

**The London School of Economics and Political
Science**

*A Long Goodbye: The Politics and Diplomacy of the
Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan, 1980-1992*

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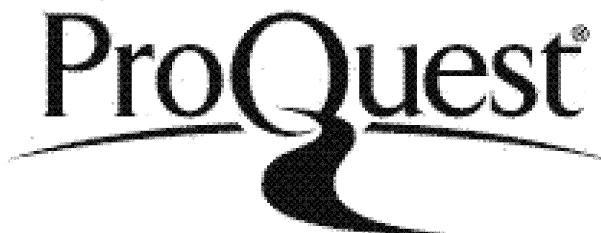


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Abstract

This thesis explores the politics and diplomacy of Soviet efforts to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. Although Soviet leaders began looking for a way out of the conflict soon after the introduction of Soviet troops in December 1979, the war dragged on because Moscow was afraid of the damage that a failure in Afghanistan could do to its reputation as a leader of the communist world and a supporter of national liberation movements in the Third World. Even as Soviet diplomats engaged in international diplomacy in an effort to secure an agreement for a withdrawal, Moscow looked for ways to stabilise its client government in Kabul. This characterised Soviet policy in the region from 1979 onward, not only under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev and Yuri Andropov, but even under the reform-minded Mikhail Gorbachev.

In addition to providing a detailed study of an important and often-misinterpreted conflict, the thesis also situates the Soviet intervention within the growing body of scholarship seeking to understand the Cold War in global context, particularly with regard to the Third World. Thus the thesis focuses on the broader international dimensions of Soviet efforts in Afghanistan, particularly the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, while also showing that communist leaders in Afghanistan were often able to manipulate Soviet decision-making in support of their own internal rivalries. The thesis argues that ongoing Soviet involvement in Afghanistan in the 1980s must be seen in the context of the Kremlin's official commitment to the Third World, despite the associated difficulties of such a policy.

“The day you get in and the day you get out.”
-Avon Barksdale

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At the end of the day this project would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of those closest to me, and so it is my grandmother, my family, and Dayna I must thank, for thinking this was a good idea and reminding me of the same when I found it hard to believe, and for much much more.

Abbreviations

CC	Central Committee
CDSP	Current Digest of the Soviet Press
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CRA	Council of Religious Affairs (USSR)
DRA	Democratic Republic of Afghanistan
DYOA	Democratic Youth Organization of Afghanistan
GARF	State Archive of the Russian Federation
GFA	Gorbachev Foundation Archives
GRU	Main Intelligence Directorate (Soviet military intelligence)
KGB	Committee of State Security (USSR)
KhAD	State Information Services (DRA)
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
RA	Republic of Afghanistan
RGAE	Russian State Archive of the Economy
RGANI	Russian State Archive of Contemporary History
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty
SAM	Surface to Air Missile
UNGOMAP	United Nations Good Offices Mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan
WAD	Ministry of State Security

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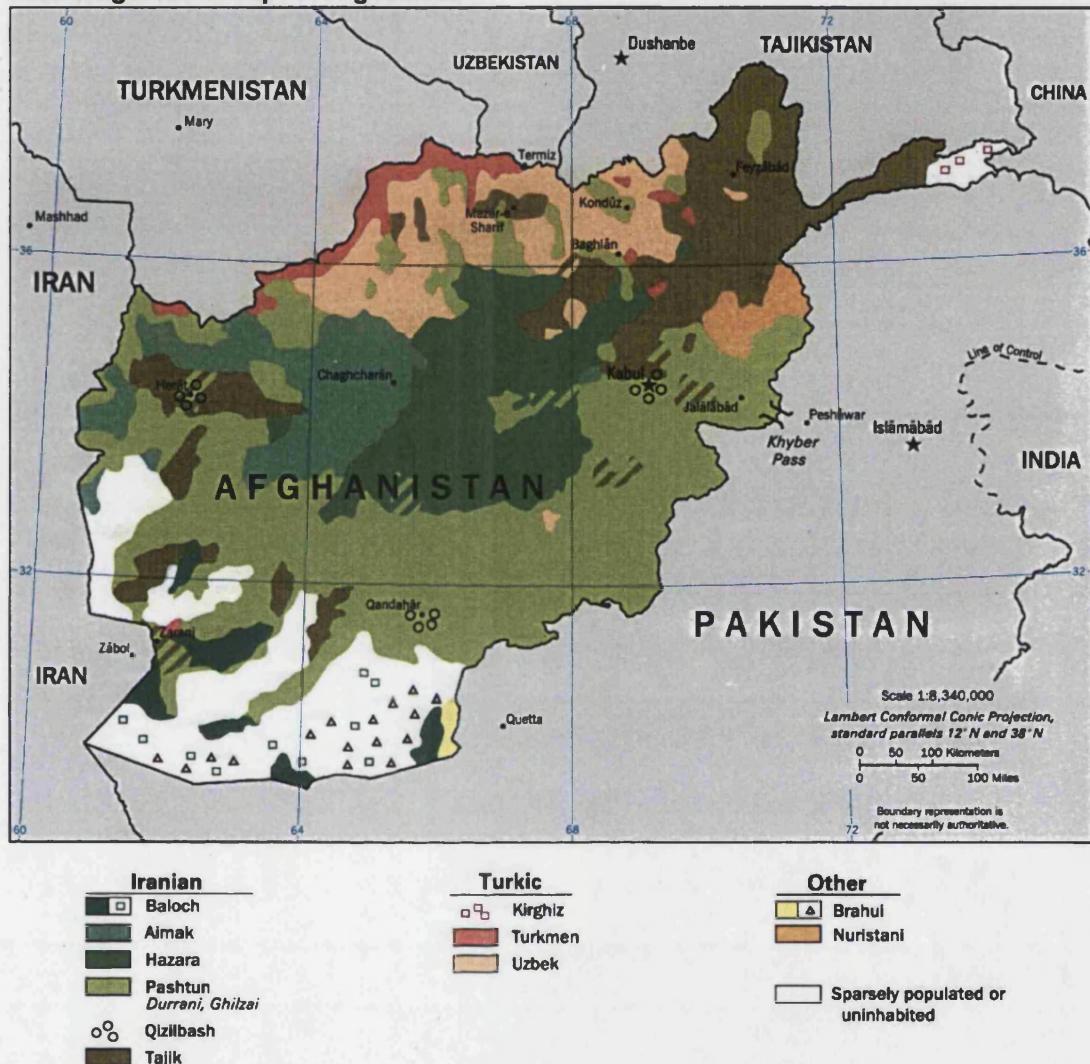
Map 1: Political map of Afghanistan, 1986



Source: Perry-Castañeda Library Afghanistan Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/afghanistan_rel86.jpg
(Accessed July 23, 2009)

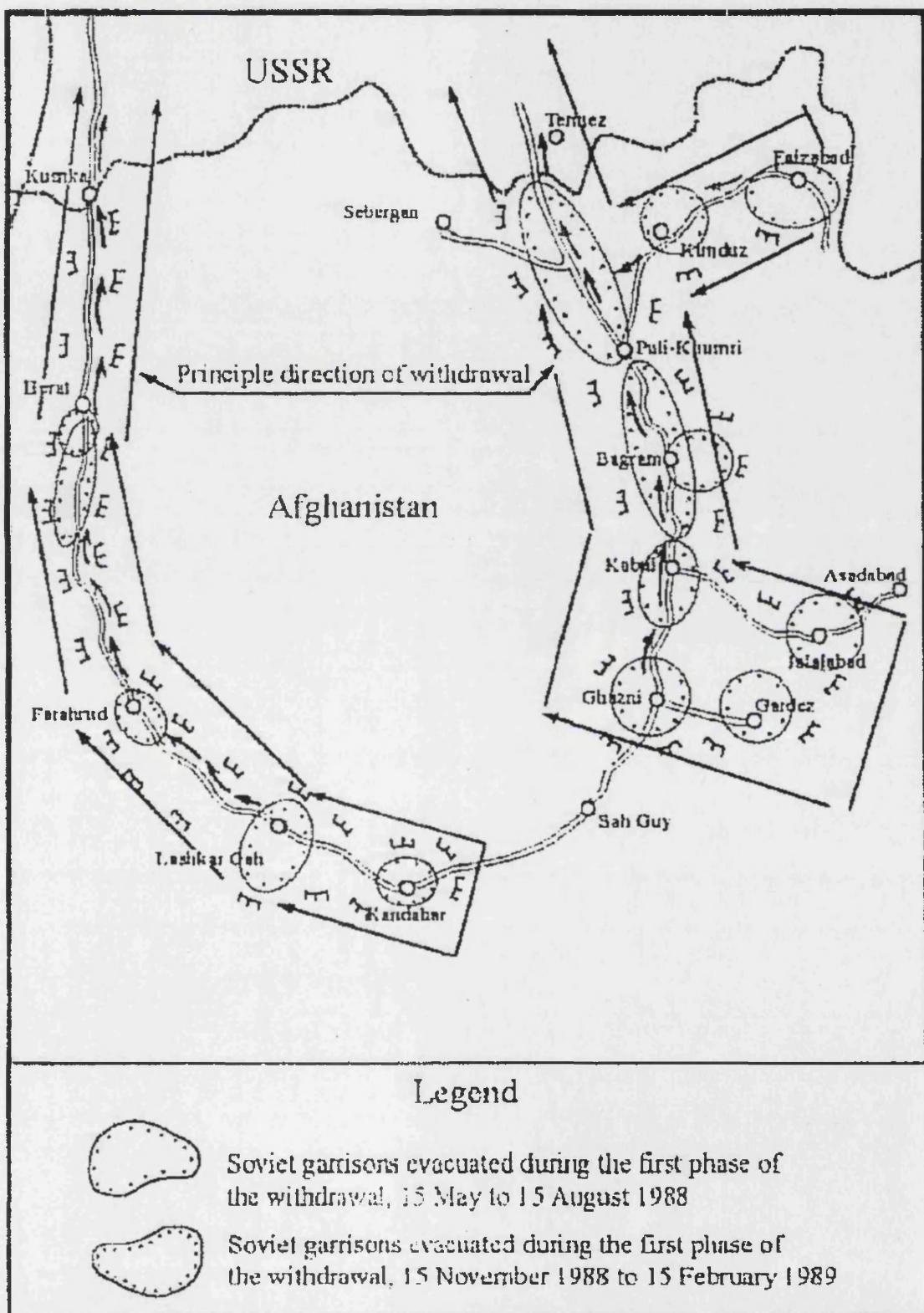
Map 2: Ethnolinguistic Groups in Afghanistan

Ethnolinguistic Groups in Afghanistan



Source: Afghan and Central Asia Research Information, Indiana University
http://www.indiana.edu/~afghan/maps/afghanistan_ethnolinguistic_map_1997.jpg
 (Accessed July 23, 2009)

Map 3: General Concept and Scheme of Soviet Withdrawal



Source: Grau, Lester W. "Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos" *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 2007, 20(2): 248.

Introduction

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979-1989) was easily one of the bloodiest of Cold War conflicts. By the time Soviet forces withdrew they had suffered over 13,000 casualties and 40,000 wounded. Yet the carnage did not end there. Between 1989 and 1992, the government of the Republic of Afghanistan, supported by Soviet advisers and armaments, continued to hold out against *mujahadeen* groups backed by Pakistan, the United States, and Saudi Arabia. The Republic of Afghanistan outlasted the Soviet Union by almost five months, but its collapse only precipitated a new phase of civil war, which in one form or another continues to the present day.

The intervention in Afghanistan was the culmination of the Soviet Union's involvement with the Third World that began in the 1950s and was extended throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In terms of military aid alone, the decade saw Soviet advisers taking part in the Egyptian-Israeli War of Attrition (1970), the Angolan civil war (from 1975), and the Somali-Ethiopian conflict in the Ogaden desert (1977-78).¹ In the European theatre of the Cold War, Soviet leaders had also chosen military intervention when communist regimes were threatened in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). Broadly speaking, all of these involvements were undertaken to shore up Soviet friendly regimes and demonstrate Moscow's willingness to use force on behalf of allies. Yet while the intervention in Afghanistan had its precedents, it also became a turning point. The war, so costly in blood and treasure, forced Soviet leaders to reevaluate interventions as instruments of foreign policy. Thus when a crisis broke out in Poland in the summer of 1980, threatening the regime in Warsaw, even an ardent pro-

¹ As Karen Brutents, former deputy of the International Department of the CC CPSU put it, there was a certain "logical progression" in the decisions to intervene or provide significant military aid from Angola to Ethiopia to Afghanistan. The seeming success of the first two interventions, and the general climate of Cold War confrontation in the late 1970s both set the context for the decision to intervene in Afghanistan. Georgii Kornienko, a Deputy Foreign Minister who also took part in the discussion, agreed with Brutents: "This competition of superpowers had its own logic...Angola, it's okay. Why not Ethiopia? It's okay. Just as Czechoslovakia defined what we could do in Europe." See O. Arne Westad, ed., "US-Soviet Relations and Soviet Foreign Policy toward the Middle East and Africa in the 1970s," Transcript from a workshop at Lysebu, October 1-3 1994 (Oslo: Norwegian Nobel Institute, 1995), 49-52.

interventionist like KGB Chairman Yurii Andropov conceded that “the quota of interventions abroad has been exhausted.”²

Historians approaching the Afghan war in the years since 1992 have primarily been interested in understanding why the Soviet Union intervened in the first place, or on the military aspects of the intervention. My thesis poses a different question: why did it take the Soviet Union so long to bring its troops home? After all, shortly after the invasion Soviet leaders realised that the intervention was becoming a quagmire with serious costs for their relationship with the rest of the world. This question is particularly important because it relates not only to the war in Afghanistan but also to the debate about changes in Soviet foreign-policy thinking in the 1980s, the emergence and influence of New Political Thinking, and the potential of superpower cooperation and UN involvement in resolving regional conflicts.

This thesis will therefore be primarily a study in the history of Soviet decision-making. It will look at the political struggles behind the decision to withdraw within the Politburo and other institutions involved in the foreign policy process in the Soviet Union, including the military and the KGB. In seeking to understand why certain policies triumphed over others and why key decisions were made (or delayed), this thesis will analyze the impact of ideology, political legacy, patron-client relations, superpower diplomacy, and bureaucratic politics on elite decision making during the Afghan war.

I will put forward the hypothesis that Soviet leaders found it difficult to disengage from the Afghan conflict because they feared undermining Moscow’s status as a defender of Third World countries against encroaching neo-colonialism. Notably, they also continued to believe that the USSR could help stabilise the country, build up the Afghan armed forces, and make the Kabul government more acceptable to its

² Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 267.

people. Efforts at withdrawal were complicated by cold war tensions, particularly in 1980-85, divisions among Soviet officials and agencies involved in Afghanistan, and the persistence of an “Afghan lobby” within the Soviet leadership that refused to concede defeat in Afghanistan. This hypothesis will be tested through analysis of decision-making and diplomacy in the years immediately following the invasion and particularly in the period after Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Historiography

There is, as yet, no comprehensive historical account of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, but the topic has been addressed widely by former policy makers and diplomats. There has also been no account of the withdrawal based primarily on archival research.³

Writing on the Afghan war began soon after the introduction of Soviet troops. The invasion was sharply criticised by both the left and the right in the West, and this was reflected in contemporary accounts by specialists on the Soviet Union and Afghanistan. It was often assumed that the invasion was part of an attempt to spread Soviet influence and bring it closer to the Persian Gulf, although a number of more nuanced accounts challenged this view.⁴ The ultimate costliness of the invasion to the USSR and its aftermath in diplomatic, human, and economic terms meant that scholars continued to wonder about why the Brezhnev leadership chose to invade Afghanistan.

³ Aleksandr Liakhovskii *Tragedia i doblest' Afgana* [The Tragedy and Valour of Afghanistan] (Moscow: Nord, 2004). Although the invasion of Afghanistan by NATO forces in 2001 has renewed interest in the Soviet experience there, there have been few attempts at overviews of the Soviet war effort. The exceptions largely ignore the politics, diplomacy, and decision-making behind the war, and focus instead on the experience of soldiers and military operations in general. See, for example, Gregory Feifer *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

⁴ See David K. Shipler, “Out of Afghanistan,” *Journal of International Affairs* 1989 42(2): 477-486 for a survey of the literature from this period. Among those who noted the defensive nature of the intervention were Harry Gelman, although he also believed that Soviet leaders saw the Afghan revolution as an opportunity to spread their influence southward. See Harry Gelman *The Brezhnev Politburo and the Decline of Détente* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 170-171.

Naturally, the end of the Cold War and the opening of Soviet archives made it possible to explore this vital question the first time. How and why the Brezhnev leadership decided to invade Afghanistan turned out to be of interest not only to scholars but to the Soviet government itself. Soon after the withdrawal a commission was set up to review this question. As a result, numerous documents were declassified and some even published in the late Soviet era. Both Russian and Western scholars have made use of these documents to re-evaluate the earlier conclusions drawn by their colleagues. The result was a radically different understanding of the decision-making process and motivations behind the Soviet decision to invade. If some contemporary commentators saw the invasion as part of a planned Soviet expansion towards the Persian Gulf, archivally-based of the decision to invade accounts have shown that in fact Soviet leaders were largely responding to events in 1979.⁵

The change in our understanding of the decision to invade highlights the importance of archival research, combined with careful oral history and combing of primary sources such as memoirs, for testing assumptions about how decisions were made in the Soviet Union. Thus far, the scholarly treatments of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan have come primarily from International Relations scholars using the withdrawal as a test-case for learning theory. These studies tend to focus heavily on the influence of “new thinking.” Andrew Bennett, in his thoughtful and stimulating study on Soviet thinking about interventionism, interprets the Soviet invasion in light of Soviet thinking about interventionism in the 1970s; that experience, and the influence of “new thinking,” moved Gorbachev to reassess interventionism in general as well as the

⁵ See, for example, Odd Arne Westad, “Concerning the Situation in A: New Russian Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 8-9 (Washington: Wilson Center Press, 1996). David N. Gibbs, “Reassessing Soviet Motives for Invading Afghanistan: A Declassified History,” *Critical Asian Studies* 2006 38(2): 239-263 or Matt W. Wolf, “Stumbling Towards War: The Soviet Decision to Invade Afghanistan,” *Past Imperfect* 2006 (12): 1-19.

relationship between third-world conflicts and US-Soviet relations.⁶ An earlier study by Sarah Mendelsohn argued Gorbachev wanted to withdraw as soon as he came to power, but was held back by the conservative security elite. This view was voiced in the early 1990s in interviews given by one of Gorbachev's closest and most liberal associates, Aleksandr Iakovlev. Mendelsohn views the withdrawal as a result of Gorbachev's successful maneuvering to oust the conservatives in the leadership, including such figures as long time Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko.⁷

More recently this view of the interaction between internal domestic political struggles and the decision making process behind the withdrawal has been partially revised, primarily in more general works on the Soviet Union, the Cold War, and the Gorbachev era. As Vladislav Zubok points out, Gorbachev's first few years did not see the ideological divides that became apparent later, something most clearly evident in the case of Afghanistan. Zubok points out that Gorbachev resisted calls from both liberals and conservatives to withdraw, siding instead with those who supported various efforts to maintain the pro-Soviet government in Kabul.⁸ A similar conclusion was reached in Melvyn Leffler's overview of the Cold War, *For the Soul of Mankind*.⁹ Looking at the conduct of the withdrawal and its effects, several recent articles highlight the important successes of Soviet diplomatic efforts and of military planning in ensuring a withdrawal in good order.¹⁰

Contemporary responses to the Geneva Accords (April 1988) and the withdrawal often reflected a highly suspicious view of Soviet actions and a serious

⁶ Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition? The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973-1996* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), 212-213, 292-294.

⁷ Sarah E. Mendelsohn *Changing Course: Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal From Afghanistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁸ Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 296-297.

⁹ Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind : the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).

¹⁰ Lester W. Grau, "Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos" *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20(2): 235-261

Alex Marshall, "Managing Withdrawal: Afghanistan as the Forgotten Example in Attempting Conflict Resolution and State Reconstruction" *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 2007 18(1): 68-89

misunderstanding of Soviet motivations in agreeing to the accords. A collection of essays on Afghanistan published in 1989 epitomised this view. In the only chapter dealing explicitly with the accords, the authors (also the editors of the volume) expressed their concern that the Geneva Accords left Afghanistan vulnerable to Soviet re-invasion and that, by not demanding “immediate withdrawal,” the accords gave the USSR the opportunity to change its mind and leave troops in. They rejected the proposition that the USSR would have withdrawn unilaterally anyway, and they credit the introduction of the Stinger missiles with inducing the USSR to get out.¹¹ Some scholars were more perceptive, however, taking note of the political and ideological difficulties inherent in a perceived “disengagement under duress.”¹² My own interpretation of the Accords is closest to that of Alvin Z. Rubinstein, who saw them as a culmination of efforts undertaken by Gorbachev between 1985 and 1988 to disengage from Afghanistan.¹³

There is also a range of opinions amongst former Soviet actors regarding the decision to withdraw that reflect the divisions within the Soviet foreign policymaking establishment. On the one hand, professional diplomats and former Foreign Ministry officials who were involved in the Geneva negotiations, as well as Soviet-Afghan relations, tend to highlight the importance of the accords but are critical of Gorbachev and Shevardnadze for their handling of Afghan policy. The most prominent of these is former Deputy Foreign Minister Georgii Kornienko, who publicised his view in a number of different publications. His account of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan appears in *Glazami marshala i diplomata* [Through the Eyes of a Marshal and a Diplomat], *Kholodnaia voina: svidetelstvo ee uchastnika* [Cold War: Testimony

¹¹ Amin Saikal and William Malley “The Geneva Accords of April 1988” in Saikal and Malley, eds., *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12-28.

¹² Marvin G. Weinbaum “The Soviet Union and Afghanistan,” in Edward A. Kolodziej and Roger E. Kanet, eds *The Limits of Soviet Power in the Developing World: Thermidor in Revolutionary Struggle* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), 248-249.

¹³ Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Moscow’s Third World Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 274-279.

of a Participant], as well as in an English-language journal.¹⁴ Kornienko belongs to the group of Soviet leaders (along with his one time co-author, Marshal Sergei Akhromeev) who originally supported Gorbachev's reforms and later became disenchanted with him. Kornienko blames Gorbachev for wavering in his commitment to withdrawal and shifting between different positions. According to Kornienko, this resulted in significant delays in the withdrawal. Kornienko's views are similar to those offered by other "professional" diplomats such as Nikolai Egorychev.¹⁵ Their general distrust of Shevardnadze, a party functionary with no diplomatic experience before he was appointed Foreign Minister by Gorbachev, and disillusionment with Gorbachev himself is related to their assessment of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

On the other hand, former military officers take another position and are almost uniformly critical of Gorbachev and even more critical of the accords. While some, like retired General Boris Gromov, are restrained, others, like Valentin Varenikov, the chief of staff representative in Afghanistan (in effect the chief coordinator of combat and advisory activity), do not hold back on their dissatisfaction with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze. They see the Geneva process as an example of the "new thinkers'" tendency to sell out to the West, and believe that while the decision to withdraw troops was the correct one, this should have been done unilaterally, since the Geneva accords did not put any demands on the Pakistani or US side anyway.¹⁶ Like the Foreign Ministry officials, these military memoirists are highly critical of the KGB's role in Afghanistan, both for its part in the decision to send in troops and its role in bypassing

¹⁴ Georgii M. Kornienko, Sergei A. Akhromeev *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata* [Through the Eyes of a Marshall and Diplomat] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnie Otnoshenia, 1992), G.M.Kornienko, *Kholodnaia voina: Svidetel'stvo ee uchastnika* [Cold War: Testimony of a Participant] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnie Otnoshenia, 2001), G.M. Kornienko, . "The Afghan Endeavor: Perplexities of the Military Incursion and Withdrawal," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 18(2), 1994.

¹⁵ "Afghanistan stoil name 15 milliardov dollarov v god" [Afghanistan cost us 15 billion dollars a year] (Interview with N.Egorychev) *Kommersant Vlast'*, No.46, November 25, 2002.

¹⁶ Boris V. Gromov *Ogranicheniy kontingent* [Limited Contingent] (Moscow: Progress, 1994), V.I. Varenikov *Nepovtorimoe tom 5: Afganistan* [Unrepeatable, volume 5: Afghanistan] (Moscow: Kniga i Biazness, 2002) also "Afganskii vopros ostanetsya v istorii" [The Afghan Question Will Remain in History] (Interview with General Valentin Varenikov) *Voenno-Promishlenny Courier* No.5 February 11-17 2002 Pg. 7

the military to convey Najibullah's demands to Moscow in the year prior to withdrawal.

These memoirs are very revealing of attitudes, but provide little specific information. A major exception is General Aleksandr Liakhovskii's *Tragedia i doblest' Afgana* [The Tragedy and Valor of Afghanistan], which arguably comes closest of existing works to a complete scholarly study of the war. Liakhovskii makes wide use of party and military documents, as well as interviews that he has conducted since the war with former co-participants. Still, Liakhovskii is strongest when writing about military operations, and when it comes to explaining policy-making he often relies on conjecture, which in turn is shaped by the distrust of "new thinkers" that he shares with the other military memoirists.¹⁷

Neither Gorbachev nor Shevardnadze have commented on their role in the withdrawal in a significant way until very recently. Both men make only passing mention to it in their memoirs. Gorbachev emphasises the importance of Geneva as a negotiated settlement of a Third World conflict, but does not say anything about the political struggles that led to it nor of his relations with the Afghan communists.¹⁸ Shevardnadze offers little more in his own memoirs, although the few lines he devotes there to Afghanistan are revealing. Shevardnadze writes that after signing the accords, he left Geneva with mixed feelings, with the sense that he was abandoning a friend and ally.¹⁹ In fact, as the thesis will show, Shevardnadze's sense that the USSR must not abandon its allies in Kabul was a driving force behind his own role in the conflict. Similarly, in an interview with the radio station *Ekho Moskvy* on the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet withdrawal (February 1989), Gorbachev said with some pride that while he believed Soviet troops had to leave Afghanistan, they must not "run" from

¹⁷ Aleksandr A. Liakhovskii *Tragedia i doblest' Afgana* [The Tragedy and Valor of Afghanistan] (Moscow: Nord, 2004)

¹⁸ Mikhail Gorbachev *Memoirs* (London: Doubleday, 1996), 458.

¹⁹ Eduard Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991), 69.

there since such a departure would be difficult to explain both domestically and abroad.²⁰

Soviet decision-making is only part of the story, however, and Soviet diplomacy was only one element in a more complex matrix of relations between countries and non-state actors. Selig Harisson, in the book on the Geneva negotiations that he co-wrote with UN mediator Diego Cordovez, concludes that American intransigence on various details of the agreement made it very difficult for the Soviet leadership to agree to the Geneva accords and push its clients to do the same.²¹ Documentary evidence regarding this period in American politics is still sporadic, although major inroads have been made through the efforts of the National Security Archive in Washington DC.²² Extensive oral history research, most notably by *Washington Post* editor Steve Coll in his book *Ghost Wars*, as well as several memoirs including that of CIA Islamabad station chief Milton Bearden, suggest that two groups struggled for influence over US policy on Afghanistan under the Reagan administration. One group, “the bleeders” only wanted to see the USSR withdraw after the maximum price had been paid in blood and treasure (though it’s not clear if they ever defined what that maximum price might be). The other group took a more conciliatory approach, arguing that the US should facilitate the Soviet withdrawal and an end to the long conflict. US Secretary of State George Shultz manoeuvred between these positions, encouraging the Soviets to continue negotiations but also adopting an uncompromising and in some ways unreasonable position.²³

²⁰ Gorbachev Interview with *Echo Moskvy*, February 19, 2009, <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/beseda/572796-echo/> Accessed February 26, 2009.

²¹ Harisson, Selig and Cordovez, Diego *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²² See documents in the “September 11th Sourcebook,” as well as “US Policy on Afghanistan,” at the National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

²³ Steve Coll *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 11, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Dan Oberdofer, *The Turn: How The Cold War Came to an End* (London: Joanthan Cape, 1992); Milt Bearden and James Risen *The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the CIA’s Final Showdown with the KGB* (Novato: Presidio, 2004); George P. Shultz *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribners, 1993); Jack Matlock *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004).

A somewhat similar situation played out in Pakistan in the years between Gorbachev's assent to power and the withdrawal of Soviet troops. In this case, the conflict was between President Zia ul Haq, a fervent supporter of the mujahedeen, and the ISI, Pakistan's intelligence service, on one side, and Prime Minister Muhammed Khan Junejo and the professional diplomats on the other. The latter believed that everyone's interests would best be served by a quick Soviet withdrawal and were satisfied with a neutralist Afghanistan taking the place of the "Democratic Republic." The former, however, refused to be satisfied with anything short of a complete mujahedeen victory and the creation of an Islamic state, and pressured the Americans to pursue these goals at the Geneva negotiations and in bilateral dealings with the Russians. Once again knowledge of these intrigues is restricted to the views expressed in remarkably frank, but nevertheless, personal memoirs.²⁴ Finally, little is known about India's role, although, as a traditional player in the area, a friend of the USSR, and a foe of Pakistan, it almost certainly played an important role.²⁵

All of these issues are, of course, tied with the wider historiographical debates on the end of the Cold War. There has been a long running debate between "triumphalists," who believe that the US won the Cold War because of Reagan's tough approach to the Soviet Union and his increased defence spending, and those who believe that the Soviet Union collapsed because of internal problems (or under the weight of its Third World commitments, for instance.)²⁶ There has been a similar debate on the Afghanistan question, with "triumphalists" arguing that it was US support for the

²⁴ Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin *The Bear Trap: Afghanistan's Untold Story* (London: Leo Cooper, 1992), Riaz M. Khan *Untying the Afghan Knot: Negotiating Soviet Withdrawal* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). Mohammad Yousaf was the chief coordinator of ISI support for the Afghan opposition. Riaz M. Khan was the chief Pakistani negotiator at Geneva. In both cases, part of their frankness in approaching the subject seems to stem from the fact that some of the key Pakistani players, most notable President Zia, had passed from the scene by the time they took up the pen.

²⁵ For example, while India criticised the Soviet invasion, it also publicly accepted Soviet assurances that it was undertaken at Amin's request and criticised the funding and training of opposition fighters in Pakistan. See Arundhati Roy, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan: Causes Consequences, and India's Response* (New Delhi: Associated Publishing House, 1987).

²⁶ For a summary of this debate, see Vladislav Zubok "Why did the Cold War End in 1989?" in Westad, ed., *Reviewing the Cold War* (London: Frank Cass, 2000).

mujahedeen that forced the USSR to withdraw.²⁷ This view is rejected by most analysts, who believe that the withdrawal was a result of changes within the USSR and therefore acknowledge that, from a military point of view, the Red Army could have continued to fight the war indefinitely.²⁸

There is also the question of the role played by individuals. Few leaders have stimulated as much scholarship debating their role in history as Gorbachev. Western authors, in general, praise him as the USSR's first truly democratic leader and the liberator of the communist bloc.²⁹ Conversely, he seems to invite little more than indignation from his own countrymen, who accuse him in various ways of betraying the national interest for "letting go" of Eastern Europe and blame him as the main instigator of the break-up of the USSR. Exceptions to this trend usually come only from the circle of his most intimate advisors, such as Foreign Policy aide Anatolii Chernyaev.³⁰ Not surprisingly, it is only the latter group who evaluate his role in Afghanistan positively.

The scholarly literature on Gorbachev, who of course plays a central role in this story, is once again informed to a great extent by the memoirs of those who knew him and the interviews that Gorbachev and his closest aides have given to researchers and journalists. There is still no work that has really synthesised this information with archival sources to provide a detailed study of the "Gorbachev phenomenon" in both

²⁷ Not surprisingly, this point of view is espoused by, among, others, the current US Secretary of Defense and a major player in the security establishment senior CIA official at the time of the Afghan war, Robert Gates. See Robert Gates *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won The Cold War* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 430.

²⁸ Fred Halliday points out that the Red Army lost twice as many soldiers annually in peace time incidents as it did in Afghanistan. See Fred Halliday "Soviet Foreign Policymaking and the Afghanistan War: From Second Mongolia to 'Bleeding Wound'" *Review of International Studies* (1999), 25, 691. See also Barnett R. Rubin *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed State* (1995), especially 68-70, and Alan Kuperman "The Stinger Missile and Afghanistan" *Political Science Quarterly* 1999 114:2.

²⁹ One of the better examples is Archie Brown *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: OUP 1996) For a review of the debate surrounding Gorbachev's role that compares western and Russian scholarship, see V.M.Zubok, "Gorbachev and the End of the Cold War," *Cold War History*, 2(2) (2002), 39-71.

³⁰ See Anatolii Chernyaev, *My Six Years With Gorbachev* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); Pavel Palazhenko, *My Six Years With Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The Memoir of a Soviet Interpreter* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); G. Shahnazarov, *Tsena Svobodi* [The Price of Freedom] (Moscow: Rossika, 2004).

domestic and foreign policy.³¹ Among the most important works currently available are Oxford political scientist Archie Brown's *The Gorbachev Factor*³² and the studies of Russian-American scholar Vladislav Zubok.³³ The latter has sifted through the criticism and praise of Gorbachev, as well as the archival materials, to distil a more balanced understanding of the man and his impact on Soviet and Cold War history. Zubok shows that Gorbachev rarely followed any policy systematically, that his planning was often overtaken by messianic zeal or faith in a big idea to the point where he would ignore the fine details of negotiations.

Gorbachev is not the only controversial leader in this story. Eduard Shevardnadze, the Foreign Minister for most of Gorbachev's tenure at the top, is often seen as a forward-looking, pragmatic foreign minister. Many of his own subordinates at the Foreign Ministry considered him a neophyte and party hack.³⁴ While he is generally seen as a proponent of "new thinking" and *perestroika*, his tendency to deal ruthlessly with dissent is often overlooked. Historians such as Ekedahl and Goodman have managed to put together a political biography that addresses these contradictions in his character and career,³⁵ but others continue to write studies that portray him only as a visionary democrat.³⁶

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan also needs to be evaluated in the context of the broader Soviet withdrawal from the Third World. Scholars studying

³¹ Amherst College historian William Taubman, who wrote a seminal biography of a similarly controversial Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, is currently working on what will likely be a similarly comprehensive political biography of Gorbachev.

³² Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: OUP 1996). Brown has revisited some of the key questions regarding Perestroika and the Gorbachev era in *Seven Years that Changed the World: Perestroika in Perspective* (Oxford: OUP 2007).

³³ Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 265-335. See also "Gorbachev and the End of the Cold War" Cold War History Vol 2, issue 2, 2002, 61-100, and "Why did the Cold War End in 1989?" in Westad, Odd Arne, ed. *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory* (2000).

³⁴ See, for example, Kornienko, *Kholodnaia voina*, and "Afghanistan stoil name 15 milliardov dollarov v god," [Afghanistan cost us 15 billion dollars a year] (Interview with N. Egorychev), *Kommersant Vlast'*, No. 46, November 25, 2002.

³⁵ Carolyn McGiffer Ekedahl and Melvin A. Goodman, *The Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997)

³⁶ For example, Nicolas Jallot *Chevardnadze: Le Renard blanc du Caucase* (Belfond, 2005)

change in Soviet policy toward the Third World focus on 1987 as the turning point.³⁷

Yet it is crucial to understand that although visible efforts to withdraw from Afghanistan came only in late 1987, the effort to get out of Afghanistan really began as early as 1985 and had roots even earlier, while the effort to change the framework of relations with other Third World countries began only in 1987, although a reevaluation of those relationships probably began earlier. Still, the difficulties in changing the relationship with Third World countries were not dissimilar to those involved in withdrawing from Afghanistan, particularly in terms of the concern about Soviet prestige as a world power.

Finally, Afghanistan is just one case of a Third World country affecting the Cold War between the superpowers. This phenomenon first manifested itself with the Cuban Revolution (1959), and in the period between 1960 and 1991, included areas such as Vietnam, the Congo, Angola, the Horn of Africa, Chile, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. While scholars have traditionally viewed these countries as pawns in the Cold War, the opening of archives since the fall of the Soviet Union has led many historians to re-evaluate the role of “satellites.” Convincing cases have been made that the Soviet Union was more follower than leader when it came to relations with “clients” like Cuba and North Vietnam.³⁸ There is evidence to suggest that a similar situation existed with regard to the Afghan communists, who learned to manipulate Soviet leaders and even maneuver the Soviet bureaucracy in order to get what they wanted.³⁹

³⁷ See Celest A. Wallander “Soviet Policy Toward the Third World in the 1990s,” in *ibid*. See also Margot Light, ed. *Troubled Friendships: Moscow’s Third Word Ventures* (London: British Academic Press, 1993) and ‘Soviet policy in the Third World,’ *International Affairs* 67 (2), 1991, 263-80; Francis Fukuyama, *Gorbachev and the New Soviet Agenda in the Third World* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1989).

³⁸ Some of the better known examples of this kind of historiography are Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting missions : Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and Ilya Gaiduk *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy Toward the Indochina Conflict* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2003).

³⁹ Both Varennikov and Liakhovskii, for example, complain about Najibullah’s use of military-KGB rivalry and his personal channel to Shevardnadze and Gorbachev to change decisions he was unhappy with.

