV and V suggest that Moscow, for its part, might have been ready for a withdrawal in late 1985 and was in all likelihood ready soon after the Reykjavik summit in late 1986. It was in January 1987 that Moscow made its first offer to specify a withdrawal timetable in exchange for U.S. support of a coalition in Kabul with Communist participation, an offer rejected out of hand by Secretary of State George Shultz.

As Part VI elaborates, the withdrawal was delayed primarily by disagreement over who would rule in Kabul after Soviet forces left. The war could have

ended sooner than it did, but only if Moscow or Washington or both had been willing to break loose from its Afghan clients as part of a cooperative shift to a broad-based coalition regime. Neither the Afghan Communist Party nor Pakistan-sponsored Islamic fundamentalist elements of the resistance represented the unorganized majority of Afghans. Afghan leaders did create a representative resistance coalition—the Loi Jirga movement of 1980—but Pakistani intelligence agencies killed this promising indigenous initiative. Pursuing its own historically rooted objectives, Islamabad insisted on channeling the lion's share of U.S. aid to fundamentalist-dominated resistance groups as the price for its role as a conduit. The United States paid the piper but did not call the tune. American acquiescence in the Pakistani demand for a fundamentalist-dominated government in Kabul with no Communist representation strengthened those in Moscow who believed that only a Communist-led regime could survive for the "decent interval" desired after Soviet forces left.

The U.N. mediation effort was addressed solely to achieving a negotiated solution to the international aspects of the Afghan conflict. The promotion of a coalition government was beyond its formal mandate. Indeed, U.N. member states resist what they consider intrusions into their internal affairs. Nevertheless, when the U.N. concluded that the parties concerned were unwilling or unable to establish a broad-based Afghan government, the U.N. decided to bend its own rules and made two proposals for a political solution in Kabul that were largely ignored by the superpowers.

Although the regime of Najibullah* did in fact survive for four years, the end result of the Soviet-American failure to cooperate with the U.N. in establishing a coalition regime has been continued bloodshed in Kabul and the emergence of well-armed fundamentalist forces in a society traditionally hostile to fundamentalist dogma. Moreover, the fact that the United States tolerated or was unable to stop Islamabad's support of fundamentalist factions has had ugly consequences. The CIA inadvertently colluded in the training of fundamentalist zealots from a variety of Islamic countries who have been implicated in terrorism against the World Trade Center and other Western and even Islamic targets.

The chaos that followed Najibullah's ouster was foreordained by the American and Soviet attitude toward the key military aid provisions of the Geneva Accords. After an interval in which the accords were respected, both sides blatantly violated the central philosophy and intention of the settlement: that once concluded it should lead to international disengagement from Afghanistan in all essential respects. In December 1985 the Reagan Administration accepted the prohibition on military aid to the resistance in Article Two, Section Eight of the accords, only to renege on this commitment at the eleventh hour. Washington objected to the fact that the accords made no reference to whether the Soviet Union could or could not provide military support to the Kabul regime. The reason for this asymmetry is explained by Yaqub Khan, Pakistan's principal negotiator during the first five years of the Geneva negotiations. Yaqub points out in an interview recounted in Part VI that the Democratic Republic

* Najibullah uses only one name.

of Afghanistan, as an accredited Member State of the United Nations, had a legal status basically different from that of the resistance groups, a status reflected in the fact that it was a party to the accords.

We share Yaqub's conviction that the chances for postwar stability in Afghanistan would have been greatly enhanced if the United States and Pakistan had lived up to their commitments. At the same time, it is most regrettable that Gorbachev and his advisers adopted a posture on the military aid issue that conflicted with their own earlier stand. Soviet negotiators had stated on numerous occasions during the U.N. mediation process that Moscow would not need to resupply Kabul with military assistance if the U.S. stopped its aid. Nevertheless, it was Moscow that provoked the "symmetry" controversy in early 1988 by stating that it reserved the right to continue its military aid to Kabul after the completion of the withdrawal. When Secretary of State Shultz made a proposal for "negative symmetry" that envisaged an arms aid moratorium by both sides, Moscow balked. Shultz then reached a secret agreement on "positive symmetry" with Moscow and declared that the U.S. reserved its right to continue aid. The Reagan Administration also reached a cynical understanding with Pakistan: If the Soviets continued to supply military assistance to Kabul, Islamabad could violate the accords. Less than two years later, after Moscow and Washington had poured in substantial new inputs of weaponry, the Soviet Union did agree belatedly to "negative symmetry."

Defenders of "positive symmetry" argue that it reflected inescapable political realities in Washington and Moscow and was the unavoidable price for the withdrawal. Whether or not one accepts this judgment, it should be recognized that equally inescapable political realities made an asymmetrical approach on the critical military aid issue necessary in order to entice the Soviet Union into negotiating a withdrawal. Moscow was drawn into serious participation in the Geneva negotiations only because the initial draft of the accords envisaged an end to U.S. military aid. Once Pakistan and later the United States accepted this approach, Moscow became enmeshed in a spider web of commitments to the accords as a whole. By the time the United States "moved the goalposts" in early 1988, Gorbachev had publicly pledged to withdraw by May 15.

In the end, despite the U.S. shift, the accords offered Moscow a much better way out than a unilateral withdrawal because they conferred international recognition on the continuance of the Kabul regime. It was this central face-saving feature of the accords that made the withdrawal possible. Ironically, the United States was willing to let the regime remain in place only because it assumed that Najibullah would quickly be overthrown.