The story of the Afghan communists will likely remain untold for some time, however. The situation in Afghanistan since the Soviet withdrawal has made any kind of archival research impossible and few high-level communist officials have come forward to give their side of the story.⁴⁰ Many did not survive the succession of civil wars that followed the fall of their own regime. This is not only unfortunate for the individuals concerned, but it also means that significant gaps in the historiography will continue to exist even if the Soviet, American, and Pakistani sides are satisfactorily studied. This gap includes an understanding of the extent to which Najibullah really tried to implement Soviet-driven policies such as National Reconciliation and how the Afghan communists evaluated their position prior to and after the Soviet withdrawal.⁴¹

My thesis will demonstrate that the story of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan does not fit neatly into the existing interpretations of the changes in Moscow's foreign policy in the 1980s. I reject the view of contemporary Sovietologists who saw the war as an effort to permanently extend Soviet influence and make Afghanistan a Soviet republic in all but name. Such a view not only misinterprets Soviet leaders' decision-making, it also ignores the agency of Afghan politicians, who sought extensive Soviet involvement in Afghan politics and economy and tried to delay the Soviet withdrawal. My interpretation also differs from writers like Bennet and Mendelsohn who see the withdrawal as a triumph of "new thinkers" over "old thinkers" within Moscow's elite. While "new thinking" was undoubtedly an important paradigm

⁴⁰ There are a few exceptions, including the memoirs of Soltan Ali Keshtmand, Prime Minister for most of the Najibullah, and Mohammed Hassan Sharq, who briefly served as Prime Minister in 1989. Mohammed Hassan Sharq, *Barefoot in Coarse Clothes* (Peshawar: Area Studies Centre, 2001) and Soltan Ali Keshtmand, *Yad'dasht'ha-yi siyasi va ruyidat'ha-yi tarikhi* (Najib-i-Kabir, 2002)

⁴¹ Laudable efforts have been made in this regard, however, using published sources and some oral history. See, in particular Antonio Giustozzi *War, Politics, and Society in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2000) and Barnett R. Rubin *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). Also significant is a work co-written by a journalist who reported from Afghanistan and a Soviet Orientalist who went to Afghanistan with the GRU, Vladimir Plastun and Vladimir Adrianov *Najibullah v tiskah geopolitiki [Najibullah in the Vice of Geopolitics]* (Moscow: Russki Biograficheski Institut, 1998). It is the only account that provides a look at how Soviet advisors and Afghans interacted below the top level of party officials and is unique in its detachment from general Soviet inter-service and bureaucratic rivalries.

in Soviet foreign policy during the Gorbachev period, the debate between “new thinkers and old thinkers” leaves out key aspects of the story. For example, the military was not opposed to the withdrawal and in policy debates on Afghanistan senior officers took positions closer to Gorbachev’s most reformist aides, while reformist like Shevardnadze pursued a much harder line. Finally, what all previous accounts and interpretations have overlooked is the wide array of actors beyond the top decision makers that affected the timing of the withdrawal, its execution, and the diplomatic efforts to find a resolution to the conflict.

As I show, there were four key paradigms at work when it came to the USSR’s involvement in Afghanistan and its slowness to disengage from the country. First, starting in the mid-1950s, but particularly from the 1960s onwards, the Soviet Union developed a major presence in the Third World as a supporter of “national liberation” movements. It provided economic and military aid and sent thousands of political, technical, and military advisers to states emerging from the yoke of colonialism. There were a number of complex motives behind this costly exercise, but among them was the three-way competition with the United States and China. By the 1970s aid to Third World became a key component of the Soviet states’ legitimacy as a superpower. If its position in Europe was justified by its defeat of fascism, frequently recounted in movies, books, monuments, and demonstrations, then its position as a world power was justified by its defense of emerging states against encroaching neo-imperialism. The possible effects of a defeat in Afghanistan on the Soviet Union’s reputation was a concern not only of “old-thinkers” like Brezhnev and Andropov, but even many in the reformist group that took over after 1985, not least of all Gorbachev himself.

Second, Moscow’s presence in Afghanistan was extended by its belief in what it could do to transform the country. Even though leaders in Moscow recognised that the

Soviet example was inappropriate for a country as underdeveloped as Afghanistan, they believed that they could go a long way toward stabilizing its client government in Kabul through a mixture of political tutelage and modernization programs. Thousands of Party advisers were sent to help the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) improve its organizational work and gain support in the countryside. As we will see, these advisers sometimes did more harm than good. Even after the majority were withdrawn, in 1986, Moscow continued try out reform programs such as the Policy of National Reconciliation to stabilise the government. As with military aid, Moscow's presence was prolonged by a desire to give its programs a chance to work.

Third, despite a general consensus at the top of the Soviet hierarchy on Moscow's goals in Afghanistan, there was often little coordination in the work of various groups in Kabul. The sharpest conflict was between the Soviet military and the KGB. Officers of the two security forces even tended to take sides in the internal PDPA split – the military supporting Khalq and the KGB supporting Parcham. These disagreements allowed Afghan communists to play sides off against one another and even to develop a “lobby” for their views in Moscow.

Finally, the conflict was prolonged by the high level of Soviet-US tensions in the 1980s. Although Pakistan delivered arms to and trained the *mujahadeen* opposition in Afghanistan, it was US money and resources that kept the *jihad* going, with help from Saudi Arabia, China, and several other countries. Soviet leaders believed that a settlement on Afghanistan would only be possible if the United States agreed to stop supporting the *mujahadeen*. At the same time, Moscow was cautious in opening a dialog with the United States, fearing that doing so would be an admission that the invasion was a mistake and that it would lose the freedom to act as it saw fit in Afghanistan. As we will see, Soviet-US tensions hindered Andropov's efforts to end the

conflict in 1983 and they also made it more difficult for Gorbachev to seek a diplomatic solution during his first years in power.

Sources

This thesis draws on a mix of sources, many of them only recently uncovered, in Russian, US and UN archives, memoirs by military and intelligence officers, diplomats, and policymakers, and over a dozen interviews with some of the key players involved. It also incorporates recent literature on the late Cold War, interventionism, Soviet reform efforts, and the war in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, a number of caveats must be mentioned.

To understand Soviet decision-making and implementation, one ideally needs sources that reflect the debates at the most senior level, the information received by officials with access to decision-makers, the instructions passed to officials in Afghanistan and on the various diplomatic battlefronts, as well as reports that evaluate the extent to which these instructions are successfully carried out. In addition, an assessment of policy-making requires objective information that will help assess whether officials were properly informed about a given situation.

Researching this period in Soviet history poses a number of methodological problems, the greatest of which is the limited access to primary materials. Certain aspects of decision-making and policy implementation are virtually impossible to trace in the documentary record. I have overcome these difficulties by using all possible archival resources in Russia, supplementing those materials with published documents, memoir literature, oral history, and archival research in the United States. I have also made use of the numerous memoirs about general Afghan and Soviet politics during the 1970s and 1980s, some which were discussed above, and have been able to conduct interviews with some of the key figures in Soviet military, intelligence, and diplomacy,

and party leadership that helped shape or carry out Afghan policy. Interviews with several figures on the US side helped complete the picture. Although all of these sources carry their own biases (including those formed by the vantage point from which they saw the unfolding drama as well as those caused by institutional rivalry), but by combining them I have been able to recreate an accurate, if not always detailed, picture of how and why decisions were made and implemented.

Certainly the best possible sources for understanding Soviet policy-making are high level memoranda and minutes of meetings that provide a record of debates. However, their selective availability presents some methodological problems. The official ones that were released as part of “Fund 89” (held at the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, or RGANI) were selected in part to embarrass the Soviet Communist Party.⁴² Thus, with regard to Afghanistan, most of them focus on the decision to invade, not on the conduct of the war or international diplomacy in the 1980-91 period. This gap is partially filled by the collection at the Gorbachev Foundation Archive, compiled by Gorbachev’s associates (including Anatolii Cherniaev, his key foreign policy aide), which includes a collection of Politburo documents, many of them minutes of key meetings.⁴³ These are compiled handwritten notes, not a formal record. However, where I have been able to cross-reference these with those available in state archives, I have found them to be notably consistent. The materials in the GFA are particularly useful for tracing debates at the Politburo level during the Gorbachev period, at least through 1990.⁴⁴ While one might expect these and other documents in

⁴² Many of these, primarily from Funds 5 and 89 at the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, were collected in an edited volume: Pierre Allan et al., eds., *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente zum Afghanistankrieg (1978-1991)* (Zurich: Hochsch-Verlag an der ETH, 1995)

⁴³ Some of these were recently compiled in: Anatolii Cherniaev et al., eds., *V Politburo TsK KPSS* (Moscow: Gorbachev Foundation, 2006). The Gorbachev Foundation has also begun releasing a multi-volume collection of Gorbachev’s papers, including records of his meetings with foreign leaders. However, since this project was still in the planning stages when I conducted my research, all references are to the Gorbachev Foundation Archive, not to the volumes.

⁴⁴ The various attempts to reform the decision-making apparatus, which decreased the importance of the Politburo, and the general disintegration of the state makes these notes much less useful for the 1990-1991 period.

the GFA to be selected in a way that sheds a positive light on Gorbachev, the picture they present is far from one-sided.⁴⁵ The bias they represent is primarily that of availability: the documents are those that came across the desk of one of the aides or were drafted by them – they do not give anywhere near a complete picture of the conduct of foreign policy in the way that would be possible with access to Foreign Ministry, CC CPSU International Department, and military and intelligence materials.

To compensate for these lacunae, I have made use of a number of archives that either hold formerly declassified documents or those related to my topic that help illuminate the context in which decisions on Afghanistan were made. There are many documents at the National Security Archive in Washington, DC, retrieved from several Russian archives during the 1990s, when access was less restricted than it is currently. Many of these are records of conversations between Soviet representatives or leaders and those of foreign countries, including Afghanistan. I have also made use of records at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), including the papers of Aleksandr Iakovlev, a leading reformer and member of the Afghan Commission of the Politburo. GARF also holds the files of the Council of Religious Affairs, the body that regulated religious practice throughout the USSR and also tracked religious feeling, reporting its findings to the Central Committee. These files were useful in trying to understand the extent to which concern about unrest in the Soviet Union's predominantly Muslim regions might have affected Moscow's decision-making on Afghanistan. They include reports written by local representatives of the CRA on the religious climate in the area, as well as broader surveys written by officials at the republic level. Documents from the Soviet Committee of Solidarity with Countries of Asia and Africa (SKSSAA) provided additional evidence on the nature of the Soviet relationship with Afghan communists

⁴⁵ It is worth noting in this regard that the former aides who compiled these documents, despite being supportive of Gorbachev and *perestroika* in general, are quite critical of certain aspects of his policy-making in their own memoirs.

prior to the invasion.⁴⁶ Documents from the Ministry of Foreign Trade, held at the State Archive of the Economy (RGAE), helped illuminate the nature of Soviet aid to Afghanistan both before and after the invasion.⁴⁷

Some archives remained closed to me. Intelligence and military archives are generally difficult to access, particularly for a period as recent as the one in question.⁴⁸ Some documents from the military have appeared in the various memoirs published by officers who served in Afghanistan.⁴⁹ At the Archive of the Foreign Ministry (AVPRF), I was allowed to see some of the files from the Kabul Embassy but nothing above the level of press clippings and some largely irrelevant correspondence.⁵⁰

Crucial to evaluating the reasons why it took Soviet leaders so long to withdraw is an exploration of their relationship with Afghan communists. Vladimir Plastun and Vladimir Adrianov's *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* [Najibullah. Afghanistan in the Vice of Geopolitics] (Moscow, 1998) provides over one hundred pages of documents relating to Soviet efforts to implement the Policy of National Reconciliation, an initiative that Moscow hoped would lead to a broad government with popular support and create conditions stable enough for Soviet troops to leave. I have supplemented this material with interviews and memoirs written by some of the advisers

⁴⁶ In Russian, *Sovetskiy Kommitet Solidarnosti so Staranmi Azii i Afriki*. GARF, Fond 9540, Opis 1. The committee was important in maintaining ties with parties that were out of power; thus its files contain some interesting discussions about aid and expertise the Afghan communists wanted both before 1978 and in the months after the Saur revolution. The records of the presidium meetings of the SKSSAA (generally held annually) are also a valuable resource for tracking the evolution of Soviet policy towards the Third World, particularly since the presidium included members of the Central Committee of the CPSU and the meetings were attended by such senior foreign policy makers as Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko.

⁴⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Trade (RGAE, Fond 413) only dealt with bilateral trade, not with infrastructure projects or military aid.

⁴⁸ Even the head of the Federal Security Bureau archive (where KGB materials are held) apparently was not able to make much use of KGB documents in his article on the Geneva Accords. See Vasili Khristoforov, "Trudniy put' k Zhenevskim Soglasheniam po Afganistanu," *Novaia i Noveishaia Istoriiia* No.5, 2008, 23-47.

⁴⁹ Especially Liakhovskii, cited above, but also Vladimir Alekseevich Bogdanov *Afgnaskaia Voina: Vospominania* (Moscow: Sovetsky Pisatel', 2005), and Mikhail M. Sotskov, *Dolg i Sovest: Zakrytie Stranitsy Afganskoi Voiny* (St. Petersburg: Professional, 2007), as well as some others. I am additionally indebted to the late General Liakhovskii for providing me with several documents from his private collection which have not been published.

⁵⁰ AVPRF Fund 169. I have, however, been able to use some Foreign Ministry documents that were briefly declassified in the early 1990s and made available to my current thesis supervisor. These are now housed at the London School of Economics Institute of Diplomacy and Strategy (LSE IDEAS).

who traveled to Afghanistan. However, evidence on this question is still lacking, and I have instead focused on relations at the most senior level, where empirical evidence has been somewhat easier to come by.

Another focus of this thesis is the diplomacy engaged in by Soviet officials as they sought a way out of the Afghan quagmire. This included UN diplomacy, US-Soviet diplomacy, and (particularly after 1987) efforts to reach out to opposition fighters and their sponsors in Pakistan and elsewhere. Again, evidence from the Soviet archives is rather slim, but in this case I was able to supplement Soviet documentation with available materials from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California (although many useful documents remain classified there) and the archives of the United Nations Organization.⁵¹ While these files do not shed much light on Soviet decision-making, they do help trace the evolution of Soviet diplomacy from the early 1980s until 1992.

Like other historians working on this period of Soviet history, collecting sources with which to understand the recent past has therefore been somewhat of a multidimensional and international jigsaw puzzle. Although many documents have yet to be declassified, I have made the best possible use of the sources available, repeatedly checking them against each other throughout the text.⁵² As such, this thesis lays the groundwork for further research as and when more sources come to light.

Thesis Structure

This thesis has a broad chronological structure. The first chapter shows how key elements of Soviet policy in Afghanistan were formed between 1980 and 1985. These were first, to fight the opposition while simultaneously training and developing the

⁵¹ Both the archive at UN headquarters in New York and the papers of Secretary General Perez de Cuellar at Yale University's Sterling Memorial Library.

⁵² Including Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, who, particularly for his chapters on the Brezhnev and Gorbachev periods, laboured under similar limitations.

Afghan army; second, to strengthen the regime in Kabul and make it more attractive to the population, and third, to conduct diplomacy that would help the Kabul regime gain recognition and stop foreign aid to the opposition. The chapter shows how what was initially envisioned as a temporary invasion became a long-term occupation, how various voices in Moscow tried to make their opposition to the invasion known to top leaders, and how Soviet leaders came to accept the need for UN diplomacy to help resolve the Afghan conflict and pushed their Afghan clients to do the same.

The second chapter will discuss the “correlation of forces” in Gorbachev’s first few years and how this affected policy-making on the Afghanistan war. Contrary to the argument advanced by some western authors, the military costs of the war did not serve as a motivation for the withdrawal. Similarly, the social costs of the war, neither in Islamic Central Asia nor elsewhere, were sufficient to push Soviet leaders to seek a quick withdrawal. Indeed, the desire to withdraw, which was pushed most forcefully by Gorbachev’s reformist “new thinkers,” was balanced by concerns for how a withdrawal would be seen by other Third World states. This “correlation of forces” explains Gorbachev’s decision to seek withdrawal gradually, rather than ending the war in 1985.

The subject of the third chapter will be Moscow’s efforts to seek a gradual resolution to the conflict in 1986 and 1987. During this period, Soviet diplomats became active in seeking a diplomatic solution to the conflict. However, Moscow also undertook a major reform of its efforts within Afghanistan and pushed the Afghan government towards the Policy of National Reconciliation. The two were related, as Moscow’s diplomatic efforts at the time focused not only on states like the US and Pakistan but also on helping Kabul to reach out to opposition leaders. In the end, the failure of these efforts to bring significant results led to the decision to seek a withdrawal without waiting for major improvements by appealing directly to the United States.

The effort to negotiate a withdrawal with the United States and complete the UN-sponsored “Geneva Process” begun in 1982, is discussed in Chapter Four. Determined to withdraw troops and improve relations with the West, Gorbachev was ultimately willing to sacrifice the long-standing Soviet position on stopping arms supplies to the Afghan resistance in the hopes that improving relations with the US would lead to a settlement in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Third World. Ultimately, however, his misjudgement of American politics and decision making, as well as his inability to renege on traditional Soviet commitments, meant that a Soviet withdrawal did not lead to a resolution of the conflict.

Chapter Five covers the period from the signing of the Geneva Accords to the completion of the Soviet withdrawal in February 1989. The failure to coordinate efforts of various Soviet agencies active in Afghanistan was felt acutely during the withdrawal period, when the Najibullah regime seemed on the verge of a crisis. The military and the KGB clashed over how far to go in seeking an accommodation with the Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, halting the withdrawal, and military operations. Within the Politburo, Foreign Minister Shevardnadze took the most hawkish line, with Gorbachev often taking his side. Again, the need to protect the Soviet Union’s reputation continued to be a major concern.

The last chapter will look at how the declining Soviet regime continued to support its client in Afghanistan until the USSR’s collapse in 1991. Arms, economic aid, and military advisers continued to prop up the Najibullah regime as long as the Soviet Union could provide them. Only after Kriuchkov was arrested following the failure of the August coup in 1991 did Moscow sign an agreement for a mutual cessation of supplies to begin in January 1992. Moscow was not able to bring about a reconciliation in Afghanistan, but Gorbachev did succeed in limiting the domestic fallout from the war

by focusing the public's attention on the errors of Brezhnev, Andropov, and others who originally decided on intervention.

Before moving on to the body of the thesis, however, I provide an overview of Soviet-Afghan relations since the 1950s and the chain of events that led to the decision to intervene in December 1979.

Background to the Invasion

There were several reasons why Afghanistan was important to the Soviet Union. First, the country shared a 2000 kilometer border with the Soviet Union running along its Muslim republics, the Tajik SSR, Turkmen SSR, and Uzbek SSR (present-day Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan). Contrary to what some Western observers believed at the time, the issue was not that the situation in Afghanistan would spark an Islamist insurgency. Moscow had little if any concern in the late 1970s or early 1980s about separatist tendencies or the emergence of a serious underground Islamist movement that could challenge the state. Rather, Soviet leaders worried that Afghanistan, traditionally a neutral state, could become the platform for US bases, targeting the Soviet Union's own facilities in Central Asia. These fears were heightened because Soviet leaders worried that Afghanistan would become a tempting target for the US after the Iranian revolution (1979) and the loss of US influence in the Persian Gulf.⁵³

Second, Afghanistan was one of the many non-communist Third World states with which the Soviet Union had a friendly relationship. Soviet aid to Afghanistan confirmed its support for developing countries and respect for non-alignment. After the Saur revolution (April 1978) that brought Afghan communists to power, the Soviet Union found itself the supporter of a nascent revolutionary government. Once it confirmed support for that government, it also exposed itself to potential ideological

⁵³ Westad, "Concerning the Situation in A," *CWIHP Bulletin 8/9*, 29.

damage if that government collapsed, particularly if it was felled by a “popular” insurgency. These factors are important for understanding both the decision to invade and the reason that Soviet leaders found it difficult to disengage from the country once their troops were committed.

The origins of the Soviet-Afghan relationship can be traced back to 1919, when the young communist state became the first to recognise Amir Amanullah’s bid for full independence from Britain. The communist government was one of the Afghan monarchy’s staunchest friends at this time. A treaty of friendship, signed in 1921, resulted in Soviet subsidies, including arms, to Amanullah.⁵⁴ Yet relations soon soured over disagreements on Central Asia, where the young Soviet state fought to suppress a Muslim insurgency, and Afghanistan turned increasingly to Germany for foreign aid. A more appropriate starting point for the purposes of this study, however, is the trip undertaken to Afghanistan and a number of other Third World countries by First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, and Premier Nikolai Bulganin in 1955. It was on this trip that Khrushchev decided to make Afghanistan an ally by providing military and economic aid. Not all of his Kremlin colleagues agreed – Lazar Kaganovich pointed out that this could set a costly precedent. Other supported the idea, either on practical grounds (Afghanistan was a neighbor and should be kept as a friendly state) or on broader strategic grounds. Anastas Mikoyan, soon to become Khrushchev’s right hand man on foreign affairs, pointed out: “we will have to render assistance to some states, if we wish to enter into more serious competition with the USA. From the point of view of state interests, it is necessary to render assistance.”⁵⁵

At the time of the Khrushchev-Bulganin visit, Afghanistan was a monarchy. A communist party, the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, was founded only ten years later by a group of urban intellectuals. Nur Mohammad Taraki and Babrak Karmal

⁵⁴ Ludwig Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan*, 221-222

⁵⁵ Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev’s Cold War* (New York: Norton, 2006), 80-82.

immediately emerged as its leaders, but disagreements between the two and their respective supporters led to a split in the party only two years later, in 1967. The two wings that emerged became known as *Khalq* (Masses) and *Parcham* (Banner) after their respective newspapers.⁵⁶

There is no evidence that Soviet representatives organised the founding of the party. After the PDPA's creation Moscow provided support to both factions, but proceeded cautiously. It was not even invited to the international party congress in 1968, a slight which Taraki apparently took personally.⁵⁷ One reason for caution may have been the split between the factions. Over the years Soviet representatives undertook efforts to bring about a reconciliation. Such efforts were often entrusted to KGB operatives within Afghanistan, in coordination with the Central Committee International Department. In 1974, the Politburo approved a message to both Taraki and Karmal, to be delivered by a KGB operative, informing the two that "In Moscow they regard with deep alarm the reports coming from Kabul about the continuing mutual fighting between the leadership of *Parcham* and *Khalq*. This internal strife unfortunately and its prolonged nature are leading to a weakening of both [sides], and is introducing a split in the ranks of the progressive forces and the democratic [movement] as a whole."⁵⁸

An even more important reason for caution with regard to support for the Afghan communists was that Moscow was quite happy with its existing relations with that country. Moscow and Kabul had grown particularly close after a coup in 1973 which brought Mohammed Daoud (Prime Minister during the first tentative steps to cooperation in the 1950s) to power. Daoud deposed the King (his cousin and brother-in-law) and established a republic, with himself as president. Continuing the practice of

⁵⁶ Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan*, 190-192.

⁵⁷ Vasily Mitrokhin, "The KGB in Afghanistan," *CWIHP Working Paper Series*, p.26

⁵⁸ Decree of the CC CPSU – An Appeal to the Leaders of the PDPA Groups "Parcham" and "Khalq" January 8, 1974 *CWIHP Virtual Archive: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*

previous decades, Daoud's government received aid from the United States as well as the USSR, but it was the latter that appealed to him as a model of development. For his first four years in power he also ruled in collaboration with other urban leftists, including members of the PDPA.⁵⁹

Daoud's honeymoon with the PDPA did not last long. He felt secure that he could control any rural or regional challenges – the scourge of leaders who wanted to centralise and pass reform – but he was worried about the challenge that other urban leftists could pose. The communists in particular had made headway in the military, whose officers received extensive training in the Soviet Union, suggesting the possibility of a future coup. Purges against the Afghan Left, begun in 1977, naturally worried Soviet officials. Daoud also seemed to be turning away from Moscow. In 1976, he visited Iran and secured a promise of aid for a railway, and the next year he visited Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.⁶⁰ Moscow still preferred that the nascent communist leadership find a way to cooperate with the Daoud government, and this was the message that its emissaries carried to Karmal and others.⁶¹

What became known as the Saur Revolution, which brought the PDPA to power, was really a reaction to these purges. In April 1978, a senior Parcham member, Mir Akbar Khayber, was assassinated, and his funeral turned into an anti-government demonstration. Daoud decided to arrest the communist leadership, including Taraki. Hafizullah Amin, a fellow Khalqi, was only placed under house arrest. This proved a fatal oversight for Daoud. Amin was able to use his connections in the military to launch a coup. In the ensuing fighting, Daoud was killed. Colonel Ahmed Kadyr, a leading mutineer, helped establish a revolutionary council which in turn elected Taraki as the Prime Minister and President.

⁵⁹ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 300-301.

⁶⁰ Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Undeclared, Afghanistan: 1979 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 64-65.

⁶¹ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 302.

Power did not unite the factions of the PDPA – indeed, it only polarised them further. The Khalqis were anxious to move ahead quickly with their modernization and redistribution program. A reign of terror was unleashed on two fronts: against traditionalist elements, especially members of the clergy, followers of the Muslim Brotherhood or of Ayatollah Khomeini, and, simultaneously, against the “enemy within,” primarily Parchamists. Many were thrown in jail, while others, like Babrak Karmal, were sent into diplomatic exile. (Karmal served as Ambassador to Czechoslovakia during this period.) Daoud supporters were purged from the government at all levels.⁶²

KGB officers in Afghanistan were alarmed by the extent of Taraki’s terror and the pace of his attempts to radically transform Afghan society. They feared that his reforms and repressions would undermine the young government and throw the country into chaos. In July 1978, the Kabul residency sent an appeal for a political intervention at the highest levels: “only the leadership of the CPSU can influence the wild [Khalq] opportunists and force them to change their attitude towards the Parcham group.”⁶³ Indeed, Boris Ponomarev, head of the International Department of the Central Committee, travelled to Kabul at the end of September to press Taraki to “stop to the mass repressions which have taken on increasing proportions following the revolution in Afghanistan, including repressions against the “Parcham.”⁶⁴

Emphasis was also placed on the importance of creating and strengthening the party throughout all of the country’s territories, on the adoption of prompt measures to normalise the activities of party organs from top to bottom, on organizing agencies of the people’s government, and on focusing increased attention on economic problems. The people must experience concrete results of the revolution in their own lives. That is

⁶² Christopher Andrew and Vasily Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: the KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 388-389.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 389.

⁶⁴ Information from CC CPSU to GDR leader Erich Honecker, October 13, 1978, CWIHP Virtual Archive: *Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*.

why the improvement of people's lives should be the primary focus of the new government.⁶⁵

Moscow's concerns did not stop the two countries from signing a Treaty of Friendship on December 5, 1978. By then, a number of Soviet advisors were serving in the government, the party, and the military. The latter were advising their tutees in military operations against the emerging rebel groups.⁶⁶

The first great test of Soviet commitment, however, came with the Herat uprising in March 1979. An ancient city located in eastern Afghanistan, the largely Tajik city of Herat erupted in revolt on March 15. A mutiny led by mid level officers joined with a mass uprising of the city's residents.⁶⁷ Afghan officials, Soviet advisers and their families all fell victim to the mob violence that overtook the city. The Afghan leadership lost its nerve, believing that its' own military would be unable to deal with the situation. They called on Moscow to send Soviet troops and planes to quash the uprising.

The Politburo met several times over the following days to discuss the situation. At first, key foreign policymakers within the Politburo supported intervention. Dmitrii Ustinov, the Minister of Defense, Andrei Gromyko, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Yurii Andropov, the KGB chief spoke in favour of armed intervention at a Politburo meeting on March 17, arguing that the risks of engaging Soviet troops outweighed those of losing Afghanistan. Afghanistan was too important, Gromyko insisted, to let it fall into hostile hands: "if we lose Afghanistan now and it turns against the Soviet Union, this will result in a sharp setback to our foreign policy."⁶⁸

By the next time the Politburo met, however, the situation had changed – intervention was seen as inadvisable both in view of the situation in Afghanistan and

⁶⁵ Information from CC CPSU to GDR leader Erich Honecker, October 13, 1978, CWIHP Virtual Archive: *Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, hereafter *CWIHP Afghanistan*.

⁶⁶ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 390-391.

⁶⁷ Liakhovskii, *Tragedi i doblesti'*, 111.

⁶⁸ Transcript of CPSU CC Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan regarding deterioration of conditions in Afghanistan and possible responses from the Soviet Union March 17, 1979 *CWIHP Afghanistan*.

because of the threat it would pose to détente. With the Carter-Brezhnev summit scheduled for that June in Vienna and the expected culmination of SALT II, there was too much to lose. Ustinov and Andropov both realised that the Soviet army would end up fighting on behalf of the Afghan army. Apparently, Brezhnev's foreign policy advisor, Aleksandrov-Agentov, played a key role, pushing his boss to override Ustinov, Gromyko, and Andropov's enthusiastic support for intervention.⁶⁹ These three leaders, along with international department chief Boris Ponomarev, would form the Afghanistan Commission of the Politburo, and their dominance over decision-making in this area only increased.⁷⁰

The Afghan army was able to pacify Herat, but the situation within the leadership continued to deteriorate. The PDPA was further from unity than it had ever been, and a conflict was growing between its two top leaders, Taraki and Amin. Moscow instructed its officials on the ground to take an active role in trying to resolve it, but with little success.⁷¹ As would happen many times throughout the intervention, each side in the intra-PDPA contest had its supporters amongst Soviet advisers. In this case, some of the military advisers had been impressed by Amin's role in putting down the Herat revolt in March. Taraki, however, had Brezhnev's support. During a visit to Moscow in September 1979, Brezhnev and Andropov warned him that Amin was planning to oust him. When Taraki returned to Afghanistan, he tried to act on this information by having Amin killed, possibly with KGB help. In the event, the attack

⁶⁹ Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 260-261; Westad, *Global Cold War*, 288-330; Karen Brutents, *Tridsat' let na staroi Ploshadi*, 465. Aleksandrov-Agentov was a long-serving foreign policy aide of Brezhnev's. He was particularly important because the General Secretary, with little knowledge of foreign affairs yet carrying enormous responsibility, relied on someone to interpret the problems and proposed solutions brought before him. In his memoirs, Aleksandrov-Agentov himself barely mentions his own involvement with deliberations on Afghanistan. He claims to have learned of the invasion after the fact, which however does not exclude the possibility that he was involved in the build-up throughout 1979. See Aleksandrov-Agentov, *Ot Kollontai do Gorbacheva* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnie Otnosheniia 1994), 246-247.

⁷⁰ Ponomarev was a member of the commission, but did not have the same clout as Andropov, Gromyko, and Ustinov, nor the same proximity to Brezhnev. When Andropov and Ustinov began pushing for intervention, they effectively side-stepped Ponomarev.

⁷¹ From documents found by Anatolii Dobrynin and read into the record of the Lysebu II conference. Lysebu II, 77.

failed, Amin escaped unharmed and had Taraki arrested. The poet turned revolutionary leader was strangled in his jail cell several weeks later.⁷²

Taraki's arrest and murder seems to have started the final sequence of events that led to intervention. At first, Soviet leaders tried to make the best of the situation, instructing their officials in Moscow to accept Amin's consolidation of power as a *fait accompli* while working to minimise repression against supporters of Taraki.⁷³ Brezhnev seemed resigned yet cautiously optimistic at a Politburo meeting on September 20:

We should assume that the Soviet-Afghan relations will not sustain some sort of major changes, and, it seems, will continue in their previous course. Amin will be pushed toward this by the current situation and by the difficulties which the Afghan government will face for a long time to come. Afghanistan will continue to be interested in receiving from the USSR military, economic and other aid, and possibly even in increased amounts.⁷⁴

Yet Amin was proving an increasingly difficult partner. Soon after having Taraki killed, he expelled the Soviet ambassador, Aleksandr Puzanov. Nor did he adhere to Soviet requests to refrain from repression against fellow PDPA members. A memorandum from the "Afghan commission" dated October 29 noted that in light of this, Moscow ought to continue working with Amin, but also remain vigilant for "turn by H. Amin in an anti-Soviet direction."⁷⁵

There is evidence that at some point in October or November Ustinov and Andropov began reconsidering their earlier agreement to hold off on armed intervention. Amin's erratic behavior, including reported secret meetings with US officials, was part of the reason; a worsening international situation was another. The Islamic revolution in Iran made senior Soviet planners wonder if the US would now look at Afghanistan as a new base for its forces in the Persian Gulf. The Carter

⁷² Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 261-62. Gai and Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, 204-8.

⁷³ Cable from Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko to Soviet Representatives in Kabul September 15, 1979. *CWIHP Afghanistan*

⁷⁴ Excerpt from Politburo meeting, September 20, 1979 *CWIHP Afghanistan*

⁷⁵ Gromyko-Andropov-Ustinov-Ponomarev Report to CPSU CC October 29, 1979 *CWIHP Afghanistan*

administration's decision to move naval forces into the area in the fall of 1979 only fueled Soviet suspicions.⁷⁶

Ustinov and Andropov now formed the chief pro-intervention lobby and they apparently convinced Gromyko, as well as Aleksandrov-Agentov, to support their arguments. In early December, Andropov wrote a personal memo to Brezhnev laying out the case for intervention. It highlighted Amin's untrustworthiness and the possibility that he might go over to the West.

The situation in the government, the army, and in the state apparatus is aggravated. They are practically disorganized as a result of mass repressions carried out by Amin. At the same time we have been receiving information about Amin's behind-the-scenes activities which might mean his political reorientation to the West. He keeps his contacts with the American *chargé d'affaires* secret from us... In closed meetings, he attacks Soviet policy and actions of our specialists... Now there is no guarantee that Amin, in order to secure his personal power, would not turn over to the West.⁷⁷

Andropov also offered a solution. The Parchamists whom Amin and Taraki had expelled could be brought back into the country and form the core of a new government. A limited military force, consisting of two battalions already stationed in Kabul, would be needed, but a larger group would be kept along the border "just for an emergency." Such an operation, Andropov concluded, "would allow us to solve the question of defending the achievements of the April revolution, resurrecting the Leninist principles of state and party building in the Afghan leadership, and strengthening our positions in that country."⁷⁸

Ustinov and Andropov met with Brezhnev on December 8 to further make the case for intervention. Their arguments included the point that an Afghanistan that was realigned toward the West could well become the staging area for missiles directed at

⁷⁶ Lysebu II, 64-65.

⁷⁷ This memorandum was uncovered by Anatolii Dobrynin and read into the record of the Lysebu conference. See Lysebu II, 78.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 79.

the Soviet Union.⁷⁹ Once Brezhnev's support had been secured, only the formal matter of a Politburo resolution remained. On December 12, the Politburo met for a brief session and approved a handwritten resolution entitled "concerning the situation in A...".⁸⁰

When Soviet leaders approved the intervention, they did not envisage fighting a war on behalf of the PDPA. Indeed, Andropov preferred that only a very limited number of troops be committed in support of the operation to remove Amin.⁸¹ Ustinov, however, insisted on a larger contingent, comprising 75,000 troops. Their purpose was to boost morale and take a defensive posture in Kabul as well as some provincial capitals. The removal of Amin would be handled by an elite brigade.⁸²

The decision to intervene was not without its opponents. They included senior military officers who tried to make their case to Ustinov in the weeks leading to the intervention. According to testimony from several senior General Staff officials, they appealed to Ustinov in particular not to support the introduction of troops.⁸³ The last such effort took place on December 10, two days before the final decision to intervene had been made. Ogarkov spoke on behalf of the General Staff, setting out to Brezhnev, Gromyko, Andropov, and Ustinov the reasons why the Soviet Union should not send in troops. According to General Valentin Varennikov, Ogarkov's deputy who would go on to lead the operational group in Afghanistan, his boss made the following points:

first, that the Afghans should deal with their internal affairs themselves, and we should only give assistance; second, that the public would not understand us—neither the American people, nor the Soviet people, nor the world in general—if we introduced those troops; third, that our troops did not know the

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Westad, "Concerning the Situation in A," *CWIHP Bulletin* 8/9, 29.

⁸¹ Soon after Taraki's murder, Andropov told Viacheslav Kevorkov, a senior KGB officer who served as a backchannel between Moscow and Bonn, of his concern that the US would use Amin to pull the Soviet Union into "another Vietnam." This perhaps explains his reluctance to commit militarily in the way Ustinov wanted. Andropov did not believe that Amin could be allowed to stay in power, but he was still aware of the potential costs of an intervention. See Viacheslav Kevorkov, *Tainyi Kanal* (Moscow: Geia, 1997), 244-245.

⁸² Lysebu II, 64-66.

⁸³ Kornienko and Akhromeev, *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata*, 26.

specific circumstances of Afghanistan very well—the tribal relations, Islam, and various other things would put our troops in a very difficult situation. And he made some other arguments.⁸⁴

These arguments failed to impress the Politburo members who had already decided on intervention. Although, in March, similar arguments had persuaded them to reject military intervention as an option, now they seemingly saw no other way to handle the situation. The failure of the US congress to ratify SALT II in the summer of 1979, which seemed to signal a turn away from détente by the US, was one reason. The decision to deploy Pershing missiles in Europe was another.⁸⁵ The murder of Taraki by his rival Hafizullah Amin, despite Brezhnev's pledge of support, helped convince Brezhnev that the latter had to be removed from power.⁸⁶ Growing suspicion that Amin might be considering a turn towards the United States contributed to this belief.

Several conclusions can be drawn about the decision-making that led to the invasion. First, the invasion was the result of a decision reached by several key foreign policy decision-makers within the Politburo, not the Politburo as a whole. This was characteristic of decision-making in the late Brezhnev era. With Brezhnev himself ailing, foreign policy was dominated by three people: Andrei Gromyko, the foreign minister, Dmitrii Ustinov, the minister of defense, and Yurii Andropov, chairman of the KGB. At the same time advisers, such as Brezhnev's foreign policy aide Andrei Aleksandrov-Agentov, played key roles in shaping decisions.

Second, dissenting voices from within the Politburo as well as from other ranks of Soviet bureaucracy were regularly silenced by this troika. According to Karen

⁸⁴ Lysebu II, 74.

⁸⁵ Ustinov made the connection between Afghanistan and the missiles in Germany in a conversation with Viacheslav Kevorkov. Ustinov noted that the US might take advantage of a vacuum in Afghanistan, creating yet another US base along the Soviet border (others being in Greece, Turkey, and Pakistan.) The same was true, he went on, with regard to West Germany. If the US placed the new missiles there, then it would be necessary to "find a way to re-establish the balance." See Kevorkov, *Tainyi Kanal*, 235.

⁸⁶ Indeed, Brezhnev complained to French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing in May 1980: "President Taraki was my friend. He came to see me in September; And it was just after he returned that Amin had him assassinated. That is a provocation. I could not pardon it." Valeri Giscard d' Estaing, *Le Pouvoir et La Vie* (Paris: Campagne 12, 1991), 427.

Brutents, in the late fall of 1979, Aleksandrov-Agentov even pushed those preparing to advise against intervention to abandon their position.⁸⁷ Similarly, senior military officers who tried to object to the operation were told to mind their own business and “not teach the Politburo.” Once Gromyko, Ustinov, and Andropov had come to an agreement amongst themselves and managed to secure Brezhnev’s support, they were able to essentially intimidate other Politburo members and senior officials to accept their decision.⁸⁸

Finally, those who supported the decision to invade did so because they felt that the “loss” of Afghanistan would be an unacceptable loss and a blow to Soviet prestige. At the same time, it did not mean that they had completely abandoned détente. Leonid Brezhnev’s commitment to détente was very strong, as was that of Gromyko and Andropov. Nevertheless, it did not override other concerns that these men shared as leaders of a great power with client states around the globe and which was in an ongoing perpetual contest with the United States and China for influence, particularly in the Third World. The fact that détente hit a low point after the rejection of the SALT II treaty by the US congress in the summer of 1979 served as a catalyst for supporters of the invasion. The “loss” of Afghanistan would be particularly embarrassing at a moment when the Soviet Union’s main adversary seemed to be abandoning détente. Later efforts to extricate the Soviet troops from Afghanistan would often move with the ebb and flow of the USSR’s relationship with the United States.

⁸⁷ According to Karen Brutents, an International Department official, when Aleksandrov-Agentov learned that he was writing a memorandum arguing against intervention, the latter said “So, do you suggest giving Afghanistan to the Americans?” His memorandum was excluded from materials presented to the Politburo. Westad, “Concerning the Situation in A.” 131.

⁸⁸ Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 262-264; Westad, “Concerning the Situation in A..” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 128-132. Westad also points out that Kosygin, who had voiced his opposition to an intervention in March was absent from the key Politburo meeting on December 12, thus removing a key restraining voice.

Chapter I: Counter-insurgency and “nation-building” in Afghanistan, 1980-1985

Although the main focus of this thesis is the Gorbachev period (1985-1991), it is impossible to understand the context in which he and his colleagues made decisions without considering the first five years of the war. This chapter will look at the 1980-1985 period, when Soviet policy was still made by the “old guard,” people like CC CPSU General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, KGB chairman (and later General Secretary) Yurii Andropov, and the long serving Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, while rising stars like Mikhail Gorbachev and Eduard Shevardnadze largely watched from the wings when it came to key issues of foreign policy. During this period, Soviet leaders began to seek paths beyond their military activities and support of the Afghan communist regime to settle the worsening situation in and around the fledgling socialist state. At the same time, concerns about maintaining prestige as well as the worsening bilateral relationship with the US, the USSR’s chief cold war rival, meant that the Soviet leadership moved slowly and often reluctantly in bringing in outside help, such as that of the United Nations.⁸⁹

During the first months of 1980 Soviet leaders decided on an open-ended commitment of Soviet troops in support of the PDPA regime, complementing their military campaign with an influx of aid and political advisors. Moscow assumed a defensive attitude to the nearly universal condemnation of its intervention and undertook a number of propaganda and diplomatic efforts to counteract the hostility of

⁸⁹ Of all the chapters in the thesis, this one poses the greatest difficulty when it comes to documentation. The Politburo notes compiled at the Gorbachev Foundation Archives, which provide a skeleton on which a study of decision-making can be built for much of the Gorbachev period, do not exist for the years in question, simply because the advisers who made those notes were not senior enough at the time to sit in on Politburo meetings. The Fund 89 documents, which were so important in developing an understanding of the intervention itself, are also sparse for this period. What is available, aside from memoirs and a few excerpts from diaries, are documents from the private archives of leading military participants such as General Valentin Varennikov and Marshal Sokolov, as well as several political advisers, printed in some of the books discussed in the previous chapter. See Aleksandr Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest’ “Afgana* (Moscow, 2004) and Vladimir Plastun and Vladimir Adrianov *Nadzhibulla: Afganistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* (Moscow, 1998). There is also a rich collection in the United Nations Secretary General’s file on the UN effort to mediate a settlement. For the purposes of this work, these documents add to the other materials and serve as a tool to help understand the changing attitude of Soviet leaders.

the US, Western Europe, and much of the Muslim world. Within the USSR itself there was no public protest, but there was a strong reaction to the invasion by influential intellectuals in Moscow, including party members, as well as senior military officers. Initially ignored, their criticisms eventually came to be heard by the USSR's key foreign policy makers. By 1982 Soviet leaders came to accept the need for UN diplomacy to help resolve the Afghan conflict and prodded their Afghan clients to do the same. However, the high level of US-Soviet tensions in 1983 scuttled these efforts, and confusion at the top of the Soviet hierarchy caused by Andropov's death and Chernenko's illness meant that no further significant initiatives were taken before 1985.

The key principles of Soviet policy in Afghanistan on the military, political, and diplomatic fronts were largely developed during this period. By 1985 these were 1) To fight the opposition while simultaneously training and developing the Afghan army; 2) to strengthen the regime in Kabul and make it more attractive to the population through economic aid and political tutelage, and 3) to conduct diplomacy that would help the Kabul regime gain recognition and stop foreign aid to the opposition. Under Gorbachev's leadership the Soviet Union departed from these principles only slowly.

Entrapment

The purpose of the initial Soviet invasion in December 1979 had been limited, and its planners expected that Soviet troops would be able to return home within several months. The long time Soviet ambassador in Washington, Anatolii Dobrynin, recalled that when he brought up his concerns about the damage the invasion would do to Soviet-American relations, his boss, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko replied "we'll do everything we need to in a month and then get out."⁹⁰ Brezhnev confirmed this, saying the troops would be out within several months.⁹¹ Within several months,

⁹⁰ Artem Krechetnikov "Afghan- The Soviet Vietnam" BBC Russia 20 June 2007.

⁹¹ Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 356.

however, the Soviet leaders who dominated foreign policy decided that the stabilization of the PDPA regime required a long term commitment of Soviet troops. Rather than just providing training and some security, these troops would engage the Kabul regimes enemies directly.

Western scholars and analysts have suggested that Soviet leaders were suffering from a “Czechoslovakia syndrome” when they intervened in Afghanistan. In that situation, Soviet troops had managed to restore a pliable conservative regime after several months of worry over the Czechoslovak experiment with a more liberal communism. Although the invasion had been condemned by western countries and even by some Soviet citizens, the mere presence of Soviet arms had settled the situation, and a sort of calm quickly returned. There is nothing in the documents to suggest that Soviet leaders were thinking of Czechoslovakia when they considered sending troops into Afghanistan, although there were certain similarities in the way the actual invasion was planned.⁹² On the other hand, in earlier discussions of a possible intervention Soviet leaders clearly expressed their concern that such an intervention would lead to Soviet troops directly fighting Afghans.⁹³ In the end this was exactly what happened. The goal of the invasion was to secure infrastructure and create the necessary conditions for the new government to function. Soviet leaders did not envision the Soviet army being directly involved in battle after the initial invasion – they were there to prop up the military of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. For the Soviet army, this was supposed to be a light task.⁹⁴ Almost immediately, however, the Limited Contingent of Soviet Troops (really the 40th army, commonly referred to by the Russians as OKSV) was faced with a situation that foreshadowed the difficulties of working with the Afghan army. In early January 1980 the 4th artillery regiment of the DRA army, based

⁹² Such parallels are drawn in, for example, Douglas MacEachin *Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: The Intelligence Community's Record* (Center for Study of Intelligence) <http://www.cia.gov/csi/monograph/afghanistan/index.html>. Accessed 02/07/2007.

⁹³ See introductory chapter.

⁹⁴ Harisson and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 58.

in the northern settlement of Nahrin, mutinied. Since it was suspected that Soviet advisors had been murdered, limited contingent troops were sent in to quell the insurgency.⁹⁵ David Gai and Vladimir Snegirev, both of whom traveled to Afghanistan on numerous occasions during the war and interviewed Soviet and Afghan participants, write that over 100 mutinous soldiers were killed.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, there was reason for the new Parchamist leadership to have hope in those first few weeks after the invasion that they could establish control over the county. The mutiny in the north aside, the removal of Amin had been a popular move. His short but bloody reign had made him many enemies. A KGB official working in Afghanistan recalled that Soviet soldiers were greeted warmly and told “you have done a great deed by removing the bloody Hafizzulah Amin” but warned to go back to their homeland quickly.⁹⁷ The story may not necessarily be authentic, but there does seem to have been genuine relief in Afghanistan that Amin was gone and a more conciliatory leader had come in his place. Soviet leaders, concerned with Amin’s repressive rule, had urged Karmal to be much more lenient, even stopping him from severely punishing former Amin supporters. Antonio Giustozzi, who has written one of the most comprehensive analyses of Afghanistan under communist rule, also noted that the removal of Amin was welcomed not only in Kabul but even in some provinces, leading many rebels to put down their arms.⁹⁸

Within weeks of the invasion it had become clear that there would be no immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops. Following the use of the limited contingent to put down the mutiny at the beginning of January, Soviet troops were drawn into skirmishes with increasing frequency. Officers and soldiers of the Red Army noticed anti-Soviet propaganda spreading quickly throughout the towns and villages, and by the

⁹⁵ Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 355.

⁹⁶ David Gai and Vladimir Snegirev: *Vtorzhenie*, 113.

⁹⁷ Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 352. Gai and Snegirev confirm that the population seemed to welcome the Soviet troops at first in *Vtorzhenie*, 113.

⁹⁸ Antonio Giustozzi *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan 1978-1992* (London, 2000), 10.

end of the month it seemed like the only pro-Soviet Afghans were those who worked for the PDPA.⁹⁹ In Moscow, supporters of the intervention defended continued presence in Afghanistan. Andrei Gromyko, the foreign minister, told his colleagues that world public opinion was divided and not at all solidly in the US camp. Brazil, Argentina, and Canada, for example, did not want to follow the US lead of stopping grain sales. Yurii Andropov noted the major effort by Babrak Karmal to create unity within the party and to reach out to tribes and certain members of the clergy. Over the previous few weeks, he pointed out, the government had once again started to take on solid shape, acquiring 'all the necessary organs of party and state leadership.'¹⁰⁰ The small outbreaks of violence as well as the anti-Soviet and anti-government propaganda described by officers did not seem to worry Soviet leaders greatly.

By January 25 the Politburo had approved the draft text of an agreement between the USSR and the DRA on rules governing the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan.¹⁰¹ A separate protocol and appendix detailed the location and facilities that would be provided to Soviet troops. The appendix listed 16 cities and settlements where Soviet troops would be stationed, as well as five airports which would be used for Soviet aviation.¹⁰² The Soviet ambassador presented these agreements to Babrak Karmal, the newly installed Afghan president, with the explanation that such measures were necessary due to the increasingly harsh anti-Soviet rhetoric and armed interference sponsored by the US and its allies.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ B.V. Gromov *Ogranichennyi Kontingent*, 118.

¹⁰⁰ Record of Politburo Meeting, January 17, 1980 in Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 334. Archival reference APRF Fund 3 Opis 120 Delo 44

¹⁰¹ RGANI Fund 89, Perechen 42, Delo 12, in Pierre et al *Sowjetische Geheim dokumente zum Afghanistankrieg*, 230-250.

¹⁰² Ibid, 252-258.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 260. It would not be fair to judge these agreements as colonialist documents imposed on Karmal. Indeed, the main agreement mentioned above stipulated that Soviet soldiers and officers (as well as other Soviet citizens working in the DRA) would be subject to Afghan law. In fact, a memorandum submitted to the Politburo on January 27th by the "Afghanistan commission" advocated the accord on the status of Soviet troops in Afghanistan because of "the Afghan national character." Presumably this meant the Afghan hatred of foreigners. Finally, Karmal himself was unlikely to reject the proposal for such an agreement, because he knew that he had essentially inherited an already deeply unpopular government that had been faced for the past year with armed uprisings. CC CPSU Memorandum "Regarding further

At the end of January 1980 Andropov traveled to Kabul to assess the situation and report back on it to the Politburo. Unfortunately, documents relating to the visit itself are unavailable. However, there is a fragment of the Politburo discussion that followed the trip. It is clear from the conversation that someone had suggested the possibility of withdrawing troops. Ustinov and Gromyko spoke against this. The former suggested it would take at least a year to pacify the opposition; the latter seemed even more pessimistic. He pointed out that it would be dangerous to leave before there was some written agreement between Afghanistan and the countries supplying the opposition with arms. "We will never have a complete guarantee, I think, that no hostile country will ever again attack Afghanistan. That is why we need to provide for Afghanistan's complete security."¹⁰⁴ On the one hand, Gromyko seemed to be suggesting the need to begin working on a diplomatic track to help secure Afghanistan's position through bilateral agreements; on the other hand, he was arguing for an essentially open-ended commitment to maintain the regime's position through the use of Soviet troops.

As protests and small attacks on the regime became more widespread, supporters of the intervention became increasingly amenable to the direct use of Soviet troops to attack the opposition. Karmal, like the Khalqis he replaced, hoped that Soviet troops would take a more active role in helping him quash the armed opposition. According to Liakhovskii, both Marshal Sergei Sokolov and General Sergei Akhromeev, the two top ranking soldiers in Afghanistan, had been able to avoid the commitments Karmal requested in the first months of the intervention. Increasing hostility to the presence of Soviet troops and the DRA government, however, convinced Moscow that Soviet troops would have to engage the enemy directly. On February 20 a major protest broke out in

measures...in connection with events in Afghanistan" in RGANI Fund 89, Perechen 34, 3. Also in Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 341-344.

¹⁰⁴ Politburo Meeting, February 7, 1980 in Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 357. APRF Fund 3, Opis 120, Delo 44.

Kabul. Hasan Kakar, at the time a professor of history at Kabul University, wrote that it was the largest protest Kabul had ever seen, involving crowds of thousands in different parts of the city.¹⁰⁵ On February 23, opposition militants had attacked the embassy in Kabul as well as several Soviet encampments.¹⁰⁶ The event seems to have unnerved local Soviet representatives as well as the DRA leadership, who sent urgent requests to Moscow that Soviet troops be allowed to “liquidate the enemy.”¹⁰⁷ A directive followed from Moscow, ordering the 40th army to conduct joint operations with the army of the DRA.¹⁰⁸

By March the Soviet army was involved in full scale operations, repelling advancing guerrillas encroaching on Asadabad, the capital of Kunar Province. The incident foreshadowed a pattern in several ways. Soviet troops were called in to help in an area the Afghan army had at first seemed to be in control. They were able to beat back the guerrillas through intense shelling which, however, also prompted an exodus of civilians into Pakistan.¹⁰⁹ When the Soviet army left, the guerrillas resumed their attack on DRA forces. As one observer put it, “[Afghan troops] only ever seemed confident near Soviet troops.”¹¹⁰ The more Soviet troops took part in battles, the more the Afghan army seemed to limit itself to “mopping up” operations.

The behavior of Soviet leaders was indeed somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, they clearly saw their goal in Afghanistan as providing the security so that the Karmal regime to take root and be able to withstand both military and political challenges. At the same time, they did not see their Afghan protégés, either in the party or the military, as being able to stand on their own. As in January, oral and written statements by members of the Afghanistan commission noted that considerable progress

¹⁰⁵ Hasan Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 114-116.

¹⁰⁶ Gromov, *Ogranichenniy Kontingent*, 118.

¹⁰⁷ Gai and Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, 116.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid and Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'* 358

¹⁰⁹ Harrison and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 59.

¹¹⁰ “Nasha bol’ – Afganistan” [Our pain-Afghanistan – Interview with Yurii Gankovsky] *Aziiia i Afrika Segodnia* No 6, 1989, 4.

had been made by the Karmal government in restoring the authority of the state, but that it was too early to think about the withdrawal of troops. A memorandum prepared by the commission and approved by the Politburo on March 10 stated that although the government was taking proper measures with regard to its position domestically as well as internationally, the process was “moving slowly.” At the same time, the memorandum said, “the fighting ability of the Afghan troops remains low.”¹¹¹

The scarceness of documentation makes it difficult to determine the overall mood in the Politburo on the question of the OKSV and its role. However, it seems that at least some members expressed concern about the consequences of keeping troops in Afghanistan. Liakhovskii cites a document from late February 1980 that suggests Brezhnev brought up the question of a withdrawal, but the possibility was rejected by Ustinov and Andropov.¹¹² It may well be that Brezhnev was unhappy with the possibility of an indefinite presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan, although earlier that month he had himself brought up the possibility of sending more troops.¹¹³ In any event, he supported the members of the Afghanistan commission when they argued for putting off any withdrawal. In all likelihood he was genuinely upset by the possibility of a long-term commitment of Soviet troops, but did not know how to proceed and thus relied on his colleagues and advisors to direct policy. Still, it was not just Brezhnev who wanted to see Soviet troops come home as soon as possible, as is clear from the emphasis placed on defending their continued presence in Afghanistan by supporters of the intervention.

The architects and defenders of the intervention believed that the Soviet Union had made the right decision in intervening and was making the right sort of investment in the country. In the Politburo they concentrated their efforts on calming the nerves of

¹¹¹ Afghanistan Commission of the CC CPSU Memorandum March 10, 1988 RGANI Fund 89, P.34, Delo 5 and in *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente*, 304.

¹¹² Liakhovskii writes that the document, from the archive of the General Staff, is still classified and thus cannot be quoted. Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 358.

¹¹³ Politburo Meeting, February 7, 1980 in Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 357.

jittery colleagues who sought to limit the presence of Soviet troops. A memorandum dated April 7 led with a list of benefits the Soviet invasion had brought to Afghanistan as well as to the Soviet Union's security.¹¹⁴ The conclusions to be drawn from these assessments were that the Soviet Union had invested too much in Afghanistan to withdraw prematurely. For the time being Soviet troops would have to play a leading role in defending the regime. The March 10, 1980 memorandum stated quite clearly that a Soviet military presence would be required for a long time: "The successful resolution of internal problems and the strengthening of the new order in Afghanistan will take significant effort and time, during the course of which Soviet troops will continue to be the key stabilizing factor."¹¹⁵ In fact, the 40th army was assuming all the responsibilities of a national army, as the April memorandum made clear:

...Our troops in Afghanistan will have to continue fulfilling the task of defending the revolutionary order of the DRA, defending the borders of the country, providing securities in key centres as well as transportation links...Only with the stabilization of the internal situation in Afghanistan, as well as the improvement of conditions around it, would it be possible, at the request of the DRA leadership, to consider the question of a gradual withdrawal of Soviet troops from the DRA...¹¹⁶

Within several months of the invasion any hope of a quick turn around evaporated. Originally, Soviet troops had entered to save a revolutionary government from an erratic leader and to make sure an ally did not go over to the US camp. Now they were there to make sure a new government installed through that intervention could stay in power.

The Afghanistan commission developed the idea for the intervention and was the key policy-making body in the first years of the invasion. The public knew very little and the party was not involved in any decision-making. With the realization that Soviet troops would have to stay in Afghanistan for a longer period of time, however, it was necessary to go through the formality of securing party endorsement for Soviet

¹¹⁴ "The situation around Afghanistan and the role of Soviet troops" in Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 359. Archival reference: APRF Fund 3, Opis 120, Delo 144.

¹¹⁵ Afghanistan Commission of the CC CPSU Memorandum March 10, 1988.

¹¹⁶ "The situation around Afghanistan and the role of Soviet troops" in Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 361.

policy in Afghanistan. At a special plenum convened in June 1980, Gromyko delivered a speech defending Soviet policy in Afghanistan. The Soviet Union, he said, would not apologise for sending in troops, indeed “the ones who should be apologizing are those are behind the aggression against Afghanistan, who carried out the criminal plans with regard to this country.” Further, Gromyko said, echoing an earlier statement by Brezhnev, it was necessary to keep the troops there.¹¹⁷ The plenum voted to “fully approve” the actions taken by the leadership.¹¹⁸ Both the initial invasion and the continuing presence of the 40th army in Afghanistan now had the official support of the party.

It is significant that the Afghanistan commission consisted of the Soviet Union’s most senior politicians, all of them close to Brezhnev. There was no more powerful a constellation of personalities than Gromyko, Andropov, Ustinov, and Ponomarev¹¹⁹ in the CPSU of the early 1980’s. They represented, collectively, the Foreign Ministry, the KGB, the Ministry of Defence, as well the International Department. With Brezhnev on their side they also represented the party. In experience and in formal position each one of them individually was among the highest ranking members of the Politburo. Taken together they also represented the chief institutions responsible for the conduct of foreign affairs.

In the first six months after the invasion, these leaders came to accept the necessity of an open presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. They did this not from any desire to “colonise” Afghanistan, but because they did not believe that the Karmal government was ready to stand on its own. The growing insurgency, rather than

¹¹⁷ Speech by Andrei Gromyko, Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU, June 23 1980 *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente*, 382.

¹¹⁸ June 23 1980 Resolution of the CC CPSU “Regarding the International Position and Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union,” *Ibid*, 384.

¹¹⁹ According to several people who worked for him in the International Department, Ponomarev was supposedly against the initial invasion. In any case, he put his name to the proposals that came from the Afghan commission. Ponomarev was not nearly as Andropov, Ustinov, and Gromyko, and when he did object to their policies he was either overruled or bullied into accepting the troika’s point of view. See Cherniaev, *Dnevnik Dvukh Epokh*.

discouraging the extended presence of Soviet troops, convinced Moscow that their use was necessary and appropriate. From the end of February 1980, Soviet troops would become the DRA's main fighting force.

Propaganda and Limited Diplomatic Approaches

The intervention had brought cries of protest from western nations as well as the Muslim world.¹²⁰ It damaged Moscow's relationship with friendly nations, such as India, which were troubled by the precedent of an invasion undertaken to change the person in charge.¹²¹ The invasion also contributed to frictions with China, which made the withdrawal of Soviet troops one of the preconditions for an improvement in relations.¹²² Soviet diplomacy in the first year of the invasion focused on creating the space to conduct a flexible Afghanistan policy. In the first few months, this meant primarily countering the US reaction to the initial invasion, responding to the "Carter Doctrine," and undermining the US effort to create an international consensus on how to respond to the USSR. This was primarily a propaganda effort, aimed at the Muslim world and other Third World states. Moscow rejected most diplomatic approaches that involved any country other than the DRA and Pakistan, the main conduit for arms to the resistance. Moscow held firm to the position that the war in Afghanistan was an internal matter. The Soviet presence at the request of the DRA government was only necessary because of outside interference and US imperialism.

In the months following the Soviet invasion a number of European countries approached the Soviet Union with proposals for political settlement in Afghanistan. Such approaches came from the European Economic Union, French President Giscard

¹²⁰ European reaction, however, was generally less dramatic than that of the US. See Wilfried Loth, *Overcoming the Cold War: a history of détente, 1950-1991* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 160-164.

¹²¹ See Peter Duncan *The Soviet Union and India* (London: Routledge, 1989), 27-31.

¹²² This was one of the "three obstacles" to improvement of relations with the USSR, as Chinese officials framed it, along with the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan and Soviet support for Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. See Sergei Radchenko, *Facing the Dragons*, manuscript in progress.

d'Estang, and the government of Italy. These plans emphasised political resolution within Afghanistan, Soviet troop withdrawal, and mutual commitments of non-interference. The USSR rejected these approaches because they emphasised political settlement within Afghanistan, arranged by outside powers, implicitly questioned the legitimacy of the Karmal government, and threatened to limit Moscow's freedom of action. The Soviet Union was only interested in proposals that would lead to a commitment of "non-interference" by outside powers. Such proposals would also have implicitly recognised the legitimacy of the Karmal government.¹²³

In March and April 1980 the Politburo approved a set of propaganda, diplomatic, and intelligence measures meant to lessen the blow of the Carter doctrine.

¹²⁴ The counter-attack to "increase the activity of the international public against the aggressive activities of the USA in the Persian Gulf" was opened on a broad front.

Aside from the mass media offensive, the Politburo approved in March a plan of measures "for the activation of the international community against the aggressive actions of the USA in the Persian Gulf area."¹²⁵ The plan approved by the Politburo envisioned the activation of every party organ that could possibly be of relevance, including the International Department, the Komsomol, Committees of Solidarity with Asian and African countries, as well as with Palestine, reaching out to the non-aligned movement at its 25 year anniversary conference, and using various international peace and trade union conferences to organise resolutions against US policy in the region.¹²⁶

This strategy relied on traditional state and party institutions that were used for domestic and foreign propaganda. Soviet Muslim clergy issued statements addressed to

¹²³ Khristoforov, "Trudny put k Zhenevskim Soglasheniem," 27-30. Obitchkina, Evguenia "L'intervention de l'Union Sovietique en Afghanistan," *Revue d'histoire Diplomatique*, 2006, 2; Valeri Giscard d'Estaing *Le Pouvoir et la Vie* (Paris: Compagnie 12, 1991), 386-440.

¹²⁴ Apparently, an enraged Brezhnev was against it being referred to as a doctrine at all. Anatolii Cherniaev, diary entry February 9, 1980 Anatolii Cherniaev *Afganskii Vopros* [The Afghan Question] (Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniiia: 2000)

¹²⁵ Politburo note "Measures for the activation..." March 13, 1980. RGANI, Fund 89, Perechen 34, Delo 7, Appendix 2.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

the Muslims of the world asking them to remember that the USSR had always been a friend of Muslim peoples and their defender against imperialism.¹²⁷ The limitations of the strategy were evident at the “Tashkent Conference,” assembled in September 1980. Although the occasion of the conference was supposed to be a celebration of the 15th century of the Hejira, the real purpose was to push “anti-imperialist” propaganda in the wake of the Soviet invasion. A planning meeting of four Soviet muftis in January 1980 issued a declaration against “US imperialists, Israeli Zionists, the traitor Sadat and Chinese hegemonists’ meddling in Afghan affairs.”¹²⁸ Only a few of the seventy-five countries invited sent delegates, and some of those that did were vocal in their criticism of the Soviet invasion.¹²⁹

The propaganda effort was accompanied by a diplomatic effort to shore up support from friendly states. The Politburo instructed the Soviet ambassador in Aden to speak to the president of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen and ask for his help in rallying friendly parties and countries in the region, opening a “wide international campaign against the current aggressive course of American imperialism on the Arabian peninsula and in the Persian Gulf.” Soviet leaders hoped there could be a coordinated demand for the US to withdraw its troops from the area.¹³⁰ The results of this initiative were minimal. Three weeks later Soviet leaders adopted new measures, prepared by three members of the Afghanistan commission: Andrey Gromyko, Yurii Andropov, and Dmitrii Ustinov. In presenting their proposals to the Politburo, they wrote “The USA continues to carry out practical measures for widening its military presence on a permanent basis in the Near and Middle East and the Indian Ocean.”¹³¹ Messages were sent to Addis Ababa, Algiers, Beirut, Teheran, Tripoli, and several other

¹²⁷ Alexandre Bennigsen, “Soviet Islamic Strategy after Afghanistan” in Alexandre Bennigsen et al, *Soviet Strategy and Islam* (Basingstoke: Macmillan,) 1989, 57.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 58.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 59.

¹³⁰ Telegram to the Soviet Ambassador in Aden March 13, 1980 RGANI Fund 89, Perechen 34, Delo 7, Appendix 1.

¹³¹ PB Memorandum “Regarding countermeasures to US plans...” April 5, 1980 RGANI, Fund 89, Perechen 34, Doc 7.

capitals that could be expected to be sympathetic to an anti-American view as well as countries where the US was seen as being on the offensive, such as Somalia and Kenya. The tone of this message was more defensive. Rather than calling for specific actions, it laid the blame on deteriorating US-Soviet relations on the United States and pointed out that the situation in Afghanistan was being used as an excuse. Moscow was hoping that its record of support for national-liberation movements and progressive governments would allow it to mitigate some of the effects of Washington's global diplomatic offensive.¹³²

At the same time the Politburo directed the KGB to carry out appropriate measures along a similar line in developing countries, especially Iran.¹³³ It is not clear what exactly this meant, nor are there KGB documents that would provide any detail. It is almost certain however, that the KGB's task involved more clandestine ways of achieving the same goals the diplomatic initiative was supposed to help deliver.

According to Leonid Shebarshin, the KGB resident in Tehran from 1979 to 1983 and later Chief of the First Directorate, the KGB's instructions were, aside from gathering information, trying to 'increase anti-American feeling and soften anti-Soviet feeling.'

The latter was nearly impossible, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan having made the USSR almost as big of an enemy for Revolutionary Iran as the United States.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, Soviet leaders remained hopeful that the anti-Americanism of the revolutionary government would help neutralise the Carter administration's efforts in the Persian Gulf.

The Soviet leadership was not completely rejecting the possibility of using diplomacy to settle the Afghan question. Rather, Soviet leaders wanted to avoid having to negotiate with the United States directly or undertaking any other approach that

¹³² Telegram to Soviet Ambassadors in Mogadishu and Nairobi, April 5, 1980 RGANI, Fund 89, Perechen 34, Doc 7, Appendix 2

¹³³ Politburo Protocol 191 April 5, 1980 RGANI, Fund 89, Perechen 34, Doc 7.

¹³⁴ Author's interview with Leonid Shebarshin, Moscow, September 17, 2007

might undermine the legitimacy of the Kabul government or the USSR's actions in support of it. They hoped to use the US offensive in the region to deflect some of the anger from Muslim countries directed at the USSR following the invasion. As the Afghanistan commission¹³⁵ put it, it was necessary to constantly bring up the question of US bases and troops in the Persian Gulf region. This would allow the Politburo "to widen the circle of countries well disposed to our position in Afghanistan, or, at least, approaching it with understanding."¹³⁶ In other words, the Soviet leadership aimed to use the US offensive in the region to deflect some of the anger from Muslim countries directed at the USSR following the invasion.

Even at this stage the Soviet leadership accepted the need for some sort of diplomatic intervention to settle the Afghan question. This stemmed from a realization that the problem was not just the opposition but also its support network which included Pakistan, China, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Although they rejected the possibility of involving the United States in these talks, they did accept an initiative by Cuban leader Fidel Castro to act as an intermediary in organizing talks between the DRA government and Pakistan. They also accepted the possibility of the US and Soviet Union being included in the discussions, but at a latter stage. The priority was finding an agreement between Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹³⁷ Although this effort did not bring any immediate results, Pakistani President Zia-ul-Haq did not reject negotiations outright, saying that while he could not recognise the DRA government, he welcomed Castro's mediation effort.¹³⁸ The Afghan commission confirmed this approach a month later, adding that similar efforts by other non-aligned countries would also be

¹³⁵ With Vladimir Zagladin of the international department in place of his boss Ponomarev

¹³⁶ "The situation in Afghanistan and certain questions arising from it." April 7, 1980 in Liakhovskii, 376. Archival reference APRF Fund 3, Opis 82, Delo 148.

¹³⁷ "Regarding our further line of foreign policy...and a reply to F. Castro" March 10, 1980 Fund 89, P.34, D.5, in *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente* 304-306.

¹³⁸ Confidential Note for the Secretary General March 27, 1980 UN Archive, NY, S-0904-0089-05-1

welcome.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, Soviet leaders rejected efforts at mediation by the UN, as well as various resolutions from the Islamic Conference or the European Community. At the same time, initiatives similar to Castro's by other communist leaders, such as Romania's Ceacescu, were unacceptable to Pakistan.¹⁴⁰ Thus during the first year of the intervention diplomacy did not play an important role in Moscow's efforts to stabilise the Kabul government.

In the first half-year after the invasion, the Soviet leadership avoided any diplomacy that could, in the short term, limit its activities in Afghanistan. This is because the Afghan commission had come to believe that before the USSR could pull back its troops, much work would have to be done to build up the Karmal government. As Vasili Safronchuk, an advisor at the Kabul embassy in 1980-1982 put it, Karmal stalled to avoid the start of negotiations, "and Moscow helped him in this so as to win some time to strengthen the new regime in Kabul and increase the fighting ability of the army."¹⁴¹ The only diplomatic initiatives that could be considered were ones that might enhance the legitimacy of the Karmal government – such as Castro's proposal to mediate in direct talks between the Pakistani government and the DRA.

Efforts for stabilization within Afghanistan

This section will briefly discuss the Soviet leadership's efforts in 1980-1984 to create the conditions under which Soviet troops could withdraw from Afghanistan. Moscow's strategy aimed at uniting the PDPA, giving it greater legitimacy through the use of traditional Afghan institutions, including tribal councils and the clergy, and making the

¹³⁹ "The situation in Afghanistan and certain questions arising from it." April 7, 1980 in Liakhovskii, 377.

¹⁴⁰ Notes on a meeting between Mr. Agha Shahi, Minsiter for Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, and the UN Secretary General 11 September 1980 UN Archive S-0904-0089-05-1

¹⁴¹ Vasili Safronchuk "Afghanistan Pri Babrake Karmale i Nadzhibulle: Dolgiy put' k zhenevskim soglasheniam." [Afghanistan under Babrak Karmal and Najibullah: The Long Path to the Geneva Accords.] *Azia i Afrika Segodnia* 1997, No. 1, 36.

regime more attractive through infrastructure programs and other aid.¹⁴² The so-called *Policy of National Reconciliation*, launched in January 1987 with enthusiastic support from Gorbachev and discussed in chapter 3, was largely a reformulation of the policy described below. At the same time, the domestic and international situation that had developed as a result of Amin's repressive rule and the Soviet invasion meant that the new Karmal government was greatly dependent on Soviet aid, trade, and specialists.

Contemporary western commentators interpreted "the Sovietization" of Afghanistan after the invasion as part of a broader plan to make Afghanistan a virtual republic of the USSR. They noted the growing share of Soviet exports and imports in Afghanistan's foreign trade, the ever growing number of Soviet specialists, the extent to which Afghan government and enterprises were organised on Soviet models. In fact, this was due to the fact that the Karmal government had few friends outside of the Soviet Union and its allies. Pakistan and Iran's hostility to meant that trade with these natural (in terms of geographical proximity) partners was severely restricted. So was trade with other traditional partners, like India, that had to cross hostile territory.¹⁴³

The USSR became not only the major trade partner, but also a clearinghouse for Afghan goods destined for third countries and for imports arriving from those countries.¹⁴⁴ Besides non-repayable aid (which in terms of consumer goods alone amounted to \$210 million rubles in 1986, for example) the USSR also provided Afghanistan with credits that were to be used for buying Soviet products and repaid with Afghan exports. Since demand for Afghan exports other than natural gas (such as

¹⁴² Both this section and chapter III, which deals with the Policy of National Reconciliation, will focus on Soviet decision-making, rather than the process in Afghanistan itself. For an analysis of the effort during the first years of the Soviet occupation, see Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan*, 33-64.

¹⁴³ "Record of conversation between I.T. Grishin, USSR Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade, and M.H. Jalalar, DRA Minister of Trade," August 6, 1980. RGAE Fond 413, opis 2, delo 739.

¹⁴⁴ "Record of conversation between I.T. Grishin and M.H. Mangal, DRA Ambassador to the USSR," October 14, 1982. RGAE Fond 413, opis 2, delo 2214.

rugs, wool, and dried fruits) was low, the DRA was never able to repay these credits, which, however, were generally extended or forgiven by Moscow.¹⁴⁵

Trade and material aid was only one of the ways that Moscow tried to help the Karmal government. The Soviet leadership understood that to stabilise the country, Karmal would need to unify the party as well as convince the rest of the country to accept PDPA rule. The Afghanistan commission presented a plan of action at the end of January 1980. It called for measures to spread the PDPA's influence into the countryside, including the use of youth organizations. At the same time, it tried to take into account the specifics of Afghan power structures. The document called for efforts to reach out to tribal leaders, the use of *jirgas* (traditional tribal councils), and a "long term plan for work with Muslim clergy."¹⁴⁶

Before the PDPA could spread its influence into the countryside, Karmal would have to achieve a degree of unity within the party that had been elusive since its foundation and that had been further undermined by Amin's purges. Moscow's concept of unity did not always match up with Karmal's, however. Soviet leaders wanted Karmal to form a government that included Khalqis, and helped broker a deal between him and several Khalqi ministers in Moscow before bringing him to Afghanistan. Once in power, Karmal began to edge out Khalqis, even executing some of Amin's closest associates.¹⁴⁷

The only reason a full scale purge did not take place was that Moscow made it very clear it would be unacceptable. Party advisers pressed Karmal to stop the removal of Khalqi's from party and administrative posts, and a formal CC CPSU request was

¹⁴⁵ Memorandum of conversation between USSR Minister of Trade I Aristov and M.H.Jalalar, February 13, 1986. RGAE Fond 413 op 32 delo 4607; Survey of Soviet trade with Asian countries, January 10, 1986 RGAE F 413 op 2 d 4677.

¹⁴⁶ CC CPSU Memorandum "Regarding further measures...in connection with events in Afghanistan" in RGANI Fund 89, Perechen 34, 3. Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 344.

¹⁴⁷ Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'* 348, 350.

directed to him sometime in January.¹⁴⁸ Karmal, for his part, kept trying to gain a free hand, telling Soviet advisers “As long as you keep my hands bound and do not let me deal with the Khalq faction, there will be no unity in the PDPA and the government cannot become strong...They tortured us and killed us. They still hate us! They are the enemies of the party!”¹⁴⁹

To stabilise the government and broaden its base of support, the Soviet Union sent thousands of advisers. Some were Soviet party workers sent to advise the party in Kabul and in the provinces. Many more were sent to factories, enterprises, and even universities. Reports that there were Soviet advisers at every level of the Afghan government began to appear in the western press as early as January 1980. Karmal himself later confirmed this, admitting that many Afghans had largely stopped working, preferring to “lay all the burden and responsibility for practical work on the shoulders of the advisers.”¹⁵⁰ Soviet embassy employees joked about the “limited contingent of Soviet party advisors in Afghanistan”.¹⁵¹

It did not help that the advisers generally had no special preparation for the kind of work they were sent to do. The most numerous were communist party advisers, who often proved doctrinaire in their suggestions, ignorant and insensitive to local customs. In one incident, an advisor posted to a small town had the mosque shut down and Marxist dialectics played through its loudspeakers. Some KGB advisers, despite their tendency to follow a policy different from that being pursued by the military or Foreign Ministry, were better trained. They underwent serious preparation before being sent to Afghanistan, including “two years of Dari or Farsi, Afghan history, economy, culture,

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 350.

¹⁴⁹ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, (Basic Books, 2006), 407.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas T. Hammond *Red Flag Over Afghanistan: The Communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion, and the Consequences* (Boulder, 1990), 152.