Some observers have suggested that the Soviet Union would eventually have withdrawn, in any case, even without a Geneva agreement. In the absence of the accords, however, Moscow would have been free to make a partial withdrawal, keeping a significant residual force in Afghanistan to guard Kabul and other key centers. It would have been an incomplete, uncertain, and reversible process, subject to political pressures from Najibullah and his allies in the Kremlin. Part VI reveals that in April 1988, shortly before the conclusion of the accords, Foreign Minister Edward Shevardnadze and KGB chief Vladimir Khrychkov

did, in fact, press for a revision of the 1978 Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty that would have permitted the return of Soviet troops to Afghanistan under certain circumstances. Gorbachev rebuffed this initiative as well as three subsequent attempts to circumvent the accords by introducing new Soviet forces in Afghanistan both during and after the withdrawal.

Given Moscow's desire not to be cast in the role of defendant at the bar, the United Nations was uniquely placed to play its critical role in negotiating the withdrawal. As this account shows, however, the U.N. effort succeeded because the Secretary General's mediation mandate was implemented with a degree of flexibility unprecedented in U.N. annals. In effect, the mediation process became a negotiating process. When Pakistan refused face-to-face talks, the format of "proximity talks" in adjacent rooms was systematically utilized to permit rapid interchange. "Notes for the Record," a device not hitherto used in U.N. mediation, evolved into the building blocks of the agreed text that eventually emerged. More important, the twelve rounds of formal diplomatic interchange conducted in Geneva over a six-year period were nurtured by a sustained indirect negotiating process carried out through shuttle diplomacy. The process became a mutually reinforcing network of bilateral negotiations between the U.N. and each of the four governments directly concerned, as well as with other governments and unofficial personalities in a position to influence the negotiations.

A remarkable characteristic of the Cold War period was that each superpower tacitly acknowledged the supremacy of the other in its own sphere of influence. Open intervention by the United States in Guatemala (1954) and Cuba (1961), and even the U.S. armed invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965, produced only mild verbal reactions from Moscow. Similarly, the Soviet interventions in East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), and Czechoslovakia (1968) had no significant reactions in Washington. Only three weeks after the Czech invasion President Johnson declared in a speech his hope that the "setback" would only be "very temporary." A corollary of this implicit understanding was that the U.N. was consistently prevented from playing but a marginal role in such situations, usually confined to rhetorical admonitions and pious requests by the General Assembly or the Security Council to end the offensive actions. Both sides rebuffed repeated attempts by two successive Secretaries General to mediate in the Vietnam war.

When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan the reaction in the West was unprecedented and the U.N. was therefore able to play an unprecedented mediation role between the superpowers. In the Cuban missile crisis, the U.N. played a brief and marginal intermediary role, but in the Afghan case the U.N. was the major channel for resolving the conflict from beginning to end. As part of its mediation effort the U.N. prodded Washington and Moscow in turn to make concessions that seemed marginal to each at the time but that served cumulatively to build irresistible momentum. The most conspicuous case in point was the announcement by the United States in December 1985 that it would join with the Soviet Union in guaranteeing the U.N. agreement then emerging if it contained a satisfactory withdrawal timetable. Part IV shows that the "bleeders" in the Reagan Administration saw no chance of a Soviet withdrawal and went along

with the U.S. commitment to be a guarantor solely as a psychological warfare gambit against Moscow.

This account points up repeatedly the impact of the Geneva negotiations on the internal policy struggles over Afghanistan not only in Washington and Moscow but also in Kabul and Islamabad. With more diverse information sources and greater psychological and intellectual receptivity, the U.N. from the start was more sensitive than the cold warriors in Western capitals and Islamabad to the changes simmering beneath the surface in Moscow. By fashioning an agreement tolerable to Soviet hawks, the U.N. consciously promoted the process of reappraisal that began during the Andropov years and was to come to its climax after the advent of Gorbachev. Similarly, the U.N. negotiations gradually strengthened the "dealers" in Washington and Islamabad who were prepared to facilitate a withdrawal as part of a broader improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations.

The central theme emerging from this book is that the Cold War world was dominated by the superpower rivalry but not by the superpowers. Moscow and Washington saw themselves as the puppeteers pulling the strings. More often than not, however, they were manipulated by clients who had their own agendas. Rival Afghan Communist leaders viewed the Soviet Union as a vehicle for promoting parochial goals and personal ambitions. Sensitive to Moscow's internecine divisions, they fought their battles against each other with the aid of contending Soviet factions. Similarly, Mohammed Zia Ul Haq and his fellow generals in Pakistan were quick to recognize that the Soviet invasion could be utilized to get military aid from the United States. Playing the role of a "front line state" enabled them to strengthen the domestic power position of their military regime and to improve Pakistan's balance of power with India. Islamabad bargained skillfully, periodically demanding upgraded military aid as the price for its cooperation with the CIA in Afghanistan. The Pakistan-sponsored factions of the Afghan resistance were also pursuing their own objectives, stockpiling vast quantities of armament during the war years for use in postwar Afghan power struggles.

Although both superpowers invoked noble objectives, both treated Afghanistan in reality as a pawn in their global struggle. Historians will properly point the finger of guilt at the Soviet Union for its unprecedented violation of international norms and its contemptible brutality in the prosecution of the conflict. The fortitude of the *mujahideen* understandably inspired American and other international support for their cause. For much of the war, however, American policy amounted to "fighting to the last Afghan" because the United States failed to couple its support for the *mujahideen* with support for the U.N. peace effort. Blinded by its distrust of Moscow, Washington distrusted the United Nations as well. Thus, while Moscow is the villain, there are no heroes, except for the silent majority of Afghans who survived the horrors of the war years and are now left to rebuild their ravaged land with little help or sympathy from a world that has forgotten them.