¹⁵¹ O. Zharov “Sleptsi, navizivavshie sebia v povodyri” *Azia i Afrika Segodnia* No 12, 1992, 29.

customs and traditions, religion, and so forth.” On the whole, however, such well-trained advisers were hard to come by.¹⁵²

The presence of Soviet troops and advisers seemed to cause paralysis among Afghan politicians. This may have been due to a sense that the Soviet advisors could do the job better, or it may have been a response to the generally imperial attitude adopted by some advisors. Often, Soviet advisers preferred to carry out a task themselves, rather than training their subordinates.¹⁵³ It was common practice, for example, to write speeches in Russian for translation into Dari and Pashto. This practice apparently included party documents and, later, the new constitution adopted under Najibullah.¹⁵⁴ A Soviet assessment of the PDPA from 1983 noted that even at the highest level of the Party, there was a tendency to shy away from decision-making. Karmal, Keshtmand, and the other members lacked initiative, the assessment said, and “turn to advisor not just for counsel, but also to transfer to them their own functions for the composition of working documents, instructions, especially texts of reports and articles.”¹⁵⁵

The Khalq/Parcham split continued to pose a major dilemma for Soviet advisors and for Moscow. Amin had been a member of the Khalqi wing of the PDPA, Karmal the leader of Parcham. The army was primarily Khalqi, and its loyalty to Karmal was often in question. Moscow could not allow a purge of Khalqis, but also realised that Babrak Karmal and his Parcham faction were weak. A new security agency, the KhAD, was created to replace the one that functioned under Amin. The new agency had several purposes. First, it was meant to dissociate the security service from Amin’s repressive rule. Second, it was meant to be a security service loyal to Karmal, not one in which Amin loyalists would undermine his rule. Mohammed Najibullah, a KGB agent and

¹⁵² Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopoliti*, 68. Author’s interviews with Ambassador Yulii Vorontsov, Moscow, September 11, 2007, and Leonid Shebarshin, Moscow, September 17, 2007.

¹⁵³ Valery I. Mitochkin, *Afganskie Zapiski* [Notes from Afghanistan] (Saransk, 2004), 66-67. Mitochkin, a KGB officer, served as an advisor in Afghanistan.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Yulii Vorontsov, Moscow, September 11, 2007

¹⁵⁵ “Report on the Condition of the PDPA” 1983, Personal Archive of Marshal Sokolov. Provided to the author by General Aleksandr Liakhovskii.

Parcham member, was installed as its head, and KGB advisers sent to help him build up the agency.¹⁵⁶

Although Parcham increasingly occupied the most senior positions, many lower-tier members, particularly in the army, were Khalqis¹⁵⁷. This created additional friction within the party that made top-down leadership difficult. Kim Tsagalov, a military adviser, told the deputy chief of the international department in 1982 that installing Karmal was a mistake, “not because Karmal is not worthy of being a leader – he is a founder of the PDPA, but because there are many more Khalqis, and they are the ones spilling their blood, while many Parchamists are sitting in government offices, preferring to become apparatchiks.”¹⁵⁸

Soviet advisers also began to split, some of them being more inclined to support Khalqis and others Parchamis. The KGB, on the whole, supported the latter, while the military supported the Khalqis, perhaps because they were the ones, as Tsagalov put it, “doing the fighting.”¹⁵⁹ This split was noticeable in the early years of the war, but would become especially apparent even at the Politburo level when Najibullah took over and Soviet troops were withdrawing.

Of course, even if party unity had been achieved, it is far from certain that this would have led to the party making big gains with the population and attaining the kind of legitimacy that would allow it to run the country peacefully. The party continued to exist primarily in cities; its presence in the countryside was largely on paper. At a meeting with Marshal Sokolov and Fiakrat Tabeev, the Soviet Ambassador, in March 1984, one party adviser admitted that in his region only 10% of the villages had any sort of PDPA presence. At the same time, he lamented, the centre did not seem to mind that

¹⁵⁶ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 408.

¹⁵⁷ According to Giustozzi, between 60 and 70% of PDPA members in the army were Khalqi. Giustozzi, *War, Politics, and Society*, 82.

¹⁵⁸ Gai and Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, 195.

¹⁵⁹ Author’s interview with Leonid Shebarshin, Moscow, September 17, 2007.

PDPA functionaries were not making their way into the countryside.¹⁶⁰ The figure of 10% was probably an estimate, and it covered only one region, not the country as a whole.¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, it is clear that in the fourth year of the occupation very little progress had been made in terms of “widening the social base of the party,” a goal that Politburo leaders in Moscow had set in January 1980.

The difficulties in political work were similar to the ones that the Soviets faced in their effort to improve the military situation. The more Soviet advisors or troops became involved, which they were doing to stabilise the DRA government, the less the DRA government seemed able to act independently. The problem of restoring the Afghan army’s ability to fight independently, or encouraging leaders to make decisions without turning to their Soviet tutors for help, discussed further later in this chapter as well as chapter 3, was one of the major stumbling blocks in effecting a successful withdrawal.

The “nation-building” described above was part of the Soviet Union’s broader strategy in the first years of the war to stabilise the country. Moscow aimed to secure Karmal’s position in the party while simultaneously building up the army and spreading the regime’s influence. To achieve this goal, Moscow sent thousands of advisers to work alongside the Afghans, advising them on everything from party organization to infrastructure works. The limits of this approach were becoming evident early on, and by 1984 it was clear that the efforts were giving only minimal results. The Soviet effort was stalemated on all fronts: unable to reach an accommodation through Geneva, decisively beat the *mujahadeen*, or work with its Afghan clients to make their regime acceptable to the population.

¹⁶⁰ Meeting with Party Advisors, handwritten notes, March 31, 1984 Personal Archive of Marshal Sokolov. Provided to the author by General Aleksandr Liakhovskii.

¹⁶¹ For a broader overview, see Giustozzi, *War, Politics, and Society*, 36-40.

Opposition to the intervention within the Soviet Elite

Georgii Kornienko, a Soviet deputy foreign minister who would later become directly involved in Afghan affairs, wrote that at the June 1980 plenum no one had spoken out against the invasion or even raised a question about it. Perhaps, he suggests, if they had, the Politburo would have started looking for a way out earlier.¹⁶² In fact, although there had been no opposition at the plenum, by June 1980 a number of party and state officials as well as leading figures of the academic world¹⁶³ had made their concerns known to Brezhnev and others in the leadership. There was also dissatisfaction in the military, not just among those who had opposed the invasion in the first place, but those who went to Afghanistan later and took part in the fighting. Over the next several years such reports would accumulate, and by early 1981 even the defense minister, Ustinov, a supporter of the intervention in 1979, was willing to approach other members of the leadership with the idea of withdrawing troops.

The evidence of discontent came as early as January 20, when the Institute of Economics of the World Socialist System sent a memorandum to the Central Committee of the CPSU as well as the KGB. The memorandum, signed by Academician Oleg Bogomolov, argued that the invasion had done great damage to Soviet interests and detente, as well as giving new stimulus to the opposition, which was now able to call the population to resistance “against a foreign invader.” The regime was isolated, able to count on support only from the socialist camp, primarily from the USSR. The memorandum listed eleven ways in which the invasion had damaged Soviet interests, including the effect it would have on the arms race, the economy, as well as Sino-Soviet relations. Coming at a time when the extent of resistance was perhaps not yet clear, it included a prophetic note: the leadership needed to maneuver for a way out prior to the

¹⁶² Georgii M. Kornienko, *Kholodnaia Voina: svидетельство ее участника* (Moscow: 2001), 249-250.

¹⁶³ In particular, institutes whose function was to advise the central committee, such as IMEMO.

start of spring, when warmer weather would bring increased attacks and Soviet troops would be drawn into the fighting.¹⁶⁴

Anatolii Cherniaev's diary entries for the winter and spring of 1980 record the disgust and worry among his circle of "party intellectuals," historians and others with academic training working in the International Department and elsewhere in the apparatus.¹⁶⁵ Although many of these people probably never made their views known outside a small circle of friends, some appealed to the central committee and even to the General Secretary himself.¹⁶⁶ Those who traveled abroad experienced first hand the strength of the international reaction. Georgii Arbatov and *Pravda* correspondent Yurii Zhukov, returning from a trip to Italy where they were meeting with American academics, secured a meeting with Brezhnev in May 1980 in which they tried to convince them of the damage the invasion had done to US-Soviet relations.¹⁶⁷ Similar efforts were undertaken by specialists on the region.¹⁶⁸ Yet the effect of these early petitions was clearly minimal. The views of even the most respected academics could not compete with the views of the party's most senior leaders.¹⁶⁹

Troubling information also came from Soviet journalists that were sent to Afghanistan to report on the progress of the revolution. Although they were limited in terms of what they could actually publish, some of them sent more truthful accounts

¹⁶⁴ The memorandum is excerpted, almost in full, in Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i Doblest'*, 337-340. A shorter excerpt is in CWIHP Bulletin 14/15 241-242. In fact, Bogomolov later told Gai and Snegirev that he wasn't sure the memorandum had ever reached Brezhnev's eyes. Gai and Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, 115.

¹⁶⁵ Anatolii Cherniaev "Afganskii Vopros" [The Afghan Question] *Svobodnaia Mysl'* XXI, No 11 2000

¹⁶⁶ Vadim Kirpichenko, at the time a Deputy Chief of the First Directorate of the KGB, notes that even in the upper echelons of the KGB there was a sense that the invasion had been a mistake. Vadim Kirpichenko *Razvedka: Litsa i Lichnosti* [Intelligence: Faces and Personalities] Moscow: 1998, 358.

¹⁶⁷ Arbatov, *Chelovek Sistemi*, 292; Cherniaev diary entry for June 21, 1980, "Afganskii Vopros," p. 73..

¹⁶⁸ Kirpichenko, *Razvedka*, 358-359. See also Yurii Gankovskii "Afghanistan: from intervention to National Reconciliation," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. IV, no. 1 (spring 1992).

¹⁶⁹ Although there was no public demonstration by dissidents as there had been in 1968, when prominent intellectuals like the poet Yevgeny Evtushenko protested the invasion of Czechoslovakia in Red Square, some, like the physicist Andrei Sakharov, expressed their discontent in letters addressed to the central committee. Gai and Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, 100. The opinions of dissidents generally had even less of an influence on policymakers at this time than did those of intellectuals like Bogomolov or Arbatov. It was all too easy to write these petitions off as the views of the "intelligentsia," never to be fully trusted when matters of state interest were concerned. See Andropov's comment to Boris Ponomarev following Arbatov's interview with Brezhnev, in Cherniaev "Afganskii Vopros," 73.

using confidential channels. One correspondent wrote a scathing assessment, addressed to the CC CPSU, almost two years into the Soviet occupation, saying that military operations were largely counterproductive. Although the PDPA still controlled only 15% of the country, the operations against rebels only aggravated the relationship with the peasantry:

...the tactics of hot pursuit of the rebels and that of destruction of rebels' nests on their own territory is facing growing criticism on the part of the local population. In the course of those operations, the housing and the agricultural fields are often destroyed, the civilian population is killed, and in the end everything remains the same. The rebels return and control the territory again.¹⁷⁰

The letter also contained some lightly disguised criticism of the attempts to paint the war as a battle against outside aggression, pointing out that this was in fact a “civil war” before anything else.¹⁷¹ With its stark description of the Soviet army fighting against the civilian Afghan population, the letter echoed the nightmare scenario discussed at at Politburo meetings in March 1979 when Soviet leaders decided *not* to send in troops.

The most difficult to ignore were the concerns of senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the military. Mikhail Kapitsa, a long serving diplomat and Deputy Minister at the time of the invasion, pointed out at a Foreign Ministry *collegium* meeting that the Soviet intervention would face enormous difficulties, citing the experience of British troops in the 19th century.¹⁷² A number of other senior officials also expressed their concern either to the Minister personally or in written form.¹⁷³ Senior commanders had expressed their opposition even prior to the invasion.¹⁷⁴ As early as 1980 there was some consensus between Marshal Ogarkov, General Varennikov, and General Sergei Akhromeev that there was no military solution to the

¹⁷⁰ “Pravda” Correspondent I.Schedrov’s letter to the CC CPSU on the Situation in Afghanistan, November 12, 1981. Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya, National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Gromyko reportedly asked: “Do you mean to compare that our internationalist troops with imperialist troops?” Kapitsa replied: “No, our troops are different – but the mountains are the same!” Kapitsa interview with O. Arne Westad.

¹⁷³ Author’s interview with Nikolai Kozyrev, November 15, 2008.

¹⁷⁴ See introduction.

unfolded situation.¹⁷⁵ Yet negative assessments did not always make it all the way to the Politburo. General V.A. Merimksiy, deputy chief of the Ministry of Defence operational group in Afghanistan, who was in Afghanistan in the early years of the war, writes that although Sokolov agreed with the assessments of field commanders who thought there was no military solution, the Politburo was not willing to consider a pull out.¹⁷⁶ At times, however, senior officers were more optimistic about their prospects for defeating the insurgency. At a meeting in the Soviet embassy in Kabul in January 1980, Marshal Sokolov said that the “counterrevolution” would be defeated by June 1st of that year.¹⁷⁷ Aleksandr Maiorov, the Chief Military Advisor in 1980-1981, also noted that he believed the war could be won by the end of 1981.¹⁷⁸

It is difficult, if not nearly impossible, to evaluate which of these reports, if any, had an impact on the key decision makers: Andropov, Gromyko, Ustinov, Brezhnev, and to a lesser extent, Ponomarev. It is not even clear which reports traveled up the bureaucratic chain. Leonid Shershnev, a lieutenant colonel and political officer sent to Afghanistan in 1981, sent numerous reports to his superiors (and, he later said, straight to Moscow) arguing that the Soviet army was doing more harm than good. There were no replies, and he was repeatedly warned not to go around his superiors. Even Akhromeev, who seemed to agree with him, told him to steer clear of politics, which were not the army’s business.¹⁷⁹ Since Akhromeev was one of the officers expressing his doubts to Sokolov, Ogarkov, and Ustinov, it is possible that Shershnev’s concerns were made known, at least indirectly, even at the Politburo levels. But it is also likely that many of these reports never made it all the way to the top decision makers,

¹⁷⁵ Yurii Gankovskii “Afghanistan: from intervention to National Reconciliation,” *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. IV, no. 1 (spring 1992), 133.

¹⁷⁶ V.A. Merimskii “Afganistan: Uroki i vivody” *Voenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal* 1994(1), 29.

¹⁷⁷ This comment was noted by Vladimir Plastun, a Soviet adviser. Vladimir Plastun & Vladimir Adrianov *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* [Najibullah. Afghanistan in the Vice of Geopolitics] (Moscow: 1998), 80.

¹⁷⁸ Aleksandr Maiorov, *Pravda ob Afganskoi voine: svидетельство главного военного советника* [The Truth About the Afgan War: Testimony of the Chief Military Advisor] (Moscow: Prava cheloveka, 1996).

¹⁷⁹ Gai and Snegirov, 204-205.

intercepted along the way by “gatekeeper” subordinates who did not wish to anger their bosses with bad news.

Clearly, however, at least some of these views were filtering through to top Soviet leaders. By early 1981 doubts about continuing the intervention had started to form among Politburo members. Minister of Defense Ustinov, who had rejected the officer’s concerns prior to the invasion, now started to take them to heart. He was the one receiving assessments regularly from commanders in the field and knew first hand the difficulties they were facing. In an interview with journalist David Gai, General Ter-Grigoriants recalled a meeting with Ustinov early in 1981 when the latter asked “in all honesty, when will we end the war there?” Ter-Grigoriants replied that it was impossible to “resolve the Afghan problem by military means” and recommended the formation of a coalition government.¹⁸⁰ In February of that year, Ustinov circulated a letter in the Politburo that stated that “no military solution to the war was possible and that it was necessary to find a political and diplomatic way out.” However, no one else on the Politburo backed Ustinov, and the letter was never put on the agenda of a Politburo meeting.¹⁸¹

It is also clear that Brezhnev himself was troubled by the prospect of a long term intervention and gravely upset at the deterioration in east-west relations that had taken place. Throughout the 1970s he had been passionate about détente, even facing down Politburo colleagues when they opposed concessions he was willing to make in negotiations with the US.¹⁸² He hoped that Soviet troops could be brought back within a few months.¹⁸³ At a meeting in May 1980, Brezhnev listened to Valerie Giscard d’Estaing criticism of the Soviet invasion and to Gromyko’s formulaic retorts, then

¹⁸⁰ Harisson and Cordovez, 65. David Gai, “Afganistan: Kak Eto Bylo: Voina Glazami Ee Uchastnikov” [Afghanistan the way it was: the war through the eyes of its participants], *Vecherniaia Moskva*, October 30, 1989.

¹⁸¹ Quoted in Harisson and Cordovez, 65.

¹⁸² Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 220-221, 245.

¹⁸³ Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 356.

asked to the French president in private. When the two were alone he told d'Estaing that he agreed with the latter's views. While justifying the need to remove Amin, Brezhnev added that he knew Soviet troops could not stay in Afghanistan. A political solution was necessary, an emotional Brezhnev went on: "I also wanted to tell you this one on one. The whole world is not in agreement [with our actions.] I will make it my personal business to impose [a political solution. You can count on me!]"¹⁸⁴ Most likely, Brezhnev really did believe that Soviet troops should leave Afghanistan as quickly as possible. But he also listened to his main foreign policy advisors, who, as we saw earlier, did not believe that withdrawal was possible at this stage.

As time went on, however, new reasons emerged for Soviet leaders to consider withdrawal. It was becoming more difficult to keep the war a secret from Soviet citizens. Although the press still spoke only of limited Soviet aid and there was a news blackout on the 40th army's activities there, rumors had begun to spread. These rumors were perpetuated by citizens who listened to foreign broadcasts. Another source were the parents of soldiers who wounded or had died in Afghanistan. By July 1981 the Politburo Soviet leaders were worried about the consequences of this and unsure how to handle the letters coming to the central committee from parents and relatives of the fallen.¹⁸⁵ Even gravestones for fallen soldiers were to exclude any information about how or where they died. Mikhail Suslov, the chief Soviet ideologist, pointed out that any mention of the war on the headstones could have unwelcome consequences: "if we perpetuate the memory of soldiers who died in Afghanistan, what will we write about this on the epitaph of the headstone? In some cemeteries there could be several such headstones, so from the political point of view this would not be entirely correct."

Andropov agreed.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ D'Estaing, *Pouvoir et la Vie*, 432-33.

¹⁸⁵ Working Record of CPSU Central Committee Politburo Meeting, July 30, 1981, published in *Krasnaya Zvezda* February 15, 2000. Translated by Gary Goldberg. CWIHP Bulletin 14/15, 245.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

By the end of 1981 a significant shift had taken place in how the USSR's top foreign policy decision-makers thought about the war. The intervention of December 1979 had now lasted two years, and the concerns of their subordinates became harder to ignore. The illusion that the invasion could help Moscow achieve its goals in a reasonable time-frame faded. Between January 1980 and the end of 1981 there were plenty of indications that the war was going poorly and that the intervention had not been worth the strain it had put on the Soviet Union's relationship with the United States, other western countries, and the Muslim world. The concerns of mid level officers, generals and marshals had filtered through to the Minister of Defence, while party members and intellectuals had made their concerns clear to the leadership, sometimes appealing directly to the Politburo. The country's leaders were also becoming aware that with the secret operation having grown into a war it would be difficult to keep it secret from the public, which was showing signs of discontent. All of these factors encouraged Soviet leaders to go beyond the initial propaganda efforts of 1980 and look for other avenues to resolve the conflict, namely through the UN.

Towards a UN Role

With the situation in Afghanistan becoming more difficult and the military becoming even less confident regarding its chances of stabilizing the Karmal regime, the Soviet leadership became more open to a possible multilateral solution. Gradually the policy of supporting only direct DRA-Pakistan talks gave way to a UN-mediated four party discussion which provided the legal framework for the Soviet withdrawal that began in 1988. Although there were still some key outstanding issues when Gorbachev came to power in March 1985, the accords had largely been prepared before the death of his predecessor, Konstantin Chernenko.

The first indications that Moscow was becoming more interested in a diplomatic initiative came in the winter of 1980-1981. President Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan and the Soviet ambassador in Islamabad, Vitaly Smirnoff, held several discussions regarding the format of possible talks under the auspices of a UN representative. Moscow responded positively to the idea, but the initiative broke down because of a misunderstanding: the Soviets thought that ul-Haq wanted a UN representative present, while in fact the Pakistani president had wanted a Special Representative who would organize the talks. The Soviet ambassador told UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim not to take this failed initiative as a sign that the USSR and Afghanistan were ready to accept a “trilateral” meeting.¹⁸⁷

Although this initiative had gone nowhere, it opened the door for further UN efforts. When Waldheim traveled to Moscow in May 1981, he found Brezhnev and Gromyko more open to diplomacy and even to a more prominent role for the United Nations.¹⁸⁸ Gromyko said that the Secretary-General’s efforts should continue “at a cautious pace,” but added that Moscow supported his efforts and was prepared to accept the participation of special representative in the negotiating process. Gromyko also added that Moscow “would cooperate with those efforts by advising the Afghan Government to act likewise in this direction.”¹⁸⁹ Javier Perez de Cuellar, acting as the personal representative of the UN Secretary-General, also found that both Kabul and Islamabad were showing more interest in the possibility of a negotiated solution when he traveled there in August 1981. While in his previous visits he had found little hope of finding a way for the two sides to negotiate, he was now been able to secure agreement on an agenda for negotiations: withdrawal of foreign troops, non-interference,

¹⁸⁷ Notes on a meeting between the Secretary General and the Soviet Charge d’Affaires Richard S. Ovinnikov, January 9, 1981 UN Archives S-0904-0089-6-1

¹⁸⁸ Harisson and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 77.

¹⁸⁹ “The Soviet position as it emerged during the Secretary-General’s Visit to Moscow, May 4-7, 1981” May 21, 1981 UN Archives S-1067-1-1.

guarantees and refuges.¹⁹⁰ However, when de Cuellar mentioned this to a *New York Times* reporter, there was an angry reaction from Pakistan, which was still wary of letting it be known that it was interested in such negotiations.¹⁹¹ There would still be a considerable amount of such back and forth between the UN representative and Pakistani, Afghani, and Soviet officials before actual negotiations could get started.

In the meantime, however, Moscow showed increasing willingness to accept a UN role. Although earlier in the year Ustinov's letter questioning the wisdom of continued Soviet occupation had not even been considered by the Politburo, other members of the Afghanistan Commission were now beginning to accept the importance of finding a diplomatic solution through negotiations. Kornienko recalls that in the Autumn of 1981 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs prepared a memorandum, with Andropov's and Ustinov's support, that proposed the acceptance of proximity talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The hope was that the resulting agreement would lead to Pakistan ceasing its support of the opposition in Afghanistan. The proposal was approved by the Politburo.¹⁹²

After Perez de Cuellar was elected Secretary General, he appointed Diego Cordovez, an Ecuadorian lawyer and international official with 20 years of experience, his Personal Representative on Afghanistan. Cordovez had already been involved in the preliminary efforts to start talks under Kurt Waldheim, but with the new appointment he would become the main UN official dealing with Afghanistan. After another trip to the area in April 1982, Cordovez was able to announce the start of talks at Geneva on June 15, 1982.¹⁹³

The press was not optimistic about the chances for the accords to produce any visible results, and Cordovez's optimism earned him a certain amount of ridicule in the

¹⁹⁰ Memorandum from Cuellar to Waldheim, "Mission to Pakistan and Afghanistan," 10 August 1981 UN Archive S-0904-0089-6-1.

¹⁹¹ Harisson and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 77.

¹⁹² Kornienko, *Kholodnaia Voina*, 250.

¹⁹³ Harisson and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 84.

press.¹⁹⁴ Indeed, for the time being, the new attitude toward negotiations was more a tactic than a profound change in strategy. Moscow remained committed to the Kabul government, and saw the main purpose of the accords as finding a way for that government to gain legitimacy and strengthen its ability to fight the opposition. Nevertheless, the Soviet interest in negotiating was genuine. During the first round of negotiations, Moscow sent a senior MID official who was also a specialist on the region to act as a liaison with Cordovez. According to his superior at MID Vasili Safronchuk, Gavrilov was known to have a low opinion of the Kabul government and considered the invasion a tragic mistake.¹⁹⁵ That Moscow sent him as a “minder” of the Kabul representative confirms that the attitude towards the Kabul government was changing.

The first round of the talks was held on June 16, 1982 in the Salon Francais of the Palais des Nations in Geneva. With Cordovez acting as a go-between (the two sides never actually met in the same room), the Afghan and Pakistani foreign minister’s made the first tentative moves towards an understanding on key issues: the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the cessation of “interference.” The results were minimal. As Cordovez put it, “the main significance of the talks was that they were held at all.”¹⁹⁶

There were both technical as well as historical issues to overcome. For example, Pakistan refused to admit that it was responsible for any interference. Shah Mohammed Dost, the Afghan foreign minister who represented his country at the talks then presented maps, provided by the Soviets, which showed the locations of mujahedeen camps on Pakistani territory. Yaqub Khan, the Pakistani Foreign Minister, told Cordovez that though this was true Pakistan could never admit it publicly. Cordovez

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Safronchuk “Afghanistan pri Babrake Karmale..” Part IV, 41.

¹⁹⁶ Harrison, Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 84.

eventually came up with a formula that bound both sides to stop interference, thus getting around an awkward problem.¹⁹⁷

A more serious problem was the issue of the Durand Line, the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The line had been demarcated in 1893 by Sir Mortimer Durand, the Foreign Secretary of the Indian Government, but it cut through what were traditionally Pushtun lands. Tribes had continued to move across the border as if it didn't exist. However, the Durand issue had caused friction between the state of Pakistan and Afghanistan, even leading to a major diplomatic crisis in 1953. Afghanistan refused to recognise the line as its proper border. Yaqub Khan argued that in order to cease interference, it was first necessary to define borders. The Afghan side refused, arguing that this issue should not be part of the discussion but should be solved later on a bilateral basis.¹⁹⁸

After the first round (and several more discussions during the following UN session) Cordovez was able to produce a preliminary draft agreement. Although many of the details were left blank, the framework for a future accord had been laid down. The four sections covered the withdrawal of troops, provisions on nonintervention and noninterference, a declaration of guarantees (with no mention on who would provide them) and a provision for the return of refugees.¹⁹⁹

The first round of talks was very preliminary, but it seemed to give the Soviets hope. Kabul's participation in the talks and Moscow's support of the UN effort were not simply propaganda tools. The Soviet leadership sincerely hoped that Cordovez's effort would help them find a way out. After Safronchuk briefed Gromyko on the talks, at the end of June, the latter instructed him to find a solution to get over the Durand issue.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Safronchuk "Afghanistan pri Babrake Karmale..." Part V, *Azia i Afrika Segodnia* No.5 (1997), 37. There was, of course, no actual interference on Afghanistan's part.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 38.

¹⁹⁹ Harisson and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 112. Riaz M. Khan *Untying the Afghan Knot: Negotiating Soviet Withdrawal* (Durham, 1991), 100-102.

²⁰⁰ Safronchuk "Afghanistan pri Babrake Karmale..." Part V, 41.

Similarly, when Cordovez and Perez de Cuellar came to Moscow in September 1982, they received some encouraging words from Brezhnev. Reading from a prepared statement and pausing for breath, the ailing leader told them “as far as Afghanistan was concerned, the negotiations between Afghanistan and Pakistan had made a good beginning.”²⁰¹

In fact, the Soviet leadership was actively considering ways to withdraw from Afghanistan within a short period of time. Several weeks before Brezhnev’s death several senior officers serving in Afghanistan were summoned to Moscow to report to the Politburo. There were several delays, and the session finally took place on November 27th, with Gromyko chairing. At the end of the meeting Gromyko asked all relevant bodies involved to prepare a plan to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan.²⁰²

The goal of any settlement for Moscow was the preservation of the Karmal regime. This meant that enthusiasm for the talks would be measured, particularly while the regime itself remained weak. Brezhnev told Cordovez that the key issue remained outside powers interfering in Afghanistan.²⁰³ In some ways, the rhetoric had not changed. In his own memoirs, Perez de Cuellar writes that when he suggested that a regime change might be necessary in Afghanistan, the suggestion did not even get a response.²⁰⁴ At the same time Moscow was more than willing to press its clients on issues that it deemed of lesser importance, like the Durand line.

We cannot be sure if all of the senior leaders who sat on the Afghanistan commission were equally enthusiastic about the UN effort, but there is evidence that each one individually was aware that a diplomatic track was necessary. Ponomarev,

²⁰¹ Note on the Secretary General’s Meeting with President Brezhnev, Thursday 9 September 1982, UN Archives S-1024-87-13

²⁰² Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 380. I have not been able to find additional confirmation regarding this meeting, but it is consistent with the general shift in the Soviet attitude at the time as well as Andropov’s apparent desire to hasten the end of the Soviet occupation.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ Perez de Cuellar, *Pilgrimage for Peace: A Secretary General’s Memoir* (New York: 1997), 188.

according to his subordinates, had been the most skeptical of the invasion from the beginning. Ustinov had already written that there was no military solution in early 1981. Gromyko's instructions to Safronchuk seem to suggest that he, too, saw the talks as important, his reserved attitude at the meeting with Perez de Cuellar and Cordovez notwithstanding. Kornienko, Gromyko's deputy, also confirms that in 1981 Gromyko had given his "blessing" for finding a diplomatic solution.²⁰⁵

Yuri Andropov's enthusiasm for the talks became clear once he became the General Secretary following Brezhnev's death in November 1982. Perez de Cuellar writes that Andropov was already hinting at his interest in a political settlement when the two spoke at Brezhnev's funeral.²⁰⁶ Even more dramatic was Cordovez' and Cuellar's meeting with Andropov in March 1983. While emphasizing that "noninterference" was still the key issue, he complimented Cordovez on his efforts and told him that once there was an agreement on non-interference, all the other issues, including the withdrawal of troops, could be settled.²⁰⁷ Setting aside his notes (something that Brezhnev did very rarely, particularly in his later years), Andropov said that, interference aside, the Soviet Union had no intention of keeping its troops in Afghanistan. Then, counting off on his fingers, he listed the difficulties the presence of Soviet troops had created: problems in relations with the United States, the Third World, and the Islamic World, as well as having a negative influence on the internal situation within the USSR, being a drain on the economy and society.²⁰⁸

Not surprisingly, some of the problems encountered at Geneva I were settled by the end of the next round at Geneva in June 1982. This included the issue of the Durand line, where Cordovez was able to secure a text mutually acceptable both to the DRA and

²⁰⁵ Kornienko and Akhromeev, *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata*, 47.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Harisson and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 123.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 124. Kornienko, *Kholodnaia Voina*, 251. Kornienko was present at both this meeting and the September 1982 meeting with Brezhnev.

Pakistan.²⁰⁹ The key issues that remained were refugees, non-interference, and the time-frame for withdrawal. Refugees were the only remaining major problem that did not require the direct involvement of the Soviet Union or the United States.²¹⁰ For the talks to be successful, however, it was now necessary to involve the two great powers directly, since they would have to act as guarantors.²¹¹

The Afghan situation had always been connected to the US-Soviet relationship, and this came to the fore again as issues that could be settled directly between Pakistan and Afghanistan were resolved. The crux of the problem was that Moscow did not want to commit to a time-frame until Pakistan made a “formal commitment” to end interference. Similarly, Pakistan refused to commit to non-interference until Moscow agreed to designate a date for the start of the withdrawal and accept a suitable timeframe for it too be completed. Inevitably these issues would have to involve parallel negotiations with the United States, which was by far the biggest supplier of arms to the *mujahadeen* and in many ways led the multi-nation effort to support the resistance. As Andropov put it to his Politburo colleagues, “The problem is not Pakistan’s position. It is American imperialism that is giving us a fight...we cannot retreat.”²¹² There could be no agreement with Pakistan until there was an accommodation with the United States.

With the collapse of détente at the end of the 1970s, US-Soviet relations had been at a continuous low point. The Carter doctrine had been enthusiastically adopted and even enhanced by the Reagan administration, which took office in January 1981. The US showed little interest in the Secretary-General’s early efforts, calling on the Soviet Union to withdraw troops as a precondition for an improvement in relations. By

²⁰⁹ Although the issue would be re-opened at the last minute in 1988 by the Afghan Foreign Minister.

²¹⁰ It was, however, an issue of major importance for Pakistan, which had accepted some three million Afghan refugees. Afghan representatives claimed that many of these were nomads, and that Pakistan was using the issue as propaganda against the DRA.

²¹¹ Cordovez’s Note For the Record, June 1983, UN Archives S-1024-3-1.

²¹² Politburo Meeting March 10, 1983 *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente*, 410. Fund 89, Perechen 42, Delo 51.

Spring of 1983 the US attitude seemed to change. In May US Secretary of State George Shultz sent a personal letter to Gromyko supporting the United Nation's efforts.²¹³

Unfortunately, US-Soviet relations soon hit another rough spot with the downing of Korean Airlines Flight 007 in September 1983. The strong condemnation from the United States and the inept response of Soviet leaders meant that US-Soviet relations would remain at a high level of tension throughout the year. The US invasion of Grenada in October 1983 did not help. Soviet intelligence, meanwhile, had apparently received word that Pakistani intransigence in negotiations was influenced by the United States.²¹⁴ Even under these conditions, however, Moscow continued to support negotiations, actively pressuring Afghan diplomats to cooperate with Cordovez's efforts over Karmal's objections.²¹⁵

By the time of Andropov's death in 1984 a draft of the agreement was nearly ready. Despite the problems in US-Soviet relations, Andropov continued to maintain a strong interest in the Geneva talks and finding a diplomatic solution. Kornienko goes so far as to say that were it not for Andropov's illness, the question of a time table for withdrawal would have been solved by the end of 1983.²¹⁶ This is probably too optimistic, since this question was closely linked to the question of guarantees. Its resolution depended on an improvement in US-Soviet relations. Nevertheless, Kornienko's comment confirms that in 1983 the Soviet leadership was looking for a way out through diplomacy. Questions regarding the timetable and non-interference would continue to be the main obstacles under Gorbachev and would not be resolved until March 1988.

²¹³ Shultz had replaced Reagan's first Secretary of State Aleksandr Haig in July 1982.

²¹⁴ Garthoff, *The Great Transition*, 117.

²¹⁵ Harisson and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 153.

²¹⁶ Kornienko, *Kholodnaia Voina*, 251.

Conclusion

By the end of 1983 the UN sponsored negotiations were once again stalemated. Although several key issues had been resolved, there was no agreement on guarantees or a timetable for the withdrawal. Nor would there be any movement on these issues under Konstantin Chernenko, the ailing leader who succeeded Andropov in February 1984 and stayed in power (if only nominally) until March 1985. Although negotiations continued through Cordovez, there was been no progress on the key issues. A new Geneva round had taken place in August, but it had been inconclusive.²¹⁷ With no movement in US-Soviet relations, it would have been very difficult to get past these two key issues.

During the first months of 1980 the key Soviet foreign policy decision-makers came to a consensus that Soviet troops would have to play an active role in Afghanistan and remain there indefinitely. Having taken the momentous step of intervening in the country Soviet leaders also raised the stakes. Now a withdrawal before Moscow's goals were achieved, or one followed by a collapse of Karmal's government, might be seen as a defeat of the Soviet military. Such a defeat would be a blow to Moscow's prestige in the Third World and its sense of parity with the US, both of which Soviet leaders valued highly.

Between the invasion in January 1980 and the death of Konstantin Chernenko, Moscow pursued a three track policy to stabilise the Karmal regime and normalise the situation in Afghanistan. The first track was military. Soviet leaders accepted the need for Soviet troops to engage the Afghan opposition directly so as to protect their client in Kabul. They accepted that it would be necessary to do this until such a time when Afghan security forces could fight on their own. The second track was the effort to unify the PDPA and make it more acceptable to the population. The third track was

²¹⁷ Harisson and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 177. See also Perez de Cuellar, *Pilgrimage for Peace*, 190-192.

diplomacy, which in this period meant participation in the UN effort. Diplomacy could secure greater recognition for the regime as well as stop interference from Pakistan.

The Soviet “nation-building” campaign reflects the confidence of Soviet leaders that their experience of exporting modernity could help them win in Afghanistan. Soviet advisors had been active in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America since the 1950s, and particularly during the 1970s. Soviet economic aid and expertise helped post-colonial governments gain and maintain legitimacy. It is not surprising that Soviet leaders tried to draw on this experience in Afghanistan. Thus while political advisers made sure the PDPA followed a moderate path and helped Afghan activists spread the governments influence in the countryside, technical specialists and economic advisers tried to bring some of the benefits of modernity to the Afghan people. Yet while these efforts did bring some real benefits to many Afghans, the overall strategy failed to make the Kabul government legitimate to most Afghans.

By the end of 1981 Soviet leaders had realised that their counter-insurgency strategy was not doing enough to prop up the Kabul regime. On the military front, they faced difficulties familiar to other regular armies fighting guerillas. They were often able to push opposition fighters from a village or stronghold, but as soon as they pulled back or were ordered to another location those fighters regrouped. They also found it impossible to completely close off the borders, meaning that supplies to the *mujahadeen* continued to flow from Pakistan.²¹⁸ The political side of the counter-insurgency strategy also failed. The Amin period had deepened the divide between the Khalq and Parcham factions of the PDPA. Karmal seemed to approach the question of unity only half-heartedly, preferring to purge Khalqi politicians and officers. As late as 1984 there was still very little PDPA presence outside of the urban centers. At the same time PDPA

²¹⁸ In 1984 Sokolov said that closing off the borders was something the 40th army and DRA forces could not do, although they could try to cut off the most important routes. Meeting with Party Advisors, handwritten notes, March 31, 1984 Personal Archive of Marshal Sokolov.

officials at all levels took very little initiative, preferring to let their Soviet advisers do the work.

Moscow came to support UN diplomacy because it had lost faith that its goals in Afghanistan could be achieved militarily; at the same time, they hoped that negotiations would lead to a cessation of arms supplies from Pakistan (crippling the Afghan insurgency) and much broader recognition for the DRA government. After Moscow recognised the need to involve the UN, the diplomatic track achieved some success. By the time of Chernenko's death the main bilateral issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan had been resolved. The remaining issues, that of a timetable for the withdrawal and a guarantee of non-interference, could not be resolved without some significant improvement in US-Soviet relations. The KAL 007 incident and the death of Andropov ended any chance of those relations improving in the short term.

The myriad difficulties Soviet leaders encountered as a result of their introduction of troops into Afghanistan had an effect that went beyond their decision making with regard to that unfortunate country. Not only had it brought east-west confrontation to an uncomfortable level and complicated relations with Third World allies, it also threatened to embarrass the Soviet military and its ability to defend socialism abroad. When the Polish crisis erupted in 1980, Soviet leaders felt strongly that they could not afford to "lose" Poland, but they were far less confident about using Warsaw Pact forces to crush the "counterrevolution."²¹⁹ Soviet leaders began to see the costs of interventions as outweighing the benefits.²²⁰ There was also a clear sense of hangover from the support of Marxist and quasi-marxist regimes in the 1970s and a feeling of frustration regarding Soviet aid efforts, as evidenced by Andropov's

²¹⁹ Vojtech Mastny, "The Soviet Non-Invasion of Poland in 1980-81 and the End of the Cold War" *CWIHP Working Paper #23*, 29.

²²⁰ Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 267; Notably, this time the objections of senior military officers who opposed interventions seem to have carried more weight. Matthew J. Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 200-204.

statement in 1983: "It is one thing to proclaim socialism as one's goal, and it is quite another to build it". The fate of progressive states, he went on, depended on 'work by their own people, and of a correct policy on the part of their leadership."²²¹

This was the situation that Mikhail Gorbachev inherited when he became General Secretary in 1985. The remaining five chapters will discuss his policies both before and after the signing of the Geneva Accords in April 1988 and the start of the Soviet withdrawal. Although Gorbachev was not generally involved in foreign policy decisions before he became General Secretary, he was present at many of the Politburo meetings where Afghanistan was discussed and must have kept abreast of developments there. Nevertheless, his policies in 1985-1987 continued to be shaped largely by the initiatives undertaken in 1980-1985, although they were modified and pursued with renewed intensity.

This is not surprising, since there were few alternatives to these policies which did not involve abandoning the PDPA regime and accepting a government dominated by the opposition. Such a scenario would have been too big of a blow to Soviet prestige as well as the interests of conservative leaders such as Brezhnev, Andropov, Gromyko, and Ustinov to consider. Paradoxically, the realization that the PDPA continued to be weak seemed to draw Soviet leaders deeper into the quagmire, as they assumed the Afghan government's functions on the military and political levels.

²²¹ Quoted in Robert G. Patnam, "Reagan, Gorbachev and the emergence of 'New Political Thinking'" *Review of International Studies* (1999), 25, 588.

Chapter 2: New Thinking, Old Commitments: Gorbachev and the Afghan War

By the time of Konstantin Chernenko's death and Mikhail Gorbachev's ascent to the top of the Soviet hierarchy in March 1985 the Afghan War was in its fifth year. Soviet citizens still had very little official information about the war available to them.

Although letters coming into the central committee offices suggest that a growing number of people knew more about what young men were being sent to do in Afghanistan than they could have known from the Soviet press, the official line had changed little since 1980. By October 1985, Gorbachev had decided to seek a withdrawal from Afghanistan and had the support of the Soviet leadership to do so.

Support for withdrawal stemmed not so much from the military and economic costs of the war, nor the domestic political effects, although these were undoubtedly important.

Rather, Gorbachev's decision to seek a withdrawal from Afghanistan stemmed in large part from his desire to make the transition to a new era of Soviet foreign policy making which would see a lessening of international tensions. His colleagues supported him because even when they did not share his broader reform goals they agreed that the continued presence of Soviet troops was unlikely to bring victory in Afghanistan.

Gorbachev's failure to end the Soviet involvement before 1989, however, stemmed from a belief that a perceived defeat in Afghanistan would be a major loss of face, one that would not be well accepted by the Soviet Union's Third World allies.

Although Mikhail Gorbachev, a Politburo member since 1979, had already earned a reputation with some Western observers as a reform-minded politician, it took him almost four years to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan. One might assume that he needed time to ease out his more conservative colleagues before taking a decisive step on Afghanistan, and indeed several scholars have made this argument.

Gorbachev did change the composition of the Politburo in his first few years, bringing in reformers like Aleksandr Iakovlev, and replacing the conservative Foreign Minister

Andrei Gromyko with Eduard Shevardnadze. One of the reasons that the war dragged on is that it was a limited war, both in a military and a socio-political sense. While the point may seem obvious, it is none the less important to highlight. Keeping the war within certain limits (for example, never engaging more than 120,000 Soviet servicemen at any one time) gave politicians freedom of maneuver.

Gorbachev absorbed the ideas of new thinking and sided with those who supported Soviet initiatives to ease the Cold War confrontation. In formulating policy on Afghanistan, however, he had to balance his genuine desire to end the conflict with the immense legacy of support for the Third World that Gorbachev and his team inherited. While he came to the conclusion that the war needed to end, he hesitated to move too quickly for fear of undermining his country's prestige. Rather than pushing for an immediate withdrawal, he spent several years looking for ways to reform the military, political, and diplomatic efforts meant to stabilise the country and gain legitimacy for the regime. Gorbachev could bide his time, because, like his predecessors, he was dealing with a limited war. The Soviet military adjusted to the demands of a prolonged counterinsurgency campaign that it had not planned for, and military losses remained at a tolerable level throughout. Similarly, the war's effect on Soviet society during the period in question was still restricted enough that it did not force the country's leadership to take drastic measures. While knowledge about the war and dissatisfaction with the Soviet involvement grew during the 1980s, this did not translate into public pressure on Gorbachev or his colleagues to end the war immediately. Soviet Muslims did not become "infected" with a desire to wage *jihad* on the Soviet state, despite the prediction of some Western experts. The war remained limited both in its effects within the Soviet Union and in terms of the military and economic resources it required, a crucial point in understanding why Gorbachev did not bring the troops home in 1985.

Old Commitments and New Political Thinking

It is impossible to understand Moscow's Afghan policy in the Gorbachev era without looking at the battle between old and new thinking that characterised the Soviet foreign policy debate from 1985 through 1988. One obstacle to withdrawing Soviet troops from Afghanistan was the general climate of the Cold War in the early 1980s. The collapse of détente at the end of the 1970s, the heightened rhetoric of confrontation coming from Soviet and US leaders, as well as various accidents and misunderstandings in this period threatened to reduce relations between the two superpowers to a level they had not reached since the Stalin era. Heightened tensions not only bolstered a confrontational approach to foreign policy within the Soviet leadership, they made it more difficult to reach some accommodation once the leadership started to look for a way out of Afghanistan. Andropov's genuine desire to seek an accommodation for withdrawal was hampered, in part, by the difficulty in making a diplomatic opening to the United States.

In contrast to the "confrontational" approach of the late Brezhnev era and the brief Chernenko interregnum, the Gorbachev period was characterised by a greater effort to reach out to the West, restart stalled arms control negotiations, and create a new basis for relations. This shift in foreign policy was conducted under the slogan of "New Political Thinking." The concept was less formal policy and more an emerging philosophy that, over time, came to characterise the conduct of foreign affairs under Gorbachev. It emphasised that confrontation was not inevitable, and crucially, that the Soviet Union could take major initiatives towards a lessening of tensions, thus differentiating from the by now discredited calls for "peaceful coexistence of the Brezhnev era."¹ Taking strong, often unexpected initiatives in negotiations with the US

¹ Cherniaev, *Six Years with Gorbachev*, 44-45.

on issues like nuclear testing, force reduction, and regional problems, became a key aspect of Gorbachev's own style in foreign policy.

The roots of New Thinking go back to the Khruschev era and the political and intellectual thaw that began with the secret speech in 1956. Khruschev's denunciation of Stalinism ushered in an era of relative intellectual freedom and debate that had not existed in the Soviet Union since the 1920s. New directions were taken in history and the social sciences, where many of the assumptions of the Stalinist period were challenged or pushed aside.² The period was also marked by the exposure of young social scientists and party members to western ideas, scholarship, and general way of life. This took place through the creation of research institutes, such as the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), the Institute of the Economy of the World Socialist System (IEMSS) or the Institute of the USA and Canada (ISKAN). Scholars at these institutes were given unprecedented access to western scholarship as well as an opportunity to study experiments with economic policy in east-bloc countries like Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Many of Gorbachev's advisers had also worked on the Prague-based journal *Problemy Mira i Sotsializma*, where they were also exposed to "European" ideas while working alongside French and Italian communists.³ Not surprisingly, representatives of this group, including Georgii Arbatov and Oleg Bogomolov, were the most vocal critics of the intervention and the biggest supporters of a speedy Soviet withdrawal.⁴

Although Gorbachev did not belong to this group of young intellectuals, he was influenced by the ideas they shared and developed. Gorbachev had attended Moscow

² See Robert D. English *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: 2000), 49-80. English traces the origins of new thinking as far back as Peter the Great's westernizing project and the debate between Slavophiles and Westernisers in the 19th century. For our purposes, understanding the context in which Gorbachev's foreign policy advisers underwent their political education is sufficient.

³ English, *Russia and the Idea of the West*, 71.

⁴ It will be remembered that when Oleg Bogomolov criticised the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in January 1980, he did it from the platform of the IEMSS.

State University in 1950-55, at a time when Stalin was still revered for leading his country to victory in the Great Patriotic War. Still, he made some important friendships with future reformers, including a leader of the “Prague Spring” movement, Zdenek Mlynar.⁵ After his move to Moscow in 1978 he became acquainted with some of the reform-minded intellectuals working in the central committee and the institutes, including Georgii Arbatov and Anatolii Cherniaev. Gorbachev’s interests quickly evolved beyond the agricultural sphere, his official domain, to larger questions of domestic and foreign policy.⁶ Reform minded thinkers like Georgii Shakhnazarov helped develop the idea of a foreign policy guided by universal values and interests (as opposed to the idea of class conflict), which Gorbachev absorbed and eventually made a part of his own approach to external relations.⁷

New Thinking, with its emphasis on cooperation with the West, helped lay the intellectual groundwork for the détente of the late 1960s and 1970s. But parallel to the development of “New Thinking” in the 1950s there was also a re-evaluation of the Soviet Union’s role in the Third World. Soon after coming to power, Nikita Khrushchev criticised Stalin’s failure to take note of the Third World in the worldwide communist struggle. With rapid decolonization changing the political map of the world starting in the late 1950s, Moscow became increasingly involved in the transformations taking place in the Third World, including Afghanistan, where it helped King Zahir Shah and his Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud build modern infrastructure.⁸

The competition in the Third World became a three way contest. Moscow had to prove not only that communism was a better path to modernity than liberal capitalism, but that Soviet communism was better than the Chinese model. In the 1970s

⁵ Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 29.

⁶ English, *Russian and the Idea of the West*, 183; Anatolii Cherniaev *Shest’ let s Gorbachevym*, 9.

⁷ Brown, *Gorbachev Factor*, 221-225.

⁸ O.A. Westad *The Global Cold War*, 68-72., 300. For Khruschev’s trip to Afghanistan and the resulting aid package, see Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali *Khruschev’s Cold War* (New York: 2006), 81-82.

the Soviet Union would find itself involved in a number of situations where the US and China backing the rivals of Moscow's ally.⁹ The trend continued into the 1980s. Between 1982 and 1986, the USSR was providing \$78 billion in arms to developing states. Some of the biggest recipients were Ethiopia, Angola, Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba. India, Syria, and Libya were also major recipients.¹⁰

Support for the Third World, particularly when it was part of a competition with the US and China, was a legacy Gorbachev and his allies in power could not easily shake off. While those who laid the intellectual groundwork of New Thinking at some distance from government could argue for a more radical reassessment of Soviet foreign policy, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze had to contend with the expectations of a large part of the communist world. During their first years in power they did little to significantly change Moscow's relationship with Third World states. Even as the USSR underwent fundamental transformations in its domestic political and economic system and in its relationship with the US, China, and other former adversaries, it did not break its links with former Third World allies. Aid to the Third World continued well into 1990-1991, when the Soviet economy was nearing total collapse, and actually increased in the period 1987-89.¹¹ It did not help that even after Gorbachev hinted at a more conservative Soviet role in the Third World, Reagan spoke openly about rolling back Soviet influence there and telling "freedom fighters" in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Nicaragua, and Angola that they would have US support.¹² Although the Soviet relationship with its Third World clients began to change after 1986, with the Soviet Union even helping negotiate a peace deal in Angola, on the whole this change of pace

⁹ Examples being Ethiopia, where Moscow backed the Mengistu government against the Chinese-backed Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, and Angola, where China was one of the backers of UNITA. China was also a backer, although a relatively minor one, of the Afghan resistance.

¹⁰ Campbell and MacFarlane, ed. *Gorbachev's Third World Dilemmas* (1990), 73. These numbers are based on western calculations; it should be noted that the equipment sent in these cases was often second-hand.

¹¹ Celeste A. Wallander "Soviet Policy Toward the Third World in the 1990s" in Weiss, Thomas G. and Kessler, Meryl A. eds., *Third World Security in the Post-Cold War Era* (London, 1991), 54-55.

¹² Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 270-271.

was glacial, especially compared with the rapid downward spiral of the domestic economy. It was only after 1990, when the Soviet Union entered a serious economic crisis, that the foreign aid budget decreased significantly.¹³ As we will see later in this chapter, commitment to the Third World played an important role in Gorbachev and the Politburo's thinking about Afghanistan.

Gorbachev's contacts with the "new thinkers" in the years before he came to power not only had Andropov's blessing, they were in part ordered and supervised by the former KGB chairman. Aside from the informal discussions Gorbachev had with individuals like Arbatov or Iakovlev, acting on Andropov's instructions he also commissioned some 110 papers from them on various domestic and foreign policy issues. Some of these reports addressed the issue of Afghanistan. These papers together provided the intellectual core of Gorbachev's program when he came to power. As he put it in 1989, these conversations and papers "formed the basis of the decisions of the April [1985] plenum and the first steps thereafter."¹⁴

Once Gorbachev was in power, he moved quickly to bring these young advisers into the fold and raise the profile of their institutes. Many of them had been among the war's strongest opponents from the beginning, but during the later Brezhnev era had they lost much of their already limited ability to provide input into the decision-making process.¹⁵ These advisers now took advantage of having a reform-minded General Secretary as a patron and immediately began offering their prescriptions for changing Soviet foreign and domestic policy. Gorbachev had shown a consistent interest in reforming the Soviet system during his days as Stavropol party secretary and as a junior member of the Politburo and Central Committee. Now, as General Secretary, he was in

¹³ Margot Light, ed. *Troubled Friendships: Moscow's Third Word Ventures* (London, 1993), 17-22.

¹⁴ Sarah Mendelson *Changing Course: Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Princeton, 1998), 82. Gorbachev made this comment to a group of scholars in January 1989 - see *Pravda*, January 7, 1989.

¹⁵ Although Brezhnev and Andropov were willing to hear their views, and even agreed with them to some extent, the climate of the Cold War and the dominance of "old thinking" meant that their influence was very limited. Thus, for example, a major policy memorandum like the one submitted by Bogomolov in January 1980 went completely unanswered and unacknowledged.

a position to provide the space for reformist thinkers to offer their views, a space that was threatened during the the later Brezhnev years and the Chernenko interregnum.¹⁶

With Gorbachev in power, these new thinkers did not hesitate to once again voice their views on the war and make their recommendations. Soon after Gorbachev's election, Arbatov submitted a lengthy memorandum entitled "Toward a Revised Approach to Foreign Policy," which argued for an immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan. Other "new thinkers" agreed. Anatolii Cherniaev, soon to become Gorbachev's foreign policy aide but for the moment still working at the International Department, noted in his diary that if Gorbachev were to move quickly on Afghanistan, it would give him a major political boost: "Such an action would provide him with a moral and political platform, from which he could later move mountains. It would be equivalent to Khrushchev's anti-Stalinist report at the XX Congress. Not to mention the benefits the withdrawal would give us in foreign policy."¹⁷ A good example of the "new thinking" approach comes from a memorandum on necessary reforms submitted by a Gorbachev aide sometime in 1987. Discussing the nationalities issue in the USSR, the memo stated:

Our military presence in Afghanistan places an enormous financial burden on the USSR, and can lead to serious ideological consequences (the families of the dead), it damages our relations with the Muslim world, and gives the Americans an ideal opportunity to exhaust us by forcing us to lead an endless war. Of course, the withdrawal of troops and an agreement for some form of political settlement does not guarantee the survival of a socialist regime in that country. But however significant the survival of a socialist oriented regime in that country is, in the end we will win. And the faster we leave that mousetrap, the better.¹⁸

To the new thinkers, neither the survival of the PDPA regime nor the loss of prestige outweighed the costs of the war for the USSR.

¹⁶ The last few years of Brezhnev's rule saw attacks by conservative Politburo members on institutes like IEMSS. While Andropov, who had been the patron of "new thinkers" like Arbatov in the 1960s was also interested in reformist views, the Chernenko interregnum saw a return of the "old guard" to dominance.

¹⁷ Diary of Anatolii Cherniaev, April 4, 1985, posted on the National Security Archive website <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>, cited hereafter as Cherniaev Diary, NSA.

¹⁸ Memorandum: "Regarding certain timely measures," undated, but not earlier than 1987. GFA, #17923.

As a philosophy, “new thinking” was poised for a resurgence with Gorbachev’s election. Not only was Gorbachev himself partial to the view of the “new thinkers,” many of their hard-line opponents had either left the scene or were pushed aside. The conservative champion of the military-industrial complex, Dmitrii Ustinov, had passed away in 1984. Viktor Grishin and Grigorii Romanov, both staunch conservatives, were removed from the leadership and sent into retirement during the July 1985 plenum, and Andrei Gromyko was asked to give up his job at the Foreign Ministry.

In spring 1985, then, major political forces were aligned in favour of withdrawal, at least in principle. On the one hand, some of the key pro-interventionists were now gone and reform-minded leaders and advisers were gaining influence. On the other hand, some of the more conservative figures in the Politburo recognised that the war had become a quagmire and agreed that there was no military solution to the Afghan problem. The Afghanistan commission, which under Gorbachev’s predecessors had guided Afghan policy, still included Andrei Gromyko, but it also included the new minister of defense, Marshal Sokolov, and the new head of the KGB, Viktor Chebrikov. These men were conservatives, not new thinkers. As the previous chapter showed, however, Sokolov had become disillusioned with the war before he took over the defense portfolio from Ustinov. Chebrikov’s views are unclear, but it is worth noting that he came up in Andropov’s footsteps, and thus probably shared Andropov’s belief that the Afghan war was a mistake.¹⁹ As the next section will show, new political thinkers played an important role in convincing Gorbachev to withdraw from Afghanistan and helped him shape the arguments for withdrawal. His own caution and fear of a Soviet “failure” in Afghanistan, however, meant that Gorbachev would spend

¹⁹ Chebrikov never wrote a memoir and gave few interviews. In one, however, he does say that as a KGB chief he tried to “follow Andropov’s line.” It is worth noting that, unlike Andropov, Chebrikov had little foreign policy experience, having spent most of his KGB career dealing with organizational and domestic issues. See his interview with Aleksandr Hinshtein, *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, December 23, 1998.

several years looking for ways to avoid having the withdrawal become a defeat before bringing the troops home.

A decision , but not a plan

Gorbachev came to power with a desire to end the Soviet intervention, but without any well-defined ideas about how to handle the Afghan situation, and he gave no immediate signs that he would seek a quick withdrawal. During his first year in power, he largely let the war run its course, although he gradually became more involved in decision making. Even after he became convinced that disengagement from Afghanistan would require more direct intervention on his part he moved cautiously, preferring to try every option available before finally giving up on helping the Afghan regime win the war.

Gorbachev had been a candidate Politburo member since 1979 and a full member since 1980. Although he was not privy to the work of the Afghan commission, he was certainly familiar with its reports and discussions of the problem at Politburo meetings, which he often chaired when Chernenko was ill.²⁰ Indeed, we know from Cherniaev's diary of at least one Politburo meeting chaired by Gorbachev where the main subject of discussion was Afghanistan. Ustinov and Chebrkikov, back in Moscow after talks with Karmal, painted a devastating picture of affairs there. The Afghan officer corps was still torn by the Khalq/Parcham split, almost half of the border with Pakistan was a "hole," and 80% of the territory was controlled by the "bandits." Yet neither Ustinov, Chebrikov, nor any of the other members of the Politburo suggested a radical change of course was necessary. With the political situation uncertain, matters were allowed to drift.²¹

²⁰ In fact, Gorbachev's name appears on records of Politburo discussions of the situation in Afghanistan going back to January 1980.

²¹ Cherniaev Diary entry for August 12, 1984. Cherniaev was present at the Politburo meeting. Cherniaev, *Dnevnik*, 570-571.

Gorbachev's first months in power saw similarly little movement on Afghanistan. On other foreign policy issues, Gorbachev moved more quickly. At Chernenko's funeral he had already begun dismantling the so-called "Brezhnev doctrine", telling East-bloc leaders that they could not rely on Soviet troops to keep them in power. Gorbachev's comments during his first meeting with Karmal reflected some skepticism regarding the Afghan revolution, but it did not represent a radical break with policy. With Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, the last surviving member of the old Afghanistan Commission, at his side, Gorbachev spoke about the need to expand the PDPA's base of support. The party had to attract a wider sector of the public, allowing for a "stabilization of the situation, consolidation of the revolution's victories, and solving some of the most difficult problems" facing the country. While he mentioned that Soviet troops "would not be in Afghanistan forever", he avoided specifics on how and under what circumstances they would be brought home.²²

Significantly, Gromyko's only comment during this meeting sought to highlight the need for Soviet troops. When Karmal said that while his party was working hard (as Lenin had taught them!) to improve its ties with the masses, closing off the borders with Pakistan and Iran was even more important, as it would "deliver a strong blow to the plans of American imperialists, Chinese hegemonists, and Pakistani reactionaries and other hostile powers," Gromyko agreed. Closing the borders, he said, "remained one of the most important problems."²³ Even before a policy was formulated, different emphasis was being placed by the representatives of the old guard and the new.

In 1985 Gorbachev was already looking for a change of course, but was not sure what shape it would take. During his first months in power, as he solicited advice and

²² Record of meeting between M.S. Gorbachev and Chairman of the Revolutionary Council of the DRA B. Karmal, 14 March 1985. Volkogonov Papers, Library of Congress, Regional File, Box 26, Reel 17

²³ Ibid. Karmal's comments were on the whole quite superficial, and mostly defended the progress already made by the party. In concluding, Gorbachev expressed the hope that by their next meeting the party would have some new "successes and progress" that they could discuss. The issue of Gorbachev's disillusionment with Karmal will be discussed further in the next chapter.

tried to formulate a new approach, he defended Soviet policy in Afghanistan. In May 1985 Gorbachev told Italian Prime Minister Benedetto Craxi that “there is a certain process underway in this country, the point of which is to get rid of centuries-old backwardness. It is difficult to say when this will be completed.”²⁴ Gorbachev defended the Soviet intervention: “Someone decided to interfere in Afghanistan’s internal affairs. Under these conditions the USSR... introduced a limited contingent of its troops.”²⁵ Indeed Gorbachev had already decided the limited contingent’s time in Afghanistan had to end sooner rather than later. Supposedly on his first day in office he had already made a note for himself that Soviet troops had to leave Afghanistan, although this had to be done in stages.²⁶ Some time in March or early April, Gorbachev requested a policy review from the sitting Afghan commission, now composed of Marshal Sergei Sokolov (elevated to Minister of Defence after Ustinov’s death), Andrei Gromyko, and Viktor Chebrikov, the head of the KGB. The commission was told to look into “the consequences, pluses, and minuses of a withdrawal.”²⁷ To Arbatov’s call for a withdrawal, Gorbachev apparently replied that he was “thinking it over.”²⁸

For the next few months the new General Secretary continued to discuss the Afghan problem, soliciting proposals from the likes of Arbatov as well as the Foreign Ministry and the military. Crucially, new thinkers like Arbatov and the hard-boiled military men agreed that the war was hopeless. A report from General Valentin Varennikov, the head of the Ministry of Defense Operating Group in Afghanistan,²⁹ noted that military successes had no long-term effect on the opposition, which continued to grow. The DRA government failed in the key counterinsurgency strategy of establishing a presence in an area cleared of guerrillas. As a result “the combat

²⁴ From M.S. Gorbachev’s conversation with B. Craxi May 29, 1985 GFA Fond 3, Opis 1, Document 4771.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Gorbachev interview on the radio station *Ekho Moskvy*, February 15, 2009.

²⁷ Ibid, Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 521. Interview with Marshal Sergei Akhromeev, 2RR, 1/4/12, p.3.

²⁸ Cherniaev Diary, April 7, 1985, *Dnevnik*.

²⁹ Marshal Sokolov’s post until he was promoted to Minister of Defense.

actions for stabilizing the situation in the country can have only a temporary character. With time the insurgents in these districts are capable of re-establishing lost positions.”³⁰

Gorbachev’s early aloofness from the Afghan problem did not last long. Some time in June 1985 he issued instructions to prepare a proposal on “resolving the Afghan question.”³¹ Gorbachev’s reactions to his aides’ proposals on Afghanistan also changed. One morning in the third week of June, Gorbachev even summoned Arbatov for a one hour conversation that focused primarily on Afghanistan. Whereas previously he had told Arbatov that he was “thinking” about the Afghan problem, now he said that he agreed that a quick withdrawal was necessary.³²

Gorbachev spent the summer of 1985 pondering the problem and soliciting advice on the Afghan problem. By fall he was ready to start acting on the recommendations of “new thinkers” and others who urged withdrawal. In October Babrak Karmal was secretly called to Moscow. Gorbachev put the problem in stark terms: the Afghan revolution had little popular support and needed a quick turn around. He recommended a return to “free capitalism, Afghan and Islamic values, to sharing power with oppositional and even currently hostile forces.”³³ Gorbachev’s advice to Karmal was not a complete departure from what his predecessors had advocated. Soviet leaders had long urged Afghans to adopt a slower approach that emphasised the establishment of political power over revolutionary rhetoric or programs. Gorbachev was going further than his predecessors, however. His advice to Karmal may have been the first time a Soviet leader urged a client to turn to capitalism and religion, and it foreshadowed his own increasingly radical views after 1988. The record, such as it is, of

³⁰ Report by General Valentin Varennikov June 6, 1985, Liakhovskii, 513-514.

³¹ Cherniaev Diary, April 20, 1985. Cherniaev records that Georgii Kornienko, the deputy foreign minister, made this comment to Karen Brutents, an international department official and personal friend.

³² Ibid.

³³ Cherniaev Diary, October 16, 1985, posted on the National Security Archive website <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/> Cherniaev was not present at the conversation but saw the transcript right after. See also B. Padishev, “Najibullah, president Afganistana” *International Affairs* (Moscow) Jan. 1990, 19-27.

Gorbachev's conversation with Karmal shows a leader who has spent some time studying the problem and trying to understand the situation on the ground.³⁴

Gorbachev also made it clear that Soviet troops were not going to stay in Afghanistan much longer. In fact, in this conversation, Gorbachev set the first of several deadlines for the withdrawal of Soviet troops: by summer 1986 Soviet troops would be out and the Afghans would have to "defend the revolution" themselves.³⁵ Najibullah, who was at the meeting, later said that Karmal's face went white when he heard this. Taken aback, he exclaimed "if you leave now, next time you will send in a million soldiers!"³⁶ Gorbachev told his Politburo colleagues that Karmal "in no way expected such a turn, was sure that we need Afghanistan more than he does, and was clearly expecting that we will be there for a long time, if not forever."³⁷ Gorbachev was learning the hard way that the Afghan communists would try to sabotage any withdrawal plan he could devise.

The next day Gorbachev addressed the Politburo. After briefing his colleagues on the conversation with Karmal, he began reading out loud some of the letters that had been coming in to the Central Committee. Gorbachev not only cited letters about crippled soldiers or maternal grief about lost sons, he also quoted from letters that blamed the Soviet leadership directly: "the Politburo made a mistake and it should be rectified, the sooner the better, because every day is taking lives." He concluded with a phrase that conveyed his disappointment in the Afghan leader: "With or without Karmal we will follow this line firmly, which must in a minimally short amount of time lead to our withdrawal from Afghanistan." There was no objection to what Gorbachev said,

³⁴ In fact, Karmal had already been in Moscow in July, ostensibly for "medical treatment." Although he probably met with Gorbachev at least briefly, it does not seem that a substantive discussion took place. See *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, July 31, 1985. The meeting was likely intended for the two leaders to become better acquainted. By October, however, Gorbachev was more secure in what he wanted to say on the topic of Afghanistan, and this was reflected in his long statement to the Politburo the day after the meeting with Karmal.

³⁵ Cherniaev Diary, October 17, 1985, NSA.

³⁶ Padishev, "Najibullah, President Afganistana."

³⁷ Cherniaev Diary, October 17, 1985 NSA. Cherniaev was present at this Politburo meeting. See also Cherniaev, *My Six Years With Gorbachev*, pp.42-43.

and Marshal Sokolov, the defense minister, supported moving towards a withdrawal.³⁸

Gorbachev's approach with his Politburo colleagues reflected a desire to establish a consensus on the Afghan problem. No doubt he had concerns about the reaction of some of his more conservative colleagues. Andrei Gromyko was still a supporter of continued intervention, as was evident at the meeting with Karmal in March. The Politburo's reaction, as recorded by Anatolii Dobrynin, seemed to justify his approach: "there was no objection and no strong endorsement, but rather reluctant silent agreement."³⁹ By reading out loud letters from the public he was raising the "emotional tension," as Cherniaev put it, and at the same time showing his colleagues that the public's tolerance for the war was limited.⁴⁰ No matter the private concerns about the war of individual members, it was Gorbachev's task to take the lead and form a consensus. He would need this consensus if critics later raised concerns about his handling of the problem.

In 1980, the most senior members of the Politburo had sought a Central Committee plenum to ratify their decision to send troops into Afghanistan and keep them there to fight on the side of the government. The plenum had ratified the decision unanimously, as expected, giving the Politburo a "mandate" to continue its Afghan policy. Now that a new direction was being set for Afghan policy, it would have to be ratified by the party as well. This "ratification" took place at the 27th Party Congress in February-March 1986. Apparently placing the need to withdraw troops from Afghanistan on the political agenda was given serious consideration. Eduard Shevardnadze, who barely mentioned the war in his first memoir,⁴¹ wrote that the topic was in the early drafts of the Congress's Political Report, but had been removed,

³⁸ Cherniaev Diary, October 17, 1985 NSA. See also Cherniaev, *Six Years with Gorbachev*, 42-43.

³⁹ Dobrynin was still ambassador to Washington but in Moscow at the time and present at the meeting. Anatolii Dobrynin, *In Confidence...*, 447.

⁴⁰ Cherniaev, *Six Years with Gorbachev*, 42.

⁴¹ He is said to be writing another one at present.

presumably at the insistence of more hard-line advisers or Politburo members.⁴² In his key-note speech, Gorbachev still called the Afghanistan war a “bleeding wound,” thus telling the assembled delegates, the nation, and the world that the Soviet leadership saw the war as a drain.⁴³

The winter of 1985-1986 was a critical point in Gorbachev’s evolution as a leader and in his conceptualization of reform in both the domestic and international spheres. Publicly, Gorbachev still often used the language of the Brezhnev period, for example referring to Stalinism as “foreign propaganda.”⁴⁴ Following the disappointing meeting with Reagan at Geneva, Gorbachev and his advisors sought new approaches. Ultimately, they rejected the “two camps” formula with a focus on integrity and interdependence. Despite skepticism from some of Gorbachev’s Politburo colleagues, these new ideas about foreign policies became crucial components of his report to the 27th Party Congress in February 1986.⁴⁵ We may never know who pushed for the withdrawal item to be removed from the Political Report, but in light of what *was* said, it is not of great importance. It may very well have been a tactical decision; by making the point in his speech but not putting on the agenda officially, Gorbachev was indicating that ending the war was now a priority but also leaving room for the USSR to do it on its own terms.

Still, there was no firm decision on how Afghan policy should be conducted in order to make a Soviet withdrawal possible. A decision to withdraw *in principle*, which the Politburo had approved in October 1985, was neither a strategy nor a plan in practice. In fact, while Gorbachev clearly wanted to move Soviet policy toward a withdrawal, he did not yet have any particular scheme in mind. This may explain why,

⁴² Eduard Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom* (New York: 1991), 47. Author’s interview with Eduard Shevardnadze, Tbilisi, Georgia, May 9, 2008.

⁴³ Brown, *Gorbachev Factor*, 220-21.

⁴⁴ Brown, *Gorbachev Factor*, 92-93.

⁴⁵ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 284-286; Brown, *Gorbachev Factor*, 220-222; Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 256-260.

for example, he did not respond to Reagan's initiative in 1985 to discuss Afghanistan after Geneva.

Although it is no surprise Reagan's idea of a "coalition of Islamic states" to supervise the installation of a new Afghan government," proposed at the Geneva Summit, was rejected, Reagan's follow-up letter was more conciliatory: "I want you to know that I am prepared to cooperate in any reasonable way to facilitate such manner which does not damage Soviet security interests. During our meetings I mentioned one idea which I thought might be helpful and I will welcome any further suggestions you may have."⁴⁶ In a follow-up letter, Reagan went further, telling Gorbachev that "withdrawal of your forces" remained the only sticking point.⁴⁷ According to Jack Matlock, US Ambassador to the USSR and a staff member on the National Security Council during Reagan's first term, the United States was prepared at this stage to stop aid to the *mujahadeen* if Soviet forces withdrew, without insisting that the Soviets cut off aid to the PDPA. Gorbachev's failure to respond directly to Reagan may have extended the war unnecessarily for several years, and helps confirm that Afghan policy was not well-defined at this stage.⁴⁸ Further, Gorbachev did not yet trust the Americans sufficiently to engage with them directly and overcome the hurdles that had stalled the Geneva talks in Andropov's day. Finally, he did not believe that his relationship with Reagan had reached the point where they could profitably discuss regional issues.⁴⁹

More generally, Gorbachev operated on the assumption that the Soviet Union needed to withdraw from Afghanistan, but without "losing face."⁵⁰ In April 1986, two months after labeling the war a "bleeding wound," Gorbachev told a special Politburo

⁴⁶ Reagan to Gorbachev, Draft of Private Letter, December 1985, National Security Archive <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB172/Doc29.pdf> (Accessed July 22, 2009).

⁴⁷ Reagan to Gorbachev, December 16, 1985. Reagan Library, Executive Secretariat, Head of State File, Box 40

⁴⁸ Author's telephone interview with US Ambassador Jack Matlock, January 1, 2008.

⁴⁹ According to Cherniaev, Gorbachev drafted guidelines on dealing with Reagan in late 1985 that included "not to get into regional issues; not to forgo our right to 'solidarity' with 'fighters for independence; not to recognise US 'vital interests' indiscriminately, where it suits [the US]" Cherniaev, *Six Years with Gorbachev*, 43.

⁵⁰ Author's interview with Soviet Ambassador Yulii Vorontsov, Moscow, September 11, 2007.

meeting that a poor withdrawal from Afghanistan would do great harm to Soviet relations with its client states. In the presence of Varennikov and Ambassador to Kabul Fiakrat Tabeev, Gorbachev said he believed “we must under no circumstances just clear out from Afghanistan, or we will damage our relations with a large number of foreign friends.”⁵¹ With the weight of the Soviet Union’s commitments to the communist world on his shoulders, Gorbachev feared acting precipitously. Perhaps nothing highlights this better than the statement he made in a February 1987 Politburo meeting:

We could leave quickly...and blame everything on the previous leadership, which planned everything. But we can’t do that. They’re worried in India, they’re worried in Africa. They think that this will be a blow to the authority of the Soviet Union in the national-liberation movement. Imperialism, they say, if it wins in Afghanistan, will go on the offensive.⁵²

Despite general consensus that the war had to end, it was clear that the Soviet effort there was too closely associated with Soviet efforts elsewhere in the Third World and its reputation as a *guarantor* of friendly regimes. Bringing home the troops was not in itself a problem, but if the withdrawal was followed by a collapse of the government or a *mujahadeen* victory there could be manifold consequences for the prestige of the Soviet military, for the USSR’s reputation as an economic benefactor and political role model. As much as Gorbachev’s views on foreign policy by early 1986 were already a significant departure from those of his predecessors, he was not about to unravel the entire fabric of Soviet foreign policy and its attendant myths. He sought a breakthrough with the US, but specifically left out “regional” issues and “solidarity” with “fighters for independence” off the agenda.⁵³ And Gorbachev knew that were the worst to happen as a result of a withdrawal he initiated, it would be great fodder for the conservatives who were already growing suspicious of his turns in foreign policy. Meanwhile, as we shall see in the section below, the war remained within

⁵¹ Liakhovskii *Tragedia i doblest’ Afgana*, 523. Unfortunately, the record of this meeting is unavailable.

⁵² Politburo meeting, February 23, 1987 GFA PB 1987, p.114

⁵³ Cherniaev, *Six Years with Gorbachev*, 43.

boundaries that the Soviet state could tolerate – the wound may have been bleeding, but the patient was not in danger of massive blood loss.

Fighting a limited war

Moscow's military and political approach to the war sought to minimise its impact while preserving freedom of action. The military strategy was typical for counter-insurgency warfare: protect main routes, cities, air bases, and logistic sites; support the Afghan forces with superior air, artillery, intelligence, and logistic capabilities, and strengthen DRA forces so that they could fight without Soviet support.⁵⁴ The USSR avoided becoming over-committed by limiting its presence in Afghanistan to 120,000 troops, and it never expanded the war into neighbouring Pakistan, thus avoiding some of the pitfalls of US strategy in Vietnam. It faced domestic pressures and international criticism, but not at a level that made an immediate change of course obligatory. Appreciating the limits and costs of the war is crucial to understanding why Gorbachev could afford to spend several years tinkering with the Afghan problem before bringing home the troops.

From the beginning, the intervention in Afghanistan had put Moscow under significant pressure. The invasion had isolated the Soviet Union diplomatically, with the 1980-84 period seeing some of the greatest tension in the Cold War era. The intervention quickly turned into a long-term military commitment, the costs of which added to the cost of the military supplies and civilian aid provided to the Kabul regime by Moscow. There were domestic social and political concerns as well. The Politburo had decided to conduct the war in secret, keeping press coverage to a minimum and even, as we saw in the last chapter, restricting information on the gravestones of soldiers who had fallen in Afghanistan. Still, some details filtered through, and Andropov even

⁵⁴ Lester W. Grau and Mohammad Yahya Nawroz "The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan" *Military Review* 1995 75(5): 17-27.

expressed his concern about the social effects of the war to UN mediator Diego Cordovez. There was also the problem of the Soviet Union's large Muslim population and how it might react to the war once the Soviet involvement became more widely known.

It would be a mistake to focus too much attention on the effects of any of these pressures as the reason for Moscow to seek a way out of Afghanistan. Firstly, the Brezhnev leadership in particular seemed willing to weather the diplomatic isolation and seemed to believe that it would eventually pass. Secondly, militarily and economically, the war was costly but well within the means of the USSR's military-industrial complex. In fact, from a tactical point of view, the army only improved at fighting the *mujahadeen* as the war went on and adjusted well to the introduction of new weapons such as the Stinger.⁵⁵ Thirdly, the Soviet leadership was certainly not completely ignorant of public opinion, and in fact studied it through various institutes as well as the KGB. Still, it did not face the same pressures from its population that the US did in Vietnam, and would have probably withstood the anger of military families if it had decided to stay in Afghanistan. Finally, the fear of a Soviet Muslim revolt sparked by the Soviet invasion was largely a fantasy of the CIA and some sympathetic scholars in the West – in practice the Afghan war did not greatly change the religious climate in the Central Asian republics, and the two issues never seem to have become associated in the minds of the Soviet leadership.

It is almost axiomatic among senior Soviet officers who fought in the Afghan conflict, and then spoke or wrote about it, that the military was able to carry out its duty. Aleksandr Liakhovskii, who served in Afghanistan as part of the military advisory staff and later emerged as the most authoritative Russian writer on the topic, concludes that

⁵⁵ For example, the Soviet military set up specialised training courses for Afghan-bound soldiers in the Turkestan Military District where conditions were similar to those found in Afghanistan. Similar training sites were set up in other parts of Central Asia. See Aleksandr Alexiev "Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan," RAND Publication Series, (Santa Monica: May 1988), 15.

the Soviet military did not lose the war: “It would be wrong to say that the 40th army sustained a military defeat. It is just that the army was faced with tasks which it was not in a position to carry out, since a regular army cannot radically solve the problem of revolt.”⁵⁶ Lieutenant-General Boris Gromov, the last commander of the 40th army in Afghanistan, goes further: “There is no basis to say that the 40th army suffered a defeat, just as there is no basis for saying we carried a military victory in Afghanistan.” Nobody had ever asked the 40th army to bring about a military victory, Gromov writes. Rather, the limited contingent was tasked with protecting the government of Afghanistan and preventing an invasion from outside, which it did.⁵⁷

It is indeed true that the Soviet military never lost a battle or gave up a position in its war with the mujahedeen. Yet the decisive blow that the Soviet leadership hoped to strike at the opposition never came. Senior officers who served in Afghanistan were being asked to carry out what they felt was an impossible task. Colonel V.A. Merimskii, who served in Afghanistan in the early years of the war, writes that he repeatedly asked Marshal Sokolov, then the senior commander on the ground, to take this up with the Defense Minister, Dmitrii Ustinov. When Sokolov eventually did, Ustinov seemed to agree, but asked Sokolov to at least find a way to close the borders and stop arms from entering Afghanistan: “all right, you can’t deal with the counterrevolution, but can you defend from penetration from the outside?” Sokolov apparently replied that he could.⁵⁸

Responses like Sokolov’s probably helped to prolong the war, giving the Politburo reasons to believe that it would yet be possible to change the military situation for the better. In fact, the Soviet military was having trouble dealing with a task that could seem simple only to someone who had little idea of how weapons were crossing the border. Afghanistan’s long mountainous border with Pakistan was almost impossible to control. Historically, Afghan kings secured alliances with Pushtun tribes

⁵⁶ Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 744.

⁵⁷ Gromov, *Ogranichennyi Kontingent*, 330-332.

⁵⁸ V.A. Merimskii “Afganistan: Uroki i vivody” *Voenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal* 1994(1), 24-29.

living in the area and rarely sent their own regular army to guard the border with British India. Even then it was assumed that Pushtun tribes, who lived on both sides of the “Durand line” would be able to migrate back and forth as they saw fit. Ustinov’s request to “close the border” was a deceptively easy one.

Moreover, Sokolov himself knew that even this “simplified” task was all but impossible to carry out. The Soviet military and the DRA tried to secure the border as best they could using a combination of military units, Afghan secret police detachments, and border patrol. This still left gaps for penetration, on top of which the reliability of Afghan forces was always in question. In a meeting with Soviet advisors in March 1984, Sokolov admitted that, as far closing off the borders was concerned, “at the current moment we cannot do it. Right now we have to close off the most important sectors.”⁵⁹ In fact, arms continued to flow into Afghanistan from Pakistan, completing a long supply chain that included US and Saudi funding and weapons, sometimes acquired from countries such as China, Egypt and Israel.

The 40th Army tried to compensate for its inability to close the borders by trying to interrupt the supply lines on the Afghan side of the border.⁶⁰ In the early years of the war, this involved a heavy reliance on fixed-wing aircraft to provide air support in raids on *mujahadeen* supply lines. Bombardment was supplemented by attacks from helicopter gun-ships and by means of mines, which were often dropped from the air along supply routes. These had the effect of wounding *mujahadeen* as well as crippling

⁵⁹ Notes of a meeting with party advisors. March 31, 1984. Private Archive of Marshal Sokolov, provided to the author by General Aleksandr Liakhovskii. That Sokolov, apparently, was ready to admit to his subordinates and colleagues in Afghanistan that the border issue could not be solved but found it difficult to tell the defense minister the same is indicative of some of the problems of communication even near the top of the Soviet hierarchy. It seems to confirm that even as Soviet leaders learned about the difficulties of the conflict, they were sometimes spared the complete picture.

⁶⁰ Not surprisingly, the vast majority of Soviet military operations took place near the border with Pakistan, such as Kandahar. Some of these were efforts to disrupt the *mujahadeen* supply chain but others were engagements with entrenched opposition groups. The distribution of fighting within Afghanistan as seen by Soviet military planners is well illustrated by the maps provided in Maiorov, *Pravda ob Afganistane*.

mules and camels that might be carrying supplies.⁶¹ As with other cases when mines were used in warfare, they became a lasting hazard for civilians, yet another of the tragic legacies of the war. According to Major General Oleg Sarin and Colonel Lev Dvoretskii, some three million such mines were dropped or laid between 1980 and 1984 alone.⁶²

Another major preoccupation was protecting Soviet-DRA lines of communication, which supported both the 40th Army as well as DRA forces and cities. The only reliable overland route was a highway that ran from Termez to Kabul and connected that city with urban centers like Jalalabad and Herat, forming a horse-shoe through Afghanistan.⁶³ Typically for guerrilla warfare, *mujahadeen* often attacked supply lines, which were particularly vulnerable on the difficult roads.⁶⁴ Even the Kabul-Termez highway was a major challenge to drivers, particularly in winter. One Soviet source described it as a road that winds “in steep and narrow hairpin turns, with a perpendicular cliff on one side and an abyss on the other.”⁶⁵ Not only were Soviet soldiers vulnerable in such conditions, they often found it difficult to attack *mujahadeen* who seemed to melt away into the mountains above.⁶⁶ At the same time, the vulnerability of the roads and their importance for Soviet military and economic aid meant that the number of troops that could actually be used for operations was often quite limited –it is estimated that some 35% of Soviet troops were being used to guard

⁶¹ See Edward W. Westermann “The Limits of Soviet Airpower: The Failure of Military Coercion in Afghanistan, 1979-89” *The Journal of Conflict Studies* XIX (Fall 1999), 41-43.

⁶² Sarin, Oleg and Dvoretskii, Oleg *The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union’s Vietnam* (Novato: 1993), 120.

⁶³ The highway was a relic of an earlier era of Soviet-Afghan friendship. The road was built by Soviet engineers in 1950s, a result of the USSR’s push into the Third World under Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Earlier Afghan Kings had resisted British and Russian offers to build communications in Afghanistan, fearing that these would then be used to invade the country. See Vartan Gregorian *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946*. (Stanford University Press, California, 1969).

⁶⁴ See *Soviet Afghan War*, 64-67.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Westermann, “The Limits of Soviet Airpower,” 41.

⁶⁶ Feifer, *The Great Gamble*, 100-105.

roads.⁶⁷ This, and the high rate of hospitalization due to disease among Soviet troops, limited the number of soldiers available for combat operations.⁶⁸

Both fixed wing aircraft and helicopters were of major importance in other kind of attacks on *mujahadeen* positions. In the early years of the war in particular, Soviet strategy relied on “hammer and anvil” operations involving massive attacks from the air and mechanised advances on the ground. By the third year of the war the 40th Army was relying increasingly on the helicopter-gunships, which could drop bombs from a lower altitude (and thus with greater precision) than fixed-wing aircraft and could also strafe rebel fighters. Over time, too, the 40th Army increased its use of special forces (*voiska spetsalnogo naznachen'ia, or spets-naz*), which could be used for targeted attacks against bands of fighters. On the whole, the Soviet military, which was geared towards conventional warfare with an eye on central Europe, adjusted well to the requirements of mobility that came with a guerilla war in a mountainous terrain.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, air power remained a key feature of Soviet combat tactics as well as a way to supplement transport by road.⁷⁰

The larger dilemma Soviet generals faced was how to use force against the insurgency without alienating the Afghan population. While Soviet forces were generally able to achieve objectives set out in operations, Soviet tactics often undermined the broader efforts to pacify Afghanistan. Attacks from the air, even well targeted ones, inevitably hit civilians as well fighters. Even with the transition from

⁶⁷ Sarin and Dvoretskii, *The Afghan Syndrome*, 92.

⁶⁸ Lester Grau, the most prolific military analyst of Soviet fighting in Afghanistan, has suggested that the high rates of disease, highly unusual for a modern army, contributed to the falling morale of the troops and the undermining of the Soviet army's prestige within Soviet society as a whole. See Lester W. Grau and William A. Jorgensen “Beaten by the Bugs: The Soviet-Afghan War Experience” *Military Review* 1997 77(6): 30-37 and Grau and Nawroz “The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan.” It is not an unreasonable argument – the number of soldiers incapacitated by disease was over 400,000 (as opposed to the official figure of wounded, released in 1989, of 14,000). Nevertheless, there has as yet been no study of how this affected the military's standing in the longer term.

⁶⁹ This is not to say that the adjustment was easy. The Red Army had last engaged in a similar campaign in its battle against the *basmachi* in the 1920s, but had since largely abandoned counter-insurgency training or planning. After the invasion, Soviet generals did turn to some of the military texts written during the *basmachi* campaign as they tried to reorient the 40th army to partisan warfare in mountainous conditions. Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 386-87.

⁷⁰ Westermann, “Limits of Soviet Airpower,” 44-50.

fixed-wing bombing to helicopter gunships civilian casualties remained high. Soviet officers might say that the war had to be won politically, not militarily, but their tactics contributed to the political problem. Considering the restraints imposed by the situation and by Soviet leaders themselves, however, there weren't many options available. A major decrease in the use of airpower would have meant a much larger invasion by ground troops, particularly considering how many were used to guard the supply routes and for other support functions. More boots on the ground could have created its own political difficulties within Afghanistan as well as within the USSR.

Although the war was frustrating to senior Soviet commanders, the conflict never amounted to a serious military or strategic challenge to the USSR. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, while the material costs of the war were significant, they were little more than a dent when viewed in comparison to the overall Soviet military budget. Aid to Afghanistan constituted a significant, but not overwhelming, portion of the aid given to Third World at this time – estimated at \$78 billion between 1982 and 1986. Taken together, aid to the DRA military and the expenses associated with Soviet military amounted to 1578.5 million rubles in 1984, 2623.8 in 1985, 3197.4 in 1986, and 4116 in 1987, or roughly \$7.5 billion over the four years.⁷¹ By comparison, the entire Soviet military budget as late as 1989 was \$128 billion.⁷² Similarly, according to Russian government records, Afghanistan's debt to the USSR by October 1991 was 4.7 billion rubles, roughly half of India's, and about a tenth of the total debt owed by developing countries.⁷³

Further, while the war certainly required the exertion of military power and consequent loss of life at level higher than any since the Second World War, it was far

⁷¹ GosPlan USSR [State Planning] Memorandum Regarding Expenses in Afghanistan, January 1988. Volkogonov Papers, Regional File, Box 26, Reel 17. The calculation is based on the official exchange rate at the time of .65 dollars to the Soviet ruble.

⁷² "Soviet Military Budget: \$128 Billion Bombshell" *New York Times*, May 31, 1989. According to Stanislav Menshikov, a Russian economist, the military budget represented some 20-25% of GDP. However, it is not clear what methodology he uses to get at this number. Stanislav Menshikov "Stsenarii Razvitiya VVP" *Voprosy Ekonomiki* (1999), no.7, 86.

⁷³ "Repayment of developing countries' debt" October 1991, GARF Fond 10026, op.5, d. 640.

from unmanageable. The official tally, presented to the Central Committee the day after the last soldier left Afghanistan, counted 13,826 dead, 1977 of those being officers. The 40th Army had also suffered 49985 wounded, of whom 7281 were unable to return to duty.⁷⁴ As Fred Halliday has pointed out, Soviet casualties were comparable to peacetime losses due to accidents.⁷⁵

Finally, even though Afghanistan was on the Soviet border, there was little fear that the conflict would escalate to the point that the Soviet Union itself would be threatened. It should be noted that this was not for lack of trying on the part of the *mujahadeen*. From 1985 onward, in particular, the Pakistani ISI formulated plans to attack targets within the Soviet Union. For example, in 1986 the ISI trained fifteen Afghan resistance commanders to launch attacks within Soviet territory that would help disrupt the Soviet supply chain. While several attacks on the rail link between Samarkand and Termez, the last outpost on the Soviet border, were successful, others failed. In December 1986, there were also attacks on a power station in Tajikistan.⁷⁶

On the whole, however, these successes were very limited precisely because of US and Pakistani fears that the war could potentially escalate into a wider conflict as a result. The USSR responded with force to these incursions, bombarding the Afghans side of the border heavily. When the ISI commander in charge of aid to the resistance devised a plan to hit the “Friendship Bridge,” which provided a road link between Afghanistan and the USSR, it was called off by President Zia ul Haq, who feared

⁷⁴ CC CPSU Memorandum “Regarding the completion of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Republic of Afghanistan.” February 16, 1989. Volkogonov Papers, Regional File, Box 26, Reel 17. The memorandum makes no mention of psychological trauma. There is also some controversy about the numbers – for example, a book by the Soviet General Staff cites a figure of 26,000 dead. However, it is not clear what sources are used to reach that number or why it differs from the official tally. See Grau, Lester W., and Gress, Michael A., trans & ed. *The Soviet Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost* (The Russian General Staff) (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 44.

⁷⁵ Fred Halliday “Soviet Foreign Policymaking and the Afghanistan War,” 691.

⁷⁶ Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *The Bear Trap: Afghanistan’s Untold Story* (London: L. Cooper, 1992), 199.

escalation of the conflict.⁷⁷ An April 1987 attack which destroyed several buildings on Soviet territory led to a Soviet protest which apparently caused some panic in the Pakistani Foreign Office. According to Yousaf, the Soviet ambassador to Islamabad relayed the message that “if any further operation was conducted in the Soviet Union the consequences for the security and integrity of Pakistan would be dire.”⁷⁸ This prompted the local CIA official to ask Yousaf “not to start World War III” by conducting operations in Soviet territory. Eventually the attacks were called off completely.⁷⁹

The possibility of the conflict moving on to Soviet territory never became a major concern for the Soviet leadership or even a reason to seek withdrawal. Similarly, the resource drain never became sufficiently serious to be a major factor in Soviet decision-making on the war. Although the war was costly in both men and materiel, it was well within the limits the Soviet Union could manage.⁸⁰

Special mention needs to be made regarding the Stinger missiles and their supposed effect on the Soviet decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. Early in the war the Soviet army came to rely quite heavily on close air-support; that is, helicopter gunships, such as the Mil Mi-24 helicopters. The *mujahadeen*, fighting with small arms, had almost no way to counter against the use of this strategy. It was in response to this

⁷⁷ Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, 197-198. Another attack in Kharga using Chinese-made missiles on timed ignition destroyed a storage facilities with an estimated \$250 million worth of Soviet military equipment. The video footage was replayed on television for several days. See Milton Bearden *The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the CIA's Final Showdown With the KGB* (2003), 228-231.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 205.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 206. See also Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars* 161-162 and Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 46-47. Attacks from *mujahadeen* near border areas were felt from time to time in Soviet territory even in 1987, with Soviet civilian dead as a result. See, for example, Artem Borovik, *The Hidden War*, 42.

⁸⁰ It should be noted that one of the limits evidently set by Soviet planners was of not taking the war to Pakistan, although there was at least one strike by Soviet special forces that crossed the border, apparently without authorization. See Lester W. Grau and Ali Ahmad Jalali, “Forbidden Cross-Border Vendetta: Spetsnaz Strike into Pakistan During the Soviet-Afghan War” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 2005 18(4): 661-672. Although Pakistan did complain on occasion about Afghan Air Force jets violating its airspace, there does not seem to have been an organised effort on the part of the DRA and the Soviet Union to take the war into Pakistan, even though aerial bombing on the Pakistani side of the border could have helped stopped the flow of arms into Afghanistan. Soviet records of Pakistani complaints are unavailable, but those lodged with the UN Secretary General can be found in the UN Archives, Secretary General’s papers, Problem Area: Afghanistan files.

situation that the CIA, after offering several inadequate Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs) agreed to provide the Stinger, a powerful heat-seeking anti-aircraft weapon that was mobile enough to suit the conditions of guerrilla warfare.⁸¹

Yet while the Stinger, first introduced on the field in September 1986, did give the *mujahadeen* an important anti-aircraft tool, it hardly changed the course of the war. It is true that Soviet pilots now had to fly higher and occasionally abandon their missions, whilst all civilian and military visitors to Kabul from that point onwards recall with some horror the “screwdriver” descent into the Baghram airbase meant to evade the new weapon. Yet it is also true that the Soviet military and pilots adjusted, fitting aircraft with various devices to disorient the missiles, flying at night, or staying so low to the ground as to make the missiles unusable. Although this adjustment allowed the Soviets to limit damage caused by the Stingers, it meant sacrificing accuracy and precision, and relying on even more damaging higher-altitude bombing.⁸²

Gorbachev’s first few years in power saw some of the fiercest fighting of the war. American analysts at the time noted a major “escalation,” and this may have been one of the reasons Reagan did not believe Gorbachev was serious about withdrawing. The “escalation” had actually begun under Chernenko, bringing troop levels up to 120,000 from 100,000 and relying more heavily on special forces.⁸³ While perceived as an escalation because of the increase in troop numbers, it was more of a change in tactics that deemphasised attacks from the air and sought to involve more highly trained troops for surgical strikes.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the fact that the number of troops was sustained through the first half of 1986 further points to the fact that Gorbachev did not

⁸¹ Milton Bearden, *The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the CIA’s Final Showdown With the KGB* (2003), 207. For more on the US decision to supply the Afghan opposition with the Stinger, see Alan J. Kuperman “The Stinger Missile and US Intervention in Afghanistan” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 114, No.2 (Summer, 1999), 219-263; George Crile *Charlie Wilson’s War* (New York: 2003), 403-439.

⁸² Harrison and Cordovez *Out of Afghanistan*, 194-201; Kuperman, “The Stinger Missile,” esp 244-249. See also the exchange between Kuperman and Milton Bearden, “Stinging Rebukes” in *Foreign Affairs* January/February 2002.

⁸³ Kuperman “The Stinger Missile,” 237-239.

⁸⁴ Liakhovskii, for one, denies the notion that the military was given “two years” to win the war. Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest’ Afgana*, 518-519.

have a plan for withdrawal. Though there is no solid evidence that Gorbachev gave the military a certain time frame to win, it is likely that he did not want to dictate an immediate withdrawal before trying to achieve a settlement through diplomacy and new political strategies within Afghanistan. Withdrawing troops soon after he came to power would have meant negotiating from a weaker position.

In every sense, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was a limited war, much more so than the US involvement in Vietnam. The Soviet Union never expanded the war outside of Afghanistan, even though it may have helped destroy *mujahadeen* camps and intercept arms convoys before they crossed the border. Nor did Soviet leaders increase the number of troops sent to fight it above a limit reached early in the war, even though it was clear that there were often not enough troops to carry out the “hold” part of their clear and hold strategy. There were several good reasons to maintain those limits. Soviet leaders maintained these limits because they saw their role as helping the Kabul government establish its own defensive capability, not to fight the war on their behalf; because taking the war to Pakistan would have undermined their goal of gaining international legitimacy for their client and exacerbating the tensions caused by the intervention itself; and because, as will be discussed below, they needed to keep the war limited enough to keep it semi-hidden from the Soviet public.⁸⁵ Keeping the war limited allowed the Soviet leadership to maintain greater freedom of maneuver in its decision-making, as well as insist that the intervention was a “private affair” between two friendly states. Along with the (relatively) limited impact of the war within the USSR itself, keeping the war itself limited allowed Soviet leaders to delay the discussion about withdrawal.

⁸⁵ The Soviet decision to limit the extent of the war seems to have been recognised by the US Army in its internal assessment in 1989. One section, unfortunately mostly redacted, is called “Limited Goals, Limited Commitment.” US Army, “Lessons from the War in Afghanistan,” May 1989 (Army Department Declassification Release), NSA Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/us.html> (Accessed July 22, 2009).

Social effects of the war

After the US became heavily involved in Vietnam, political elites in Washington came under pressure from a highly motivated anti-war movement and from wide-spread disaffection with the war. The war brought about the downfall of an otherwise popular president, Lyndon B. Johnson. As this section will show, Moscow never faced similar pressures to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. Although there were calls from dissidents and relatives of soldiers to end Soviet fighting, this never amounted to a broad-based movement. Nor did Soviet Muslims, who might have been expected to protest a war against their co-religionists, use the invasion as an opportunity to mount resistance against the Soviet state.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, some Western scholars speculated that Soviet Muslims might rise up and rebel against the state. There were several reasons to suspect that the war in Afghanistan would cause unrest among the Soviet Union's large Muslim population. The first is that the Soviet house always stood on a somewhat shaky foundation when it came to maintaining harmony among the nationalities and keeping those nationalities loyal to the state. The second was that eradicating Islam and bringing it within the control of the state had always been more difficult than doing the same with Orthodox Christianity. Thirdly, three Central Asian Soviet republics shared a border with Afghanistan: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. In all three cases the dominant ethnic groups of the republic lived on both sides of the border and could migrate with relative ease.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ See, for example, Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet Union* (New York, 1983). Others were more skeptical. Muriel Atkin, a Central-Asia specialist, noted a certain tendency among western scholars to "demonise" the treatment of Soviet Muslims. (See Muriel Atkin, "The Islamic Revolution that Overthrew the Soviet State," *Contention* 2 (Winter 1993): 94. Fred Halliday, writing several years earlier, pointed out that the idea of an Islamic challenge to the USSR, as developed by Western scholars, arose in part from "cold war wishful thinking about the possible challenge to the USSR of politicised Islam, a process in which academic industry and state finance have joined enthusiastically." See Fred Halliday "Islam and Soviet Foreign Policy," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 9 (Summer 1986): 218.

Before discussing the possible effects of the Afghan war on Soviet Muslims it is worth considering the relationship of the state and Islam within the Soviet Union more generally. The peoples of the Central Asian republics had been incorporated into the Soviet State in the 1920s through a mixture of co-option and often brutal counter-insurgency.⁸⁷ In the post-war era, a certain equilibrium had been established. The Soviet state set up institutions to monitor and supervise religious activity. One of these was the Council on Religious Affairs, which had offices throughout the USSR and reported to the Central Committee.⁸⁸ The CRA supervised and kept watch over official Muslim organizations like the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, or SADUM, or the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in the North Caucasus, DUMSK. SADUM and DUMSK clergy were trained in officially sanctioned religious schools, but they were also employees of the state. Their sermons often included comments on nuclear peace and Lenin, as well as denunciations of the Western imperialist intervention in Afghanistan.⁸⁹

Soviet Muslims responded to “official” religion in different ways. Many turned to “parallel” Islam, praying in unregistered mosques set up in apartments or abandoned buildings, or by joining unsanctioned religious groups, such as Sufi circles. On the whole, however, this opposition was quietist. The religious groups rarely engaged in political activity per se. Their challenge to the Soviet state was limited to their existence outside of bureaucratic and ideological control. Religious groups also fulfilled certain functions like conducting wedding and funeral ceremonies which were normally carried

⁸⁷ In fact, Andropov recalled this episode of Soviet history in a 1983 Politburo meeting: “Miracles don’t happen. Sometimes we are angry at the Afghans...but lets remember our fight against the *basmachi*. Back then almost the entire Red Army was concentrated in Central Asia, and the fight with the *basmachi* went on into the 30s.” Record of Politburo Meeting, March 10, 1983, *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente*, 410.

⁸⁸ The CRA was created in 1965 by consolidating several other institutions. The Council, like its predecessors, was supposed to enforce laws regarding religion and report any irregularities to the government. The council was also responsible for distributing buildings to properly registered religious organizations.

⁸⁹ “Short summary of the sermon given at a prayer meeting of Muslim believers of the town of Votkinsk on the day of the ‘Qurban-Bayram’ holiday,” October 8, 1981, GARF Fund 6991, Perechen 6, Delo 2070.

out by government offices. At the same time, many local communists in Central Asia and the Caucasus also participated in “parallel” Islam.

While primarily quietist, “parallel” Islam could provide a forum for more overt anti-Soviet activity. One example of this was the “samizdat” which circulated in both Central Asia and the Caucasus and often carried truly anti-Soviet messages, including calls to avoid military service.⁹⁰ The implications of these messages were highlighted during the Afghan war. On several occasions there were reports of violence breaking out between Muslim recruits and military authorities. In June 1985, there were reports of clashes between Chechen recruits and officers when the former refused to go to Afghanistan and fight their “Muslim co-religionists.”⁹¹ This was not an isolated incident. Later that summer, a military train carrying conscripts from the North Caucasus to the Afghan border was delayed when a fight broke out between Muslims and Russian soldiers, with arguments about religion fueling the entire incident.⁹²

Cross-border ethnic and religious ties on the one hand and the existence of a “parallel” religious network on the other gave Soviet Muslims, particularly in Central Asia, the ability to discuss the war in a more open way than others in the Soviet Union. Not surprisingly, some of the earliest strong negative reactions to the war came from among Central Asian Muslims. In 1983, for example, the CRA reported to the CPSU Central Committee that in Tajikistan, some unregistered mullahs were issuing

⁹⁰ For example, an investigation in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR in 1979 uncovered 19 “official” and dozens of “unofficial” recording studios that were copying and distributing such tapes, which included prayers, religious instructions, and admonishments for young men not to join the Soviet army. “Regarding the samizdat of ideologically improper musical compositions in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR,” May 11, 1979. RGANI Fund 5, Opis 76, Delo 124. See also Yaakov Ro'i *Islam in the Soviet Union* (London, 2000), 426.

⁹¹ Taras Kuzio “Opposition in the USSR to the occupation of Afghanistan” *Central Asian Survey* Vol.6, Issue 1, (1987), 114.

⁹² Cherniaev Diary, NSA, August 27, 1985. Cherniaev read about the incident in the Central Committee Secretariat protocol.

statements saying “it is forbidden to bury Soviet soldiers killed in Afghanistan according to Muslim rites, as they fought against true Muslims.”⁹³

The war permeated Central Asian Muslim communities in other ways as well. Some of the resistance organizations in Afghanistan were able to find supporters north of the Soviet-Afghan border. In 1983 the Tajik-dominated Jemiat-e Islami claimed to have 2500 members in Soviet Tajikistan.⁹⁴ The number may have been an exaggeration, but any presence at all is significant and would have been of concern to Soviet authorities. Later in the decade, thousands of Central Asian Muslims would travel, clandestinely, to madrasas of the Deobandi school in North-West Pakistan, where they were supported and even given scholarships.⁹⁵

The potential to stir trouble among the Central Asian Muslims proved tempting for the CIA and the Pakistani ISI. In 1982 pamphlets with titles like “The Life of the Great Muhammad,” and “How to Pray,” as well as *Islam and Social Justice* by the Pakistani Islamist Sayed Abul-ala al Mawdoodi, were being printed in Peshawar in Russian and smuggled into Central Asia. Their existence came to light when they were criticised in a Kyrgyz newspaper by a local academic.⁹⁶ The CIA decided to back these efforts as part of its support for the anti-communist resistance. As CIA Chief William Casey put it, the Muslims of Central Asia “could do a lot of damage to the Soviet Union.”⁹⁷ The intelligence agencies experimented with a small-scale infiltration with Mohammad Yousaf coordinating the effort. With CIA help, some ten thousand copies of the Koran were prepared in Uzbek along with books describing Soviet atrocities against Uzbeks. During the summer of 1984, dozens of *mujahadeen*, primarily ethnic Uzbeks, made the night journey across the Amu Darya to bring the books into

⁹³ V.A. Kuroedov (CRA) to the CPSU Central Central Committee, September 16, 1983 RGANI Fund 5, Opis 89, Delo 82, p.60; *Ro'i Islam in the Soviet Union*, 346.

⁹⁴ *Ro'i, Islam in the Soviet Union*, 717.

⁹⁵ Ahmed Rashid *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven, 2002), 44.

⁹⁶ Aleksandr Bennigsen “Afghanistan and the Muslims of the USSR” in Rosemary Klass, ed., *Afghanistan: The Great Game Revisited* (New York: 1987), 298.

⁹⁷ Steve Coll *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York, 2004), 104-105.

Uzbekistan. According to Yousaf, the Koran was well received, but there was little interest in the books on atrocities.⁹⁸ A March 1984 CRA report noted that growing ties with Afghanistan had led to an increase in religious literature coming into the Tajik SSR.⁹⁹

Soviet officials at all levels were certainly aware that the Afghan war could make the situation in Central Asia and other Muslim republic more difficult. The possibility of the “Islamic Factor” being used by “enemies” to destabilise the Soviet Union was the subject of a 1981 Central Committee resolution, and the CRA was tasked with helping to neutralise the threat.¹⁰⁰ Officials in Uzbekistan also noted with alarm that “agents of imperialism” were trying to use the “Islamic factor” in the republic, not only stirring up religiosity, but giving it an “anti-Soviet, nationalist direction.”¹⁰¹

Yet Moscow did not respond to these reports with any great alarm. At most, officials in Moscow felt some concern, and passed resolutions suggesting better propaganda and educational efforts. None of the available Politburo records suggest that this was a primary concern for leaders in the 1980-86 time periods.¹⁰² In light of what has happened in Central Asia since 1991, particularly in Tajikistan, it may seem strange that Moscow did not respond with greater alarm to the possibility of “blowback.” There are several important factors to consider, however: first, the problem of religiosity among Soviet Muslims predated the Afghan war and had reached an equilibrium that seemed to satisfy both the state and the religious community. The permeation of

⁹⁸ Yousaf, Mohammad and Adkin, Mark *The Bear Trap: Afghanistan's Untold Story* (London: L. Cooper, 1992), 192-95.

⁹⁹ Memorandum to CRA official V.A. Nurullaev, March 1984 GARF. F.6991, op.6, d. 2761.

¹⁰⁰ CRA memorandum, January 19, 1982 GARF F.6991, op.6, d. 2306.

¹⁰¹ Information regarding a CRA conference in Tashkent, April 18, 1984 GARF F.6991, op.6, d. 2762.

¹⁰² Which is not to say that they did not consider certain manifestations of Islam as dangerous. There were numerous resolutions on ways combating Islam before and after the Soviet invasion. In July 1986 the question was discussed at a Politburo meeting, where Gorbachev called Islam a “dark religion” and admitted that its influence seemed to be growing. The question was not connected to the Afghanistan war, nor did Gorbachev seem particularly alarmed. See Politburo discussion July 24, 1986, Gorbachev Foundation Archives, Notes of Politburo Discussions, 1986, p. 149.

literature from Afghanistan did not affect it only significantly.¹⁰³ Secondly, while Soviet Muslims were probably not supportive of the war, this did not mean they were ready to launch a holy war against the Soviet state or indeed to upset the social order from which they in some ways benefited. Finally, to the extent that officials were concerned about the “Islamic factor” being a destabilizing consequence of the war in Afghanistan, they believed that the best way to prevent it was to win the war and establish a stable government in Kabul.¹⁰⁴

Of course, it was not just Soviet Muslims who were unhappy with the war. During the course of the war, the broader Soviet public, through unofficial channels, learned about the war and began to voice its disapproval. Soviet leaders were not unaware of this unrest. As Chapter 1 showed, in July 1981 the Politburo was already considering how to handle the letters coming to the central committee from parents and relatives of the fallen.¹⁰⁵ As early as 1983, Yurii Andropov was worrying about the effect of the war on Soviet society. Yet it is one thing to say that the effect of the war on public opinion *concerned* Soviet leaders, and quite another to say that it constituted an urgent need for Soviet leaders to consider withdrawal. The nature of the pre-glasnost Soviet system meant that it was possible to keep the details of a “limited war” from Soviet society, at least for a few years. When the Politburo considered “perpetuating the memory of soldiers who died in Afghanistan,” its members seemed to have few qualms about keeping any potentially sensitive information off their gravestones, since “from a political point of view this would not be entirely correct.”¹⁰⁶

Indeed, in the early years of the war, its presence was only clearly felt in a few areas. In Tashkent, often the first stop for returning veterans as well as troops bound for

¹⁰³ Atkin, writing in 1989, noted that the public attitude regarding Islam of Soviet officials actually changed little during the early 1980s in comparison with the pre-invasion period. Atkin, Muriel *The Subtler Battle: Islam in Soviet Tajikistan* (Philadelphia: 1989), 39-40.

¹⁰⁴ Author’s interview with Leonid Shebarshin, March 19, 2008.

¹⁰⁵ Working Record of CPSU Central Committee Politburo Meeting, July 30, 1981, published in *Krasnaya Zvezda* February 15, 2000. Translated by Gary Goldberg. CWIHP Bulletin 14/15, 245.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. See Chapter 1.

Afghanistan, the sight of wounded young men was familiar. Svetlana Alexievich, the well-known Russian human rights activist and author, described the city airport in 1986 as a place where “Young soldiers, no more than boys, hop about on crutches amidst the suntanned holiday crowds.” She goes on to say that nobody noticed the soldiers, they were “a familiar sight here, apparently.”¹⁰⁷ Most cities were not so closely connected with the war, however.

As more and more soldiers completed tours of duty and returned home, sometimes as wounded veterans, sometimes as bodies for burial, but almost always marked by the war, it became increasingly difficult to keep a secret.¹⁰⁸ In the early years of the war it was mostly discussed on the pages of dissident *samizdat* publications, such as the *Chronicle of Current Events*. Anti-war posters and leaflets were noted in 1981 in several major cities, including Moscow and Leningrad.¹⁰⁹ By 1985, the scope of open opposition to the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan from a wider sector of the public was on the rise. Cherniaev noted early in April of that year that a “torrent of letters” about Afghanistan was coming in to the Central Committee and the editorial offices of the daily newspaper *Pravda*. Unlike earlier letters, which were often anonymous, these letters were signed. Letters came not only from relatives of soldiers but wider members of the public. Soldiers and even senior officers were writing as well, and one General wrote that he could not explain to his subordinates why they were there.¹¹⁰

It was Gorbachev’s own initiative to open up the press coverage that really began to change the way the war was perceived nationwide. A *Pravda* editorial from February 1985 was typical of earlier coverage. Focusing on the US-led effort to supply the *mujahadeen* with arms, the editorial explains the USSR’s involvement as not only a

¹⁰⁷ Svetlana Alexievich *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War* (London, 1992), 3.

¹⁰⁸ For the war’s effects on veterans and society, see Mark Galeotti, *The Soviet Union’s Last War* (London, 1994).

¹⁰⁹ Taras Kuzio “Opposition to the War,” 104.

¹¹⁰ Cherniaev Diary, NSA, April 4, 1985.

question of support for the Afghan revolution, but also of national interest. American policy was “one element of imperialism’s anti-Soviet strategy” and the Afghan opposition was fighting on the side of the US:

If it succeeded in strangling the Afghan revolution and replacing the people’s government in Kabul, the American generals, with the aid of the ringleaders of the Afghan counterrevolution, would not fail to take root in Afghanistan and provide themselves with bases there, and they would reconstitute the electronic reconnaissance centers that Washington lost in Iran. After all, one should not forget that the Soviet-Afghan border is almost 2400 km. long... It is known that the CIA and the Pentagon have long attached great importance to espionage concerning these regions.”¹¹¹

When the press reported on the war directly, it was to highlight individual heroic deeds of certain soldiers.¹¹²

Changes in how the war was covered began as early as the summer of 1985. In June, General Varennikov drafted a new set of guidelines that significantly expanded what aspects of the fighting could be addressed in print and other media. For the most part the memorandum, approved at the end of July, focused on widening the reporting of acts of individual heroism as well as small unit combat engagements.¹¹³ That same month, even before the final approval of Varennikov’s memorandum, Soviet television showed footage of fighting in Afghanistan for the first time. For two and a half minutes Soviet viewers were shown young conscripts and burning vehicles.¹¹⁴

The fall and winter saw by far the most frank writing on the war to date. In August Aleksandr Prokhanov, a journalist and novelist, published a long piece in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* entitled “Notes from an Armored Personnel Carrier.”¹¹⁵ While Prokhanov went on at length about the connection between the soldiers fighting in

¹¹¹ “Why the Undeclared War Against Afghanistan is Being Waged” *Pravda*, February 14, 1985, *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, VOL. XXXVII, No.7, 4.

¹¹² See, for example, “This Kind Doesn’t Surrender” *Sovetskaia Belorussia*, January 6, 1985 CDSP VOL XXXVII, No.7, 5.

¹¹³ “Regarding publication in the mass media of material relating to the activity of the limited contingent of Soviet troops in Afghanistan” CC CPSU Document and draft by Varennikov and Kirpichenko RGANI Fund 89, Perechen 11, Doc 103; *Geheimdokumente Sowjetische*, 414-422.

¹¹⁴ “Soviet TV gives its viewers rare glimpse of Afghan war” *New York Times* July 24, 1985.

¹¹⁵ Aleksandr Prokhanov, “Note from an Armored Personnel Carrier” *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, August 28, 1985 in CDSP VOL XXXVII No. 43, 7-9.

Afghanistan and the internationalists who had fought in Spain and the patriots who defeated the Nazis, he did not include the standard line about the importance of the revolution to the Afghan people. In fact, Prokhanov wrote, after five years “any illusions have disappeared.”¹¹⁶ Other, more explicit articles followed. Published letters and reports highlighted the difficulty young veterans had readjusting to life back in the Soviet Union while also pointing to the futility of the Soviet mission. One letter from a communist party official spoke about a meeting with a young, recently demobilised veteran, who had been “tormented by the fact that he was powerless to alleviate their suffering” and now was enraged by corruption at home.¹¹⁷

By 1985, then, a certain amount of social pressure had built up that forced Moscow to reconsider how the war was presented to the public. Gorbachev’s decision to bring it out in the open was part of his early effort to democratise the Soviet media, but it was also had the effect of making the war an open part of public discourse. Some of the negative effects of the war could now be openly discussed. This may also have been part of Gorbachev’s effort to change the discourse on the war in the leadership: by appealing to public discontent, he could emphasise the need to withdraw. Crucially, however, Gorbachev was not in a position, at any point between 1985 and the start of the withdrawal in 1988, where public pressures or social problems were such that he was reacting to them in forming his Afghan policy. Instead, he was able to use such pressure as did exist to give himself freedom of maneuver and pre-empt criticism from potential conservative critics.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Gorbachev’s desire to bring Soviet troops home stemmed not just from considerations about the wars military, economic, and social costs, but

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 7.

¹¹⁷ *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, January 8, 1986. CDSR Vol XXXVIII, No. 1, 1; See also “We Wear Masks,” *Komsomolskaia Pravda* September 24, 1985, CDSR Vol. XXXVII, No.40, 24.

also because of the influence of party members intellectuals that were opposed to the war from the beginning. Even before he became General Secretary, Gorbachev was the Politburo's point-man for interacting with these intellectuals and soliciting reform ideas from them. They in turn shared their belief that the war was a mistake, both formally, through policy papers, and informally, when they were invited to brief Gorbachev or offer advice. These new thinkers had a view of international relations quite different than the confrontational one that had dominated since the fall of détente at the end of 1979, and saw the Afghanistan war as the worst of the Brezhnev eras foreign policy mistakes. Gorbachev seems to have agreed. Further, by the time Gorbachev came to power, the war had been dragging on for five years without any significant result.

Gorbachev and the team he assembled around him inherited not only a system but an entire legacy of foreign policy making, with the attendant history, myths and commitments. Whatever may be said about Gorbachev with hindsight, he was neither set to end the Soviet empire nor dismantle the Soviet state. A reformer rather than a revolutionary by nature, the consequences of his actions worried him greatly. Thus even while calling the war a "bleeding wound," Gorbachev worried about the effects on Soviet relations with its other client states if it was seen as suffering defeat in Afghanistan. Crucially, while Gorbachev saw the war as a tragic mistake, this was not how he viewed the broader Soviet policy of "solidarity" with Third World states and national-liberation movements. He believed in Moscow's obligations and the importance of maintaining its role as *guarantor*. Though his attitude would start to change in mid-1987, in 1985 and 1986 he saw himself as carrying the mantle of Soviet leadership in the Third World as it had evolved since the 1950s.

Such ideas, which some might call sentimental, might have mattered little if the military, economic, or social costs of the war were so staggering that Gorbachev and his colleagues would have recognised the need to cut their losses and bring the troops

home. Yet the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan never put that sort of pressure on the Soviet state. That the war dragged on for years after Gorbachev (and the Politburo) agreed that it was time to leave is explained by the legacies of old commitments as well as the nature of the war. A “bleeding wound” it may have been, but the flow came from a small vein of a large animal. The military costs of the war were significant, but only a percentage of the Soviet Union’s foreign aid, even less so of total defense expenditure. The war at no time posed a security risk to the Soviet state. Similarly opposition to the war, whether on religious, personal, political, or moral grounds, never expanded beyond what the Soviet state could control. Local officials in Central Asia may have worried about the penetration of Islamist tracts, but this did not seem to bother Moscow too greatly. Like the military costs, the social costs of the war were a worry to Soviet leaders, but not enough to end the war. Certainly these factors were small when weighed against the risk of a Soviet defeat in the eyes of the world.

Chapter III: Reforming Counterinsurgency: The Replacement of Karmal and the National Reconciliation Campaign, 1986-1987

“The problem for both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze was that they could not just abandon the commitments and the people that, as they understood about this time, 1988 and afterward, already belonged to the past. They were looking for a more or less smooth way to dismantle those commitments.”¹

Pavel Palazchenko, 1997

By the spring of 1986 there was a consensus in the Soviet leadership that the Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan had to end. In October 1985 the Politburo had agreed with Gorbachev that it was time to pull out and at the party congress in February 1986 the Soviet leader had publicly called the war a “bleeding wound.” The withdrawal started in May 1988. What took place in between? As the last chapter showed, the war was not going so badly that an imminent withdrawal was necessary, particularly when such a withdrawal would be balanced against the potential political costs. But somehow the war had to be finished without the potential negative consequences. As one of his aides put it, “Gorbachev hoped that he could right the mistakes of his predecessors while paying no political price.”²

This meant, first of all, that the Soviet involvement could not end in *porazhenie*, a Russian word literally meaning defeat but suggestive of something more shattering than a military reversal. In fact, Moscow’s demands at this time differed little from Yurii Andropov’s three years earlier. First, outside interference had to stop, which required an agreement with the US and Pakistan. Second, there had to be some international recognition of the DRA regime, even if it was acceptable for the character

¹ Pavel Palazchenko *Six Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze* (University Park, 1997), 89.

² Andrei Grachev, International Department official, Gorbachev aide and press secretary from September-December 1991. Author’s interview, London, February 1, 2008.

of that regime to change, at least within certain bounds. Third, the DRA regime had to outlast the Soviet troop presence. At no point could the USSR be perceived as bowing to international pressure.

As this chapter will show, not only were Moscow's demands and preconditions for withdrawal in 1986 similar to those issued in 1983, its approach to the Afghan problem was similar as well. Beginning in 1985 there was renewed emphasis on the four-party talks at Geneva which had previously stalled. From 1987 Moscow also undertook a renewed effort to stabilise the Kabul government, and to make it more self-reliant and acceptable to the Afghans. The new initiative, baptised "National Reconciliation," stressed reaching out to the clergy and to peasants, winning over elements of the opposition, and using Afghan traditions to secure legitimacy for the government. It was a case, as Yulii Vorontsov later recalled, of "doing everything possible to withdraw in good order."³

This is not to say that the 1985-88 period was just a repeat of 1982-83. Indeed, while the initiatives, plans and hopes were similar in the broad outline, there were significant differences. National Reconciliation attempted to go further and deeper, in terms of transforming the Kabul government, than anything undertaken between 1980 and 1985, and Moscow's efforts in Geneva showed more flexibility than similar efforts under Andropov. There was an effort, too, to change the *manner* of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, aimed at improving the DRA government's self reliance. And of course, Moscow initiated a key personnel change with a good deal of support within Afghanistan, replacing Babrak Karmal with Mohammed Najibullah.

In the end, these efforts proved insufficient, and in 1988 Moscow accepted a withdrawal on terms much less favourable than those it had initially sought. It is impossible to understand either the progress of the war between 1985-88, or the

³ Author's interview with Ambassador Yulii Vorontsov, Moscow, September 11, 2007.

progress of events after the withdrawal, without looking at Moscow's hopes and efforts with regard to what it could accomplish in Afghanistan.

Exit Karmal, Enter Najib

Moscow's goal in Afghanistan had always been to create a government stable enough to function without Soviet troops. Under Gorbachev this effort was renewed with greater force. When it became clear that few changes could be expected while Babrak Karmal remained in power, the Politburo sought to replace him. The replacement of Karmal became the first of several steps Moscow took between 1985 and 1987 in the hope of reforming the DRA government.

In March 1986 Babrak Karmal went to Moscow for a month of medical treatment. He arrived seemingly sure of his position at the top of the DRA-PDPA hierarchy, and of Soviet support for his position. However, upon his return he was edged out, and by the end of the year he had been completely removed from any role within the Afghan leadership. The reason for this abrupt change was that Moscow had decided, after six years of bombing the country in order to help prop up his rule, that Karmal was the wrong person for the job. Instead, the honour now passed to Mohammed Najibullah, nicknamed the "Ox" both for his physical strength and forceful personality. And it was this "Ox," Moscow hoped, that would help plough the exit road for Soviet troops.

Soviet leaders had decided to install Karmal because they saw him as a moderate and conciliatory figure, but soon grew disappointed with him. As we saw in chapter one, there were limitations to his efforts to stabilise the situation in the country and expand his party's control. For all his oratorical skills, Karmal proved indecisive, unable to push either his party or his country in any particular direction. Moscow should have known better: a profile compiled by Soviet military intelligence, the GRU, in December

1979, noted that Karmal was “a skilful orator” but “emotional, with a tendency towards generalization rather than concrete analysis. He has a poor command of economic problems, only interested in their general outline.”⁴ It was also rumoured that Karmal drank rather heavily, despite warnings from his Soviet advisers. In an interview with *Ogonyok* in 1989, Varennikov described him as “a demagogue of the highest class” who “deserved the trust neither of his own colleagues, nor of his people, nor of our advisers.”⁵

It is not clear at what point Moscow first began to seriously consider replacing Karmal. One interesting clue comes from the archives of the UN-Secretary General, which reveals that in 1982 the possibility of removing Karmal was discussed by Perez de Cuellar and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, although it is not clear how supportive the latter was of the idea.⁶ In any case, Soviet leaders had almost certainly considered the possibility of getting rid of Karmal before 1985. Indeed, it is possible that by 1983 or thereabouts there was a general agreement that Karmal would need to be replaced at some point.⁷

Ultimately, however, it was Gorbachev who pushed for Karmal’s dismissal. Gorbachev’s disapproval of Karmal was clear in October 1985, when the two had what seems to have been their first substantive discussion. Karmal’s face apparently grew dark when he was told that Soviet troops would withdraw. He tried to convince his patrons that a withdrawal would be more costly for them in the long run, saying “next

⁴ “GRU Dossier on B.Karmal,” 1979, in Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest’ Afgana*, 308-309.

⁵ Author’s interview with Ambassador Yulii Vorontsov, Moscow, September 11, 2007; See also *Washington Post* March 20, 1989; Varennikov’s interview with journalist Artem Borovik in *Ogonek*, March 1989, p.6-7; Plastun and Adrianov disagree with the assessment of Karmal given by Varennikov, Gromov, Liakhovskii, and others, stating that it was the attitude of Soviet advisers as well as the time that he had spent in opposition that limited his effectiveness as a leader. See Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki*, 70.

⁶ Gianni Picco to Cuellar, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, Box 9, Folder 96. UN officials may have been reacting to some unofficial expressions of discontent heard from Soviet representatives. Author’s interview with Selig Harisson, January 3, 2008.

⁷ Author’s interviews with Leonid Shebarshin, September 17, 2007 and Andrei Grachev, January 31, 2008. Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest’ Afgana*, 495.

time you will have to send in a million!”⁸ Gorbachev got the impression that Karmal expected Soviet troops to remain in Afghanistan indefinitely. If Gorbachev had any hope of progress during Karmal’s reign, that hope diminished after this meeting. At the next Politburo session after the meeting with Karmal, Gorbachev concluded his opening statement by saying “with or without Karmal we will follow this line firmly, which must in a minimally short time lead to our withdrawal from Afghanistan.”⁹

Although in the fall of 1985 Karmal did take some steps to implement Gorbachev’s recommendations, preparations were soon underway to replace him with Mohammed Najibullah. Najib, as he preferred to be known, was the son of a wealthy civil servant, graduate of the prestigious Habibia College¹⁰ and the medical faculty of Kabul University. Like Karmal, he joined the party at its creation and soon took charge of an underground university organization. After practicing medicine for several years, he turned to party work full time, joining the central committee in 1977, at the party’s “reunification.” His own exile during the period of Khalqi domination was to Yugoslavia, from where he returned in December 1979 to lead the State Information Service, KhAD, the secret police. In 1981 he entered the Politburo of the PDPA, where he took charge of a commission on tribal relations, and also became part of the defense council.¹¹

Najib had caught the eye of Soviet agents in Kabul as well as leaders back home. They were impressed, in part, by his ability to establish links with Pushtun tribal leaders. He was well known to Ustinov, Andropov, and Ponomarev, all of whom thought highly of him on similar grounds. Apparently at some point prior to 1983 they

⁸ B. Padishev, “Najibullah, president Afghanistana” *International Affairs* (Moscow) Jan. 1990, 20.

⁹ Cherniaev Diary, October 17, 1985, NSA.

¹⁰ A school set up under King Amanullah in the 1920s to educate the children of elites according to a western curriculum.

¹¹ Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* 127-128.

had already consulted former Khalqis, and come to the conclusion that the only viable replacement for Karmal, when the time came, would be Najib.¹²

Najib was neither the sole candidate to replace Karmal nor clearly the best choice. A GRU report from April 1986 pointed out that many in the PDPA leadership preferred Assadullah Sarwari, a Khalqi and head of the KhAD under Noor Taraki. Sarwari, the report suggested, was a better candidate for uniting the party as well as being able to balance Pushtun interests with those of Tajik, Uzbeks and others. Najib, by contrast, was a Pushtun nationalist, unlikely to reach out to non-Pushtuns.¹³ Some consideration was also given to General Abdul Kadyr, the military leader who sided with the PDPA in April 1978 and made the coup possible.¹⁴

It is not clear how much debate took place regarding Karmal's possible replacement. In all likelihood, such debate was minimal. Najib had been groomed for the leadership for several years by the KGB, was both a Pushtun and a Parchamist, and was believed to have excellent organizational skills. His promotion in November 1985 to secretary of the PDPA Central Committee, where his portfolio included managing relations with Pushtun tribes, is further testament to the determination to remove Karmal and to the fact that Najib was chosen as a replacement quickly and without much debate.¹⁵

In March 1986, when Babrak Karmal was invited to Moscow for discussions and for "health" reasons, Soviet leaders tried to convince him that he had to step down, that his health was poor and he should make room for someone younger. Apparently there was some awkwardness when Soviet doctors treating Karmal told him he was in

¹² Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* 60.

¹³ "Insinuations regarding changes in DRA leadership." GRU report, in Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest' Afgana* 532-534. This assessment would be proven correct later, when Najibullah proved reluctant to deal with the Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, whom the Soviet military believed was the most prominent commander with whom a deal could be made, preferring instead to reach out to Hekmatyar, a Pushtun seen as one of the more "extremist" leaders.

¹⁴ Author's interviews with Leonid Shebarshin, September 17, 2007.

¹⁵ Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* 127-128.

fine health.¹⁶ Karmal saw that he had little room to maneuver in Moscow and so did his best to be allowed to return to Kabul. He claimed to understand the situation and promised act differently and pay greater heed to Soviet recommendations.¹⁷

Karmal was allowed to return to Kabul on the condition that he step down as head of the party, remaining only Chairman of the Revolutionary Committee. In Moscow, he was not trusted to do this voluntarily and so Vladimir Kriuchkov, then head of intelligence at the KGB, was sent after him. According to available evidence, Karmal proved obstinate.¹⁸ In a lengthy and emotional monologue, he professed undying loyalty to Soviet leaders. A true Muslim, he explained, honored God, his prophet, and the four righteous caliphs. He proclaimed that his feelings to the Soviet Union and its leaders were close to this honour; it was, a principal foundation of his life. Kriuchkov persisted, insisting that Karmal's own colleagues wanted him out of the way. Finally Kriuchkov left, asking permission to return the next day.¹⁹ A few hours later, the Soviet Minister of Defense and the security services came to see Karmal and insisted he had to relinquish one of his posts. Finally, realizing he had no cards left to play, Karmal gave in.²⁰

Following the 18th Plenum of the PDPA, held in May 1986, Najib became the chairman of the PDPA Politburo as well as the Defense Council. The plenary session "granted Comrade Babrak Karmal's request that he be relieved of his duties as General Secretary of the PDPA Central Committee for health reasons."²¹ But Babrak Karmal still had influence and a good deal of support, and he used these to undermine Najib's position. Prior to the 2nd party conference in 1986, Karmal's supporters spread rumors that Najibullah would be removed and Karmal reinstated as general secretary. The

¹⁶ Author's interviews with Leonid Shebarshin, September 17, 2007.

¹⁷ Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 442-443; Mitrokhin and Andrew, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 416; Leonid Shebarshin *Ruka Moskvi* (Moscow, 2002), 229-231.

¹⁸ Shebarshin, *Ruka Moskvy*, 229-231.

¹⁹ Ibid, 232-236.

²⁰ Ibid, 236.

²¹ *Pravda*, May 5, 1986, *CDSP* Vol XXXVIII, No. 18, 22.

source of these rumors was the MGB (formerly KhAD), which contained, thanks to an earlier Soviet initiative, a core of people devoted to Karmal. The MGB disliked Najibullah because he supposedly aimed to “clean it up” whereas under Karmal its agents had a free hand.²²

Karmal’s maneuvering did not meet with much sympathy in Moscow. At first, Soviet leaders preferred to proceed cautiously in replacing him completely. They must have realised that Karmal had significant support from sections of the party. Furthermore, they had been his steadfast supporters for six years – if they abandoned him too quickly now their patronage of other Afghan leaders would count for less. In September 1986 Gorbachev directed Yulii Vorontsov, the new Soviet ambassador, to ask Najib not to rush with firing Karmal.²³ All the while Najib was earning quite a bit of respect and even loyalty among his Soviet interlocutors. A note submitted to the Politburo in November 1986 by Dobrynin, Sokolov, Shevardnadze, and Chebrikov noted “it is clear that he is disposed to finding real approaches to the problem [of National Reconciliation]. He needs our support in this, especially since indeed far from everyone in the PDPA accepts the idea of reconciliation.” For his part, Najibullah urged Moscow to support him in ousting Karmal completely, claiming that Karmal had “abandoned Party and government work,” and occupied himself with “fault finding” and “speaking out against National Reconciliation.”²⁴

The support was granted. At a meeting on November 13, 1986 the Politburo decided that Najibullah had to be given more leeway to act independently and Karmal had to be removed completely.²⁵ Several Politburo members spoke out in favour of Najib, including Gromyko, KGB Chief Chebrikov, Shevardnadze, and Yulii Vorontsov. While Gromyko spoke in favour of leaving Karmal as a figurehead, others, including

²² Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* 80.

²³ Record of Politburo Meeting, September 25, 1986, GFA PB 1986, p.171.

²⁴ CC CPSU Memorandum, November 13, 1986 *CWIHP Afghanistan*.

²⁵ Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* 73.

Dobrynin, said that Karmal had to go.²⁶ The November PDPA plenum relieved Karmal of his last remaining post. He soon left for Moscow, where he was given a state-owned apartment and *dacha*. Although he returned to Afghanistan in 1989, he never regained influence, and died in Moscow in 1996.

Although there may have been other candidates, Najib was ultimately acceptable to everyone in Moscow as well as Soviet officers and advisers in Afghanistan. Even the military tended to see him as a highly capable organiser with whom they could work.²⁷ Throughout 1987 Politburo members felt that in Najib they had found the right man for the job. "He creates a very good impression," Shevardnadze said after meeting him in January 1987, "he is taking the initiative in his own hands."²⁸

Najib impressed Soviet leaders as a serious, pragmatic politician who understood the Soviet desire and intention to disengage from Afghanistan. With Najib at the helm, Soviet leaders wanted to give their efforts some more time to bear fruit. Over time this faith in Najib came to have a complicated and even dangerous effect on Soviet perceptions. Vadim Kirpichenko, Deputy Chief of the KGB First Directorate, later wrote that Najibullah's success in establishing more control within Kabul and some sectors of the government led them to believe that they had found a solution that could be replicated everywhere in Afghanistan:

Faith in Najibullah and in the dependability of his security organs created illusions on the part of the KGB leadership...these dangerous illusions, the unwillingness to look truth in the face delayed the withdrawal of Soviet troops by several years.²⁹

For Shevardnadze and Vladimir Kriuchkov, director of intelligence and later KGB chief, faith in and commitment to Najibullah came to define Moscow's relationship in Afghanistan.

²⁶ Record of Politburo meeting, November 13, 1986, in *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente*, 434-450.

²⁷ Author's interview with General Aleksandr Liakhovskii, Moscow, July 2006.

²⁸ Notes of Politburo Meeting, January 21, 1987, GFA PB 987, 60.

²⁹ Vadim Kirpichenko, *Razvedka: Litsa i Lichnosti* [Intelligence: Faces and Personalities] (Moscow: Geia 1998), 362.

Gorbachev supported changing the Afghan leadership because he believed that this would improve the situation there and allow him to bring the troops home. Trying to draw lessons from Afghan history, Moscow backed an ethnic Pushtun who, they hoped, would emerge as a friendly yet independent strong-man.³⁰ Najib was a communist, but undogmatic and fiercely proud of his Pushtun identity. His succession reflected the crucial role the KGB continued to play in Soviet-Afghan policy, one that would become even more obvious after the withdrawal.³¹ Later events would show that whatever his qualities as a leader (and these were considerable), he was a far from ideal candidate to lead Afghanistan in National Reconciliation. His desire to hold on to power and his distrust of non-Pushtun politicians led him to reject alliances and truces favoured by his Soviet advisers. With the support of the KGB and key figures in Moscow, however, Najib learned he could usually get his way.

National Reconciliation

The purpose of installing a new Afghan Communist leader, of course, was so that he could make it possible for Soviet troops to leave. Gorbachev and many of his colleagues still believed that they could create a successful government in Afghanistan as long as the regime gave up any effort to transform Afghanistan along Marxist lines and focused instead on gaining legitimacy through traditional Afghan institutions. In 1987 Moscow began changing its approach to counter-insurgency in Afghanistan. Previously, the emphasis had been on winning over the population through economic incentives and organizational work. The new initiative continued that policy but placed a much greater emphasis on pacification through winning over rebel commanders.

³⁰ This came up repeatedly in my conversations with former Soviet officials. The parallel they had in mind was generally Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, (ruled 1880-1901). Although he had to accept British control of Afghanistan's foreign affairs, he is remembered as a strong leader who did much to strengthen centralise authority, subdue rebellious tribes, and limit the power of traditional chiefs.

³¹ See chapter 5.

The Policy of National Reconciliation was planned and written by Soviet advisers, with representatives of the military, foreign ministry, and KGB all taking part.³² National Reconciliation was largely what Moscow had been preaching, and the PDPA had theoretically been doing, since 1980. The principles of what Moscow urged Karmal and Najib to do were quite similar. Gorbachev's injunctions to Karmal in October 1985, cited above, were part of a continuing leitmotif: "Widen your social base. Learn, at last, to lead a dialogue with the tribes, to use the particularities [of the situation]. Try to get the support of the clergy. Give up the leftist bend in economics. Learn to organise the support of the private sector..."³³

Broadly speaking, National Reconciliation embodied not just a set of guidelines for Afghan leaders, but a set of instructions for Soviet agencies as well. Some of these reflected newer approaches to old efforts – the KGB, the ministry of the interior, and the ministry of defense, for example, were tasked with engaging with frontier tribes to help close the border with Pakistan. Both the KGB and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were to take part in encouraging opposition groups to come over to the government side. Overall, a dozen Soviet ministries, party committees and government offices were drafted to take part in National Reconciliation.³⁴

One of the reasons Moscow replaced Karmal was fear that he would be resistant to this new policy. Najib, who had first gained the support of the KGB, quickly won over the rest of the Soviet leadership and senior officials working on Afghanistan. He made his first official trip to Moscow as the uncontested leader of the PDPA in December 1986. The Politburo protocol assessing his visit noted that Najib could be expected to begin a major restructuring of his party and government: "the ideas

³² The term itself was borrowed from the process taking place in post-Franco Spain at the time and apparently the christening took place on a flight from Kabul to Moscow. Author's interviews with Leonid Shebarshin, September 17, 2007.

³³ Aleksandr-Agentov quoted in Gai & Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, 367.

³⁴ "Regarding the talks with Comrade Najib," Politburo Protocol, December 25, 1986, Volkogonov Papers, Box 26/Reel 17.

expressed oriented the Afghan government towards a *perestroika* in the shortest possible term in all spheres of party-government, military, political and economic activity, towards a decisive turn in practical policy and in the direction of achieving national reconciliation in Afghanistan.” Najib was the person to carry this out, as he had shown that his understanding of “the necessity of *perestroika*, moving towards new thinking, taking and fulfilling decisions directed at settling the Afghan problem through political means.”³⁵

The development of National Reconciliation within Afghanistan is a separate topic that has been developed elsewhere and will not be dealt with in depth here.³⁶ However, it is worth looking both at what National Reconciliation was supposed to achieve from Moscow’s point of view, and how radically Moscow began to change the nature of its involvement in Afghanistan at this time. Part of Moscow’s strategy in late 1986 and 1987 focused on soliciting more funds and support from its Eastern European allies, an appeal reflected in the documentary record that has become available in those countries’ archives. For example, Bulgaria, which had already provided many millions in aid, agreed in 1987 “to respond to the Soviet comrades’ proposal, and respond to PDPA’s appeal to provide assistance to the PDPA’s policy of national reconciliation in Afghanistan.”³⁷ Moscow made similar appeals to other Eastern European allies, all in the name of “furthering the goal of National Reconciliation.”³⁸

The biggest aid package, of course, came from the USSR itself. In February 1987 the Politburo agreed to provide 950 million rubles worth of gratis aid, more than the USSR had ever given to any one country.³⁹ This was as much a political as an economic move. Najib needed to show supporters and rivals in the DRA that the Soviet

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See, in particular, Giustozzi, *War, Politics, and Society in Afghanistan*, and Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (1995), 146-175.

³⁷ Memorandum of the CC BCP Department of Foreign Policy and International Relations, CWIHP Documents on Afghanistan.

³⁸ Presidium of the CC of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, 35th session, May 6, 1987, CWIHP

³⁹ Politburo Meeting, February 28, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 125.

Union would support him.⁴⁰ In March, Gorbachev also promised Najib that after the withdrawal had taken place absolutely all of the military infrastructure would be handed over to the DRA armed forces to help them protect the “independence and sovereignty” of Afghanistan. Some of the economic aid would even go to helping Najib develop the private sector, which was considered a necessary precondition for the success of National Reconciliation.⁴¹

Moscow also sought to make Afghan politicians more independent and to change the way Soviet advisers there operated. As discussed in Chapter One, Moscow’s policy had fallen into a trap: on the one hand, the presence of advisers seemed to discourage Afghan officials from taking any initiative either in decision-making or in policy execution. Readers will remember that an assessment of the PDPA from 1983 noted that this tendency reached the highest levels of the party.⁴² On the other hand, the PDPA’s seeming impotence only encouraged Moscow to send more advisers.

The domination of advisors in the Afghan party and government was thorough. Najibullah later described a typical meeting of the Afghan council of ministers:

We sit down at the table. Each minister comes with his own [Soviet] advisor. The meeting begins, the discussion becomes heated, and gradually the advisors come closer and closer to the table, so accordingly our people move away, and eventually only the advisors are left at the table.⁴³

Even after Najibullah replaced Karmal, Soviet advisors continued to dominate the Afghan government. Soviet advisors were “everywhere, absolutely everywhere. It was the worst sort of colonial politics. Terrible.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ See Rubin, *Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 150, for the importance of Gorbachev’s support for Najib’s battle for power within the PDPA.

⁴¹ Politburo Meeting, February 28, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 124; Notes for telephone conversation with Comrade Najib, March 3, 1987, GFA Document #577.

⁴² “Report on the Condition of the PDPA” 1983, Personal Archive of Marshal Sokolov. Provided to the author by General Aleksandr Liakhovskii.

⁴³ B. Padishev, “Najibullah, president Afghanistana” *International Affairs* (Moscow) Jan. 1990, 23

⁴⁴ Author’s interview with Ambassador Yulii Vorontsov, Moscow, September 11, 2007

Even senior Soviet figures, like Ambassador Fiakrat Tabeev, were often guilty of imperiousness in their dealings with Afghans. A party man who had spent twenty years as the head of the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Republic, he had been appointed in 1979 in part because of his Muslim background.⁴⁵ Over the years Tabeev had begun acting as a “governor-general,” and had apparently been telling the newly promoted Najib, “I made you a general secretary.” Such behaviour was inconsistent with Moscow’s emphasis on Afghan self-reliance.⁴⁶ Several months later he was replaced by Yulii Vorontsov, a career diplomat with experience in South Asia.⁴⁷

Vorontsov’s first task was to coordinate the work of the various institutions involved in Afghanistan – the KGB, the military, the Foreign Ministry, and the political advisors. Gorbachev was aware that there was a difficult relationship among these institutions and that their recommendations often conflicted. Vorontsov was given a “mandate” to coordinate their work and to provide the Politburo with recommendations on which all parties could agree. It was tough work – the representatives of these various institutions could become quite forceful in their disagreements. But the “mandate from the General Secretary” helped.⁴⁸

The fractiousness of the PDPA by this point was not limited to the Khalq/Parcham split, but included intra-faction groupings that formed around the more senior members. Aside from the Khalq/Parcham divide, there were groups loyal to individual leaders: “Karmalists” “Nurovists” “Wakilists” and “Keshtmandists.” There were also those loyal to the deposed Hafizullah Amin, although most of these were in prison until 1988. Many party leaders viewed National Reconciliation negatively because they believed their patrons’ position would not be secure in a coalition

⁴⁵ Interview with Tabeev, December 2000 http://www.amorozov.ru/inviews/tabeev_fikryat/ Accessed February 3, 2008.

⁴⁶ Politburo Session, May 29, 1986 GFA PB 1986, 75.

⁴⁷ Prior to 1986, Vorontsov had enjoyed a long career at the top of the Soviet diplomatic hierarchy. After earning his degree at the elite MGIMO, he served for many years in the Soviet mission to the UN, then as ambassador to India. In Afghanistan he was charged not only with overseeing the implementation of national reconciliation, but also changing the way Soviet advisors operated.

⁴⁸ Author’s interview with Ambassador Yulii Vorontsov, Moscow, September 11, 2007.

government.⁴⁹ Indeed, the party, reconstituted as a single entity only through KGB efforts, would probably have fallen apart without Soviet influence. As late as December 1987 the head of Afghan army propaganda said that a formal split would almost be preferable, with each wing choosing its own leader and Najibullah remaining as president.⁵⁰

Soviet policy in 1986 and 1987 aimed to address these problems. Measures were taken in the belief that without them the Afghan government would never be able to stand “on its own two legs.” Many advisers were withdrawn in 1986 and there was an effort to change the way relations with Afghans at every level were conducted. Experience showed that this would be far from easy, and the attitudes of Soviet advisors as well as the fractiousness among institution continued to be a problem. In May 1986 the Politburo had discussed removing Tabeev so that relations with the Afghan leadership could be placed on a different footing; in June and July the Politburo moved to recall many the advisers and specialists.⁵¹

In 1986 and particularly in 1987, as Gorbachev’s domestic reforms seemed to stall, a new leitmotif entered Politburo meetings. Gorbachev and the reformers were frustrated that even as new approaches were adopted at the top of the Soviet hierarchy, the wheels of change ground slowly closer to the bottom, at the level of lower party organs, ministries, and enterprises. There were similar difficulties in reforming the way Afghan policy was conducted. Lack of unity in the PDPA made it difficult to guide the party toward a new path. Soviet military and political advisers also seemed slow to adopt the new approach that was supposed to bolster Afghan independence.

Concurrently, the Policy of National Reconciliation did not seem to have much support

⁴⁹ Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* 78-79; “Record of conversation with Colonel Mohammed Sarwari,” December 18, 1987, Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki*, 203-204.

⁵⁰ Record of conversation with Major General A. Wakhed, December 1, 1987, in Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki*, 201.

⁵¹ Records of Politburo Discussions, May 25 and June 11, 1987. GFA PB 1986.

among lower level PDPA cadres. In the view of Soviet officials, the Afghan communists avoided participating in PNR, not directing resources provided by Moscow to the population. At the same time, afraid of being punished for their party activity, governors, mayors, chairmen used whatever clan, family, or tribal ties they had to ensure their own safety.⁵² Over a year after Najib had taken the top party post and Moscow had begun to recall its advisers, Shevardnadze was forced to admit “in the work of our advisers [in Afghanistan], despite our instructions and our discussion at the Politburo, there has been no turning point.”⁵³

In backing Najib the Soviet government hoped it had found a strong leader who would take charge of the party and government and not be seen by his own people as a puppet of Moscow. Yet Najib’s draft speech to the 19th PDPA plenum, written with much input from Soviet advisers, was full of references to Gorbachev’s “advice, recommendation and approval.” As Cherniaev wrote to Gorbachev, this was contradictory to what the Soviet Union was trying to do in Afghanistan, since “one of the factors of a decisive change in Afghanistan and the widening of the social base in Afghanistan is a demonstration of ‘sovereignty’ of decisions taken by the new leadership and policies it conducts.”⁵⁴

Even though National Reconciliation was supposed to attract opposition leaders to the regime, the character of Soviet and government propaganda changed little. Throughout the war, the Soviet army had an uneasy relationship with the population and the DRA. In August 1987, seven months after the start of PNR, Colonel Shershnev, who had argued for a change in the Soviet army’s approach as early as 1984, called together the entire propaganda division of the main political directorate (GlavPU) of the Afghan Army and suggested asking the “higher-ups” to stop calling the opposition a “band of killers,” “mercenaries of imperialism” “skull-bashers,” and so forth. Only in

⁵² Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* 76.

⁵³ Records of Politburo Discussions, June 1m 1987. GFA PB 1986, 342.

⁵⁴ Cherniaev Memorandum to Gorbachev, June 18, 1986. GFA Document 369.

February 1988 did a response come from Glav PU saying that “from now on the counterrevolution would be called the opposition instead of ‘armed band of hirelings...It took over a year after the proclamation of PNR for our military leadership to start calling the mujaheddin “opposition,” which is what it was.”⁵⁵ For Soviet officers who needed to lead their soldiers into battle, this was a war to be fought and enemy to be crushed, not a political project to unite enemies.

Soviet military officers sometimes seemed unwilling to alter their strategies radically to bring them in line with the principles of Moscow’s new policy. In 1987 Plastun tried to convince Colonel-General Vostrov that military attacks on Kandahar province were counterproductive. He chided Plastun: “To hell with national reconciliation. Warriors receive medals on their chest and stars on their epaulettes and money not for reconciliation, but for conducting combat operations. This is something that you, expert, did not understand!”⁵⁶ Although not all officers took such a hawkish approach, the military seemed reluctant to do its part in political work. In March 1988 its most senior officer, General Valentin Varennikov, complained, “Our army is not just a warrior with a sword. It is a political warrior...over the last year meetings between Soviet and Afghan soldiers have ceased, as have those of Soviet soldiers and the population.”⁵⁷

Yet if the army often failed to grasp the political significance of its operations, senior commanders were very active in efforts to co-opt certain opposition commanders. Along with Soviet diplomats, they tried to help the National Reconciliation process along by opening their own talks with leaders of the opposition. One leader that Soviet military leaders and some diplomats thought was particularly promising was Ahmad

⁵⁵ Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* 83-84.

⁵⁶ Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* 83.

⁵⁷ Meeting of Political Advisors, March 9, 1988 in Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki*, 211.

Shah Massoud, the Tajik “Lion of the Panjsher Valley.”⁵⁸ The military had been successful in concluding a cease-fire with him on several occasions, which in turn had kept the northern area fairly quiet from 1981-83 period. Following the announcement of National Reconciliation, Massoud sent a feeler to representatives of the DRA government in the Panjsher valley, but the attempts at talks collapsed when Kabul insisted that he lay down his arms. Nevertheless, Massoud instructed his forces to maintain a virtual cease-fire and to undertake no offensive action.⁵⁹ In October 1987 General Varennikov succeeded in opening discussions with the Tajik commander, although these collapsed when news of the contact became public.⁶⁰

Efforts to work with Massoud were not limited to the military. Soviet Ambassador to Kabul Yulii Vorontsov, who had been instructed to develop such contacts as part of his contribution to National Reconciliation, studied Massoud’s biography and speeches and concluded that his support was essential. Vorontsov was particularly impressed that Massoud seemed interested in, and capable of, organizing a development program, building schools, hospitals, and roads in his area. Vorontsov wrote to Moscow suggesting that the Soviet Union could offer to help Massoud financially in developing his region if he would ally with Kabul and received a favourable response. Vorontsov was able to arrange a meeting with Massoud, but it was sabotaged at the last minute. Apparently an Afghan Air Force jet had bombed the Panjsher valley, causing Massoud to call off the meeting. The Soviet command had not been informed of the attack - once again Kabul had sabotaged a Soviet effort to open contacts with Massoud.⁶¹ Nevertheless, Soviet efforts to make contact with Massoud

⁵⁸ For an excellent study of Massoud’s emergence as a major resistance leader, see Peter B. DeNeuville *Ahmad Shah Massoud and the genesis of the nationalist anti-Communist movement in Northeastern Afghanistan, 1969-1979* Thesis(PhD)--King’s College London, 2006.

⁵⁹ Aleksandr Liakhovskii and Viacheslav Nekrasov *Citizen, Politician, Warrior: The Memory of Ahmad Shah Massoud* (Moscow, 2007), 153.

⁶⁰ Liakhovskii and Nekrasov, *Citizen, Politician, Warrior*, 156-157. Massoud competed for resources and influence within the *mujahadeen* leadership, and was thus anxious that such contacts be conducted clandestinely.

⁶¹ Author’s interview with Ambassador Yulii Vorontsov, Moscow, September 11, 2007.

continued, and would become particularly important in 1988 when the 40th army was withdrawing through Massoud's territory.

It was not only the military that had trouble radically changing the course of Soviet-Afghan relations. At every level there were vestiges of the "colonial" approach that had taken root since 1980. Although Tabeev had been removed, and there was much talk about making Najib "more independent," it was much harder to cleanse the relationship of all manifestations of imperialism. General Ziarmal, chief of the political directorate of the DRA army, complained in January 1988 that the practice of having Najibullah meet the Soviet minister of foreign affairs at Kabul airport on his visits there only underlined the colonial nature of their relationship. Perhaps this seemed like a minor point, Ziarmal said, but "in the eyes of international opinion makes Afghanistan a satellite of the USSR." Ziarmal went on to complain that even the Soviet press did not take this point seriously: "Shevardnadze for us is a comrade, but Najib for Shevardnadze is – your Excellency the President of the Republic of Afghanistan. The Soviet press needs to speak about him as a president, not the general secretary of the PDPA."⁶²

Soviet failures in this regard only compounded the enormous difficulties faced by Najib in trying to create legitimacy for his regime. The first, of course, was that of party unity, already discussed above. In addition Najib had to face the residual support for Karmal in the party and government. On the day of Najib's election, teachers and students had marched in support of Karmal in Kabul. Pro-Karmal sentiment was strong even in the KhAD, even though Najib who had headed the organization before taking the reigns of the country. At the July 10, 1986 CC meeting, Najib added 44 members to

⁶² Record of Conversation with General-Major Ziarmal, January 4, 1988, Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* 226-227.

the Central Committee, but it took over two years to purge the Politburo and the Central committee fully of Karmal's allies.⁶³

In 1983 Andropov had spoken of scaling back Soviet efforts in Third World countries, insisting that those countries had to depend not on Soviet aid and advice but on "work by their own people, and of a correct policy on the part of their leadership."⁶⁴ In Afghanistan this principle was finally becoming policy. Soviet advisers were being pulled back and the regime was encouraged to be more independent. Rather than relying on Soviet "state-building," the stabilization effort would now rely on an Afghan leader who would, it was hoped, patch together a government with enough non-PDPA and opposition support to be legitimate. The "Afghanization" of the war had begun, even if its progress did not quite match the expectations of its planners.

The presence and protection of Soviet troops allowed the PDPA leaders to move slowly with regard to National Reconciliation. The pull-back, as well as disagreement among Soviet officials regarding what National Reconciliation meant and how it should be implemented, deprived Moscow of leverage over its clients. Najibullah found ways to sabotage Soviet-led outreach when he felt it suited his interests. After the Soviets withdrew the PDPA took much more courageous steps in terms of opening up the government and society, establishing links with tribal leaders, and shedding its communist image, all of which helped the DRA government survive into 1992. As we will see below, however, by mid-1987 Soviet leaders realised that the Policy of National Reconciliation would not be able to guarantee the survival of a friendly regime in the near term, and Moscow would have to look elsewhere if it wanted to bring its troops home.

⁶³ Rubin, *Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 150.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Patnam, "Reagan, Gorbachev and the emergence of 'New Political Thinking,'" 588.

A return to diplomacy

The diplomatic effort to end the Afghan war, which had shown great promise in 1982-83 but which had largely stalled by the time of Andropov's death, was restarted several months after Gorbachev came to power. By the end of the summer negotiators had made significant headway, but once again the lack of a Soviet-American dialogue limited further progress. However, Soviet diplomacy was not focused merely on the UN-sponsored Geneva talks. In the context of National Reconciliation, the KGB, the military, and the Foreign Ministry all became proactive in making contacts with opposition leaders with the ultimate goal of enticing them to join the government.

Gorbachev turned to the Geneva process because restarting the talks was the first logical step toward untying the Afghan knot. Indeed, the first Geneva round of the Gorbachev era were quite promising. Prior to the June 1985 talks, Soviet interlocutors managed to convince the Afghans to affirm that withdrawal and cut-off of aid would take place simultaneously. In May Moscow had sent strong signals to Cuellar that they were interested in the new round. The Soviet-Afghan side also made it clear that it was prepared to link withdrawal formally to the entire package, "which they had refused to admit for the last two years, i.e., since Mr. Andropov's exit from the political scene."⁶⁵ In Geneva, the negotiators were also able to produce an agreement on international guarantees.⁶⁶

On the whole, however, diplomacy continued to be difficult. While Moscow seemed to be more interested in dialog, the US was sceptical that there had been a real change in policy. US Undersecretary of State Michael Aramost told UN mediator Diego Cordovez that he had noticed "a lot of hints of a different Soviet style" but not a change in substance. Both Moscow and Kabul continued to insist that no real progress on the

⁶⁵ Picco to Cuellar, "Update on the negotiations in Afghanistan," June 14, 1985. UN Secretary General's Files, S-1024-3-1.

⁶⁶ Barnett R. Rubin *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed State* (1995), 70-71.

actual issue of withdrawal could take place until the Pakistani government was ready to sit down with the DRA.⁶⁷

By August 1985, the texts of the first three instruments, including interference, the return of refugees, and international guarantees, had been completed. The main outstanding issues were the status of the Kabul government, which Pakistan did not want to legitimise, and the time-frame for the withdrawal.⁶⁸ Yet the August round of the Geneva talks began with a stand-off about the format. Shah Mohammed Dost, the Afghan foreign minister, insisted that if Pakistan continued to refuse direct talks, he was prepared to wait “two or three years” before continuing negotiations. Ultimately the entire round was restricted to discussion of format issues and a review of the negotiations, an issue which frustrated UN officials as well as the Pakistanis greatly.⁶⁹ Throughout the fall Cordovez and Cuellar tried to convince Kabul and Moscow that having a procedural impasse at that point would discredit the entire Geneva process. In New York, Foreign Minister Dost continued to press for direct talks between Kabul and Pakistan, arguing that Islamabad’s refusal showed “that Pakistan did not really want a settlement.”⁷⁰

US-Soviet discussion on Afghanistan moved no faster. The decline in US-Soviet relations in the fall of 1983 had been a major factor in the Geneva process stalling in the first place. In June US and Soviet officials met for the first time to discuss the Afghan situation directly. The new Soviet leader was looking to move the relationship beyond the stalemate of the previous five years; Reagan had already moved beyond his own hawkish rhetoric and was interested in engagement with Moscow.⁷¹ The first

⁶⁷ Harrison and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 214.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 216. Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan* 70-71.

⁶⁹ Cordovez to Cuellar, September 27, 1985; Record of meeting between Dost and Cuellar, September 28, 1985; Cordovez to Cuellar, October 31, 1985. UN Secretary General’s Files, S-1024-3-1.

⁷⁰ Record of conversation between Cuellar and Dost, November 1, 1985. UN Secretary General’s Files, S-1024-3-1.

⁷¹ Beth A Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press), 2-5.

Gorbachev-Reagan summit seemed like a good opportunity to commence a US-Soviet dialogue on Afghanistan at the highest level.

US officials came away from the Reagan-Gorbachev Geneva Summit feeling that the Soviet attitude was indeed changing. The White House spokesman told journalist Dan Oberdorfer that the US had felt “something new” in Soviet policy, while the *New York Times* reported that “Mr. Reagan came away convinced that Mr. Gorbachev was looking for a diplomatic solution of the conflict in Afghanistan.”⁷² As we saw in Chapter 2, however, this did not yet translate into real bilateral discussions on the Afghan problem. In fact, the December 1985 round of the Geneva talks on Afghanistan proved to be the most frustrating of all. Despite renewed interest in diplomacy, neither Dost nor his Soviet interlocutor, Nikolai Kozyrev, showed any flexibility. In February 1986 Cordovez travelled to Moscow, where he met with Shevardnadze and Georgii Kornienko. Shevardnadze seemed to promise “his help to break the deadlock.” The round that took place after Karmal’s replacement was more successful, with some progress on the time-frame issue. Still, US officials came away unimpressed. To them, the USSR did not seem genuinely interested in disengaging.⁷³

Gorbachev did not yet trust the Americans sufficiently to engage with them directly and overcome the hurdles that had stalled the Geneva talks during Andropov’s tenure. Equally important was that Moscow was just embarking on the process that would become National Reconciliation and an overhaul of its efforts within Afghanistan. For as long as Soviet officials held out hope that these efforts would pay dividends, diplomatic efforts continued to be primarily exploratory. At the same time Soviet interest in the Geneva process was genuine, and, throughout 1986, Moscow continued to look for ways to push it along. The February 1986 “bleeding wound”

⁷² Harrison and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 219.

⁷³ Harisson and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 220-241.

comment was only the first of a series of calculated comments and decisions made to signal Moscow's willingness to seek a diplomatic solution.

With the Geneva talks stalled, Moscow wanted to send another signal, one that showed the Soviet Union was serious about disengagement without weakening its bargaining position. At the end of June, following another unsuccessful Geneva round, the Politburo considered the possibility of withdrawing some troops. So far, Gorbachev noted, the effort to find a political settlement had not been working, the US seemed uninterested and was "picking on every little thing." Maybe the thing to do was to withdraw five to ten thousand troops.⁷⁴ Two weeks later the Politburo approved a proposal to remove 8000 personnel to show "that the USSR is not going to stay in Afghanistan and did not want 'access to warm waters.'"⁷⁵ To underline the importance of this signal, Gorbachev announced the withdrawal during a major speech in Vladivostok in July.⁷⁶ In a speech often cited by policy-makers and historians as a turning point in Soviet relations with East Asia, Gorbachev highlighted the Soviet desire to get out of Afghanistan and the decision to withdraw six regiments "by agreement with the DRA."

In taking such a serious step, of which we previously informed interested governments, including Pakistan, the Soviet Union aims to speed up the political settlement, to give it another push. This also comes [from the desire] that those who organise and carry out the military intervention against the DRA will understand and evaluate correctly this step. The response should be the end of such interference...⁷⁷

By the middle of 1986 all the textual issues regarding the Geneva Accords had been resolved and discussions regarding a time-frame for the withdrawal were becoming more concrete. Having supported a change of leadership and promoted

⁷⁴ Politburo Notes, June 28, 1986, GFA PB 1986.

⁷⁵ Politburo Notes, July 11, 1986, GFA PB 1986, 129.

⁷⁶ Defense Minister Sergei Sokolov supported the decision, pointed out "we have experience: in 1980 we withdrew three divisions, but did not play it politically." Politburo Notes, July 11, 1986, GFA PB 1986, 129.

⁷⁷ "Speech on the occasion of Vladivostok being given the Order of Lenin." Mikhail Gorbachev *Speeches*, Vol. 4, 10-11; *Pravda* July 29, 1986, p.1-3 in CDSR Vol XXXVIII no. 30, p.8.

National Reconciliation, however, Moscow began following a separate diplomatic track, at once a part of and separate from the Geneva talks being carried on by Cordovez. As Riaz Khan, the Pakistani negotiator, put it, “the Soviets linked withdrawal to progress in achieving political reconciliation inside Afghanistan, thus forcing the negotiating process into an entirely new arena.”⁷⁸

Soviet diplomacy was not limited to the Geneva process. Moscow placed increasing emphasis on opening a dialogue directly with Pakistan, a likely player in any effort at reconciliation. At the end of September 1986 the Politburo discussed conducting a “secret exchange of ideas” with Pakistan on the possibility of expanding the Kabul government by inviting émigrés to participate.⁷⁹ These conversations began to expand towards the end of 1986. At the end of September, Shevardnadze and Pakistani Foreign Minister Yakub Khan met in New York. That same month the Pakistani Foreign Ministry took note of a statement made in an informal setting by Georgii Arbatov to the effect that Najib would have to accept refugees and some mujahideen in his government. The most productive discussions between Pakistani and Soviet officials began in December, when Yulii Vorontsov invited Foreign Secretary Abdul Sattar to Moscow. Vorontsov explained the forthcoming National Reconciliation plan and told Sattar that the Soviet Union had firmly decided to withdraw, but that a “cooling off” period was required to avoid bloodshed. During that period various Afghan parties could observe a cease-fire and engage in discussions.⁸⁰

Throughout 1987, Moscow tried to use its new ties with Pakistan to promote National Reconciliation, all the while insisting that the final success of the Geneva accords was linked to progress on the “second track.” At the end of January 1987 Deputy Foreign Minister Anatolii Kovalev, travelled to Islamabad to meet with senior

⁷⁸ Riaz M. Khan *Untying the Afghan Knot: Negotiating Soviet Withdrawal* (Durham, 1991), 145.

⁷⁹ Politburo Notes, September 25, 1986, GFA PB 1986, 171. From 1980-1984, Soviet-Pakistani contacts mostly took place before United Nations General Assembly sessions, but even these were discontinued in 1984. Khan *Untying the Afghan Knot*, 180.

⁸⁰ Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot*, 180-181.

officials and the president, Zia ul Haq. The conversations that took place were unprecedented, and they also revealed the gap that remained between Soviet and Pakistani positions.⁸¹ Kovalev said that “winds of change were sweeping across the Soviet Union” which made it all the more imperative to untie the Afghan knot. But he also continued to insist that National Reconciliation had to be linked to withdrawal, and that it had to take place under Najibullah. The Pakistani idea, a neutral interim government not headed by anyone associated with the present regime, was unacceptable to Moscow.⁸²

The next month Pakistani officials travelled to Moscow, meeting there with Shevardnadze and others. Prior to departure, Pakistan had been able to obtain some negotiating positions from a reluctant alliance group. While the alliance made it clear that they were willing to pursue a non-aligned Islamic foreign policy and provide safe passage during the withdrawal, they also insisted on direct negotiations with the USSR. The Soviets, sensitive to Afghan opposition to such direct talks which legitimised the opposition’s claim to power, could not agree to this. Although Shevardnadze did not completely reject the Pakistani idea of bringing back the King to head a government, the meetings in Moscow did not move far beyond what had already become clear the previous month in Pakistan: the Soviet Union was not prepared to see a coalition government headed by someone from outside the PDPA.⁸³

Moscow’s efforts to re-open diplomacy in the summer of 1985 produced a level of dialogue on Afghanistan not seen during the course of the entire war. The decision to engage with Pakistan was particularly important in this regard. Nevertheless, Moscow’s commitment to leaving behind a PDPA-led, and increasingly, Najib-led government in Kabul meant that an enormous gap remained between the Soviet position and the US-

⁸¹ Pakistani interlocutors had consulted the “Alliance of Seven” leaders in Peshawar prior to the meeting, and would do so again before Pakistani officials travelled to Moscow at the end of February.

⁸² Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot*, 191-194.

⁸³ Ibid, 197-199.

Pakistani one. The US reluctance to respond positively to Soviet “signals,” such as the “bleeding wound” speech or the withdrawal of six divisions in 1986 contributed to the stalemate.

Disappointment

By early 1987 Soviet leaders had started to realize that the situation in Afghanistan was worse than they had thought when they replaced Karmal. The economy was ruined, Najib was still isolated in the Kabul government, and a withdrawal was no closer than it had been in October 1985. The term discussed for withdrawal in January and February 1987, two years, was almost the same as the one Gorbachev was calling for a year and a half *earlier*, after Karmal’s visit. The year became a crucial turning point in the war because month by month Moscow realised the depth of the Afghan problem from which, to some extent, it had been shielded before. Even more importantly, Soviet leaders were becoming aware that their plans for saving the DRA government, which had been planned in 1986, were insufficient.

Shevardnadze and Dobrynin travelled to Kabul soon after Najib’s visit to Moscow in December 1986. Upon their return, Shevardnadze delivered a devastating report on Soviet activity there to the Politburo:

Of friendly feeling to the Soviet people, which had existed in Afghanistan for decades, there is little left. Many people have died, and not all of them were bandits. Not one problem has been solved in favour of the peasantry. In essence, we fought against the peasantry. The state apparatus is functioning poorly. Our advice and help is ineffective...everything that we have done and are doing is incompatible with the moral character of our country.⁸⁴

What is striking about these meeting is how different they are from the discussions that took place before 1985. Euphemisms and comments regarding “significant progress despite certain difficulties” were noticeably absent. Shevardnadze was not the only one

⁸⁴ Politburo meeting, January 21, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 60.

to speak up in this way. Marshal Sokolov noted “the military situation has become worse of late. Incidents of bases being shelled have gone up...such a war cannot be won through military means.” Nikolai Ryzhkov, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, noted that for the first time the information provided to the Politburo seemed to be objective.⁸⁵

Yet even as the situation seemed to grow more difficult, key members of the Politburo dug in their heels. As Chapter 2 showed, a major issue for Gorbachev was how the Soviet Union would be seen in the Third World if the DRA regime fell. Shevardnadze, perhaps influenced by Vladimir Kriuchkov, the chief of the first directorate who often travelled with him to Kabul, became Najib’s biggest supporter at Politburo meetings. Indeed, in February 1987, it was Gromyko, a key player in the 1979 decision to invade, urging a quick withdrawal, pointing out that “a half year more or less” of Soviet presence in that country would not make a difference. But Shevardnadze thought otherwise: “The most important thing is not to allow the Najibullah regime to fall. That is the most important thing!”⁸⁶

Although Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze saw eye to eye on Afghanistan, they framed their arguments in slightly different ways. Kriuchkov’s arguments were formed in more traditional geo-political terms. If the Soviet Union withdrew too quickly, Afghanistan would become a base for “Iran, Turkey, and fundamentalists.” The Soviet Union could not just “leave, run dropping everything. First we did it [invaded] without thinking, and now we will drop everything.” Shevardnadze’s logic was more subtle. What he saw in Afghanistan convinced him that the USSR had done so much damage in that country there was almost no chance that a “friendly” Afghanistan could be preserved without a friendly leader. Although he opposed the war and supported the withdrawal, Shevardnadze did not see how Afghanistan would stay “friendly” or even neutral without a strong man too keep it that way. Najib needed to be trusted, since

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Politburo meeting, February 23, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 114.

“there is not a family or village that has not suffered as a result of our presence. Anti-Sovietism will exist in Afghanistan for a long time. Therefore we need to have our own strong person in charge of Afghanistan,” he told the Politburo.⁸⁷

When National Reconciliation was first being conceived, it was assumed that the PDPA would still be the key force in the government. At the 20th PDPA plenum, Najib assured his colleagues, “We will not retreat an inch from the achievements of the Saur revolution. That is to say in politics [those] who come to us should officially recognise the leading role of the PDPA and the people’s power.”⁸⁸ It was becoming clear, however, that even if Najibullah could somehow stay in power, the PDPA would not. Shevardnadze admitted that “the PDPA could collapse” at the next big turn of events.⁸⁹ Moscow began to look for ways that it could preserve a role for Najib without having to rely on the PDPA.

Some of the ideas that the Soviet leadership began discussing in the late spring and summer of 1987 seem to have been influenced by materials provided by academic specialists. One of these was Yurii Gankovskii, who had been trying to make his views heard by decision-makers since 1980. At that time, Gankovskii had warned that unless Karmal was able to broaden the base of the regime, a civil war would quickly break out. His cautionary remarks fell on deaf ears.⁹⁰ In May 1987 he submitted a memorandum to Cherniaev, Gorbachev’s foreign policy aide, urging a more radical reformation of the DRA government. It was a crucial moment, for Gorbachev and his colleagues were growing increasingly frustrated with Kabul and various efforts to improve the situation there. Gankovskii argued that Soviet interests would best be served if the PDPA could be made to move temporarily into the background. This would require a head of the government without a clear party affiliation, someone who was respected within

⁸⁷ Politburo meeting, June 11, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 342.

⁸⁸ Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot*, 184.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Yurii Gankovsky, “Afghanistan: From Intervention to National Reconciliation” *Iranian Journal of International Affairs* Vol. IV, No. 1, Spring 1992, 134.

Afghanistan as well as other Muslim countries. This person could then reach out to the Islamic Conference and Muslim states, gaining international recognition. Only this kind of politician, argued Gankovsky, could even have a chance of making National Reconciliation successful.⁹¹

Given limited archival access at present, it is impossible to determine the extent to which Gankovskii or any other scholars had an impact on policy making, or for that matter at which point policymakers really began taking their views into account. Presumably the memorandum provided above was not the only one Gankovskii himself wrote on the matter, and he may also have made his views known through informal meetings. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in May 1987 key decision makers in the Politburo began thinking along the lines proposed in Gankovskii's memorandum. This would be consistent with the growing influence of other "academics" under Gorbachev.

Soviet leaders were increasingly pessimistic regarding what they would be able to salvage in Afghanistan. At the May 21, 1987 Politburo meeting, Gorbachev outlined what he thought a new regime might look like. Sectarianism was leading nowhere and would have to be eliminated. Although Gorbachev made it clear that he preferred to see Najib rather than someone else leading Afghanistan, he insisted that Najib should hold a state post, as he might then have a chance of staying in power another year and a half. The Afghans would not follow Najib as a party leader, but "a president, a king they would respect." Earlier discussions about opening 2-3% of government seats for Afghan émigrés were unrealistic; it might have to be something closer to 50%.⁹² The emerging consensus in the Politburo was that the PDPA would be only one of the political forces in power after Soviet troops left. Even Kriuchkov agreed that reconciliation would have

⁹¹ Gankovsky to Cherniaev, "Regarding measures to settle the conflict in Afghanistan," GFA Doc #729.

⁹² Politburo meeting, May 21, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 309.

to take place not around the PDPA, but with its participation. Gromyko, too, said that the PDPA would be one of the parties, but not the leading one.⁹³

Soviet leaders hoped that some sort of new political stability could be achieved before their forces withdrew, while Moscow could still apply pressure both on its Afghan allies and their enemies. Gorbachev was firm on the point of power-sharing in talks with Najib, telling the Afghan leader that the PDPA would have to give up government portfolios to opposition parties. The issue figured prominently during a July 1987 conversation. Gorbachev told Najibullah not assume that the PDPA would stay in power but to begin inviting opposition figures into the government. This was the only way to face reality: “to count on the party keeping its current position after reaching national reconciliation would be completely unrealistic.” Gorbachev urged Najib to remain firm in the face of attacks from party members who were reluctant to share power, who, in the spirit of “Karmalism” preferred loud slogans about the revolution, and were quite happy to have the Soviet soldiers fight and die for them. Najibullah told Gorbachev he “agreed completely” and thought having the PDPA as a leading force was simply unrealistic in practice.⁹⁴ Similarly, Najibullah expressed his agreement in November when Gorbachev insisted that he nominate a prime minister from the opposition.⁹⁵

In practice Najib was reluctant to share power. He may have feared that if he alienated his party colleagues before securing some other source of power he would be left completely isolated. Kornienko, however, insists that this was because Najibullah in practice only offered empty portfolios rather than important government positions. According to Kornienko, in Najibullah-Shevardnadze conversations commitments previously made to Gorbachev were watered down with the Foreign Minister’s consent,

⁹³ Politburo meeting, May 22, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 319.

⁹⁴ Record of Conversation of MS Gorbachev with Com Najib, July 20, 1987, NSA READ/RADD Box 9.

⁹⁵ Record of Conversation of MS Gorbachev with Com Najib, November 3, 1987 NSA READ/RADD Box 9

allowing Najibullah to avoid making any real movement toward power-sharing.⁹⁶ It is unfortunate that there are no records available of Shevardnadze's conversations with Najibullah which would allow historians to evaluate Kornienko's accusations. It is clear, however, that promises made to Gorbachev often did not lead to concrete results. By the time of the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 the government was still controlled by a shaky PDPA.

By the summer of 1987 it was becoming clear that National Reconciliation had failed to unite the party or to make the PDPA government more acceptable to the people of Afghanistan. Colonel Kim Tsagalov sent a long memorandum addressed to the Dmitrii Yazov, the Minister of Defense, which touched on almost every major problem of the war, of governance, and of Soviet hopes and illusions in Afghanistan. Not only had the Policy of National Reconciliation failed to unite the PDPA, it had completely failed to find any support among the opposition or even other "democratic" parties. Tsagalov urged a radical change in course: "The PDPA is objectively moving toward its political death. No actions aimed at resuscitating the PDPA would produce any practical results. Najib's efforts in this respect can only prolong the death throes, but they cannot save the PDPA from its death."⁹⁷

Indeed, Gorbachev had largely given up on the idea of preserving the PDPA in power, and was starting to accept that the only government that could survive in the longer term was one which consisted in large part of opposition figures, albeit with Najib at its head. Yet it was becoming clear that the process of forming a new coalition government was going to take much longer than expected, in part because of the

⁹⁶ Kornienko, *Kholodnaia Voina*, 254.

⁹⁷ Letter to Minister of Defense Dmitrii Yazov, August 13, 1987, NSA: NSA Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War Tsagalov was frustrated that his views were not being taken seriously, and decided to air them openly in an interview in 1988, for which he was fired from the military.

PDPA's reluctance. Reports coming in from Afghanistan confirmed that National Reconciliation was failing.⁹⁸

Gorbachev brought up these issues when he met with Najib in July. He underlined that the PDPA was still failing to reach out beyond Kabul: "We have been receiving information that decisions being taken in Kabul are arriving [to the provinces] much weakened." He urged Najibullah to become more pro-active in including other parties in the government: "It seems that in the second stage of National Reconciliation the question of creating a coalition government will come up, a block of left-democratic forces. You cannot refuse to cooperate with those who have a different point of view. You need to create real pluralism in society and in government offices. The right tactic would probably be to emphasise that which unites these forces, and this will be the policy of national reconciliation, ceasing of military activity."⁹⁹

Gorbachev emerged disappointed from his July 1987 talks with Najib. For several months the Politburo had been discussing why National Reconciliation had stalled. The talks with Najib, Gorbachev told the Politburo on July 23, "showed that Karmalism has put down deep roots. Everyone has started moving, but they are thinking first of all of themselves, even Karmal is raising his head. There could be a crisis in connection with this."¹⁰⁰ The Afghan problem occupied his mind during the summer holiday, and from time to time he sent his thoughts to Chenayev: "We were pulled into Afghanistan, and now we don't know to get out...it is awful, when you have to defend Brezhnev's policies."¹⁰¹

Nevertheless, Moscow's policy in Afghanistan had shifted tremendously. The leadership in Kabul had been changed, advisers had been recalled, a new crop of people had been assigned to help achieve reconciliation. Most importantly, Soviet leaders were

⁹⁸ Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* 75.

⁹⁹ Record of Conversation of MS Gorbachev with Com Najib, July 20, 1987, NSA READ/RADD Box 9.

¹⁰⁰ Notes from Politburo meeting, July 23, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 429. To Gorbachev, Karmalism meant "elements of Marxism combined with dependence on the USSR."

¹⁰¹ Thoughts from Gorbachev's summer vacation, Politburo notes, GFA PB 1987, 471.

being stripped of illusions about what they could accomplish in Afghanistan before bringing the troops home. And while efforts within Afghanistan were disappointing, there was still some reason for optimism that an honourable exit could be arranged. US-Soviet relations seemed to be improving. At the July 23, 1987 Politburo meeting Gorbachev suggested that a three-party meeting of the USA, USSR, and Afghanistan was necessary.¹⁰² The effort to get the USA involved in an agreement would dominate Moscow's Afghan policy from the fall of 1987 until the signing of the Geneva Accords in April 1988.

Conclusion

Between 1985 and 1987, Moscow's Afghan policy was defined by an effort to end the war without facing a defeat. As the previous chapter showed, Gorbachev was almost as concerned as his predecessors about the damage a hasty Soviet withdrawal might do to Soviet prestige, particularly among his Third World partners. Yet Gorbachev was also committed to ending the war, and for the most part had the support of his Politburo to do so. This meant looking for new approaches to developing a viable regime in Kabul that could outlast the presence of Soviet troops.

With regard to its policy in Afghanistan, Soviet officials continued to operate on the premise that the Afghan government could be made acceptable to the population with a combination of economic and political measures. Hence Moscow invested much of its own money to help the Kabul government achieve legitimacy and looked for ways to attract funds from its Eastern European satellites as well. Equally crucial were the political efforts: the replacement of Karmal with Najibullah, the launching of National Reconciliation, the efforts to broker a truce with certain rebels and the PDPA government. Much more so than even during the Andropov era, these efforts showed a

¹⁰² Notes from Politburo meeting, July 23, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 429.

willingness to practice *Realpolitik*. Moscow was content to see a government that was Islamic in form as long as it would remain friendly to the USSR. As with domestic reforms, however, decisions made by the Politburo were not implemented properly by officials on the ground. The imperial attitude of Soviet advisers changed only slowly, while PDPA officials resisted efforts to curb their position and their privileges.

This period saw, for the first time, a truly honest assessment of the situation in Afghanistan at the Politburo level. At the January 21, 1987 Politburo meeting, Ryzhkov responded to Shevardnadze's report by saying that the Politburo leader was hearing such a devastating account of the war "for the first time." Yet KGB Chairman Chebrikov was equally correct when he said that such information had been available before. Previous chapters have shown that very sceptical and critical assessments had come from the military as well as other quarters as early as 1980. What had changed was the Politburo's willingness to look at this information objectively, as well as to invite it into their discussions. Moreover, the questions were being discussed with the full participation of the Politburo, unlike in the Brezhnev and Andropov years, when the "Afghan commission" presented policies that were approved without much discussion.

While everyone in Moscow now recognised the apparent hopelessness of the situation in Afghanistan, they worried about the damage that a collapse there would have on Soviet interests. It became clear to Shevardnadze and others in the Politburo, that after seven years of war, the Afghan population was unlikely to think positively of the Soviet Union. This, in turn, meant that abandoning the PDPA completely was out of the question. Even as Soviet leaders abandoned hope in the spring of 1987 that a viable PDPA-led government could be constructed, they continued to look for ways to preserve a role for the party, or at least for Najibullah. Even as their faith in the party as a whole declined, their confidence in Najibullah grew.

The diplomatic efforts, which had been revived so quickly after Gorbachev came to power, were stalled for two reasons. One was the difficulty of talking to the United States about Afghanistan. US officials were unimpressed by the “signals” being sent by Moscow and continued to treat them as political ploys. In fact, it was only in the fall of 1987 that the US began to take Moscow’s desire to end the war seriously. Yet the Soviet-American relationship was only one part of a much larger problem. Another was that as long as Moscow held out hope that it could engineer a solution within Afghanistan it would not separate its diplomatic initiatives from efforts within the country. Indeed, when the process seemed to be making significant progress in 1986, Moscow decided to link the issue of National Reconciliation to the withdrawal of troops. As long as Soviet leaders held out hope that National Reconciliation could work they refused to consider de-linking.

The summer of 1987 was a crucial turning point in the development of Gorbachev’s thinking about reform, in the history of *perestroika*, and in the history of the Soviet Union. It was at this point that he told some of his closest advisers that he was prepared to change “the whole [Soviet] system, from economy to mentality.”¹⁰³ Soon he would start speaking openly of de-Stalinization, a topic that had not been broached by Soviet leaders since Khrushchev. Although Gorbachev still spoke of putting pressure on Western countries in conversations with Third World leaders, he was increasingly eager to achieve a breakthrough in relations with the United States, even if Reagan did not abandon the hated Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).¹⁰⁴ Not surprisingly, this was also a turning point in his thinking on Afghanistan and for Moscow’s Afghan policy. It was becoming clear that National Reconciliation was not going to greatly increase the stability of the DRA government, that Najib was not a saviour, and that the war could continue to drag on endlessly. Gorbachev was losing

¹⁰³ Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 301.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

confidence that the USSR could fundamentally change the situation and undo the errors of his predecessors with minimal political cost. As the next chapter will show, it was at this point that Gorbachev decided to turn to the United States directly. Although he still preferred to see an Afghanistan in which a transformed PDPA played a key role, he now seemed ready to face the ultimate defeat of the regime after the withdrawal of troops.

Chapter 4: Superpower Relations and the Geneva Accords¹

The Geneva Accords, signed in April 1988, were the starting point of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Since 1985, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev had looked for ways to steer the Soviet Union out of the conflict without undermining Soviet prestige or leaving himself politically vulnerable. Successive efforts to shore up the communist government had failed, however: the surge of troops in 1985, the changing of the leadership in 1986, and the focus on National Reconciliation in 1987 produced only the most modest results. The Kabul government was still weak and Soviet troops were still dying. Thus at the end of 1987 the focus shifted from trying to change the situation on the ground in Afghanistan to diplomacy with the other powers involved in the conflict, primarily the United States but also Pakistan. Although many of the details of policy making remain murky, it is clear that Gorbachev was determined to get out. By April it was also clear that the accords would be little more than a fig leaf for the withdrawal. Since both sides would continue to supply their clients with weapons, the conflict would continue, with the balance quite possibly falling against the government, which would no longer have the support of Soviet troops.

From the fall of 1987 to the spring of 1988 Gorbachev and his colleagues sought to use the improving US-Soviet relationship to secure an agreement on Afghanistan of the sort that had previously eluded him and his predecessors. Not coincidentally, it was a crucial period in Gorbachev's thinking about both domestic reform and foreign policy, and ultimately in the fate of the USSR. Since 1985, Gorbachev had followed a cautious approach to reform, often, as with the case of the anti-alcohol campaign, borrowing from Andropov's playbook. In foreign policy there were more genuine innovations, but as the failure of the Reykjavik summit showed, huge chasms remained in relations with the Reagan administration, and neither Gorbachev nor other Soviet officials showed any

¹ A version of this chapter appears as "Politics, Diplomacy and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan: From National Reconciliation to the Geneva Accords," *Cold War History* 8:3 (August 2008), 381-404.

inclination to move away from Soviet commitments in the Third World. In the summer of 1987 Gorbachev told his advisers that he had come to see the need for more radical approaches to both domestic and foreign policy.² Having previously excluded “solidarity” with progressive regimes and movements from the range of topics that could be discussed bilaterally with the US, he now decided to engage Reagan fully on the Afghanistan issue.

Determined to withdraw troops and improve relations with the West, Gorbachev was ultimately willing to sacrifice the long standing Soviet position on stopping the supply of arms to the Afghan resistance. By the summer of 1987 it was clear that Soviet efforts to establish a viable regime in Kabul, including the ones undertaken since Gorbachev came to power, had failed. Yet in the fall of 1987 Gorbachev did not abandon hope of achieving a settlement in Afghanistan. Rather, he hoped that improving relations with the US would lead to a settlement in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Third World. Ultimately, Gorbachev’s misjudgement of American politics and decision making and his inability to renege on traditional Soviet commitments meant that a Soviet withdrawal did not lead to a resolution of the conflict.

The US-Soviet Relationship and Afghanistan

By mid-1987, Soviet policy on Afghanistan had once again reached an impasse. Several successive strategies had failed to improve the stability of the Kabul regime, making it increasingly likely that an “honourable” withdrawal would be impossible. Although in November 1986 Gorbachev believed that the US only wanted to keep the USSR in Afghanistan to bleed it, by the autumn of 1987 he was taking a new view of the US-Soviet relationship.³ By autumn 1987 Shevardnadze and US Secretary of State George Shultz had exchanged several useful visits and a treaty on Intermediate Range Nuclear

² On domestic political and economic reform in particular, Gorbachev told Cherniaev he was prepared to go “far, very far.” Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 301.

³ Minutes of Politburo Meeting, November 13, 1986, *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente* ..., 440.

Force (INF) was nearly ready. It was logical that Gorbachev would try to use his improving relationship with the US to achieve the settlement he found so elusive. The key point would be US willingness to stop supplying the opposition. Such a resolution would fully justify not only the Soviet withdrawal but his entire foreign policy framework even to the most cautious and conservative elements in his own country and the communist bloc.

Gorbachev realised that he would first need to make it clear that the USSR was serious about withdrawal. Over the next six months Gorbachev and Shevardnadze tried several times to use a tactic they had previously developed in negotiations with the United States: a declaration of an unexpected position as a start to negotiation. At the end of July 1987, Gorbachev told the Indonesian newspaper *Merdeka*: “In principle, Soviet troop withdrawal from Afghanistan has been decided upon... We favour a short time frame for the withdrawal. However, interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan must be stopped and its non-resumption guaranteed.”⁴ Soviet diplomats were told they could use the statement as a basis for saying the political decision had been made to withdraw. The statement was meant to jump-start negotiations and prompt the US to agree to certain Soviet positions, making it clear that Soviet troops would withdraw in the hope that the Reagan administration would agree to earlier Soviet demands originally set as preconditions for withdrawal.

The first attempt to do this directly during a high-level meeting came during Shevardnadze’s visit to Washington in September 1987. On September 16, Shevardnadze told US Secretary of State George Shultz that “we will leave Afghanistan. It may be in five months or a year, but it is not a question of it happening

⁴ *Mikhail Gorbachev’s Replies to Questions Put By The Indonesian Newspaper “Merdeka,”* July 21, 1987 Novosti (Moscow: 1987). As late as November 1986 Soviet officials publicly said that a Soviet withdrawal would begin only two years after it was clear interference had stopped. Gankovsky, “Afghanistan,” 135.

in the remote future.”⁵ Shevardnadze asked the Secretary of State for cooperation in ensuring a “neutral, non-aligned Afghanistan.” He also revealed that the Soviet leadership had taken a firm decision on withdrawal.⁶ In the context of the Geneva negotiations on Afghanistan, Shevardnadze’s comment was a significant move, suggesting that the Soviet side would show its cards.⁷ Similar statements had been made before, but this one convinced Shultz.⁸ Improving Soviet-US relations played an important role. As Shultz put it in his memoirs, part of the reason he accepted Shevardnadze’s September 16 statement rather than earlier ones was that by then he “had enough confidence” to trust Shevardnadze’s word.⁹

It is not clear just how broad support for this policy was among Soviet politicians, but at least in its early stage it seems to have had support from Politburo members as well as senior Foreign Ministry officials. One measure of this, perhaps, is that similar feelers were put out on the eve of the Washington summit by KGB Chairman Vladimir Kriuchkov, a man who would later adopt some of the most conservative positions on Afghanistan within the Soviet leadership. At a dinner meeting at the Maison Blanche bistro in Washington, he told his counterpart, CIA director Robert Gates, that the USSR wanted to get out, but was seeking a political solution. Kriuchkov fully played on Gorbachev’s themes of “mutual interests”, emphasizing that a possible fundamentalist state in Afghanistan would complicate US interests in the Gulf. As Gates puts it in his memoir, Kriuchkov told him: “You seem fully occupied in trying to deal with just one fundamentalist state.”¹⁰ Other senior figures, both at the party and at the deputy ministerial level, also signalled that the Soviet Union was getting ready to withdraw. Early in November 1987, for example, Soviet Foreign

⁵ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 168.

⁶ Brown, *Gorbachev Factor*, 235.

⁷ George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph* (New York, 1993), 987.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 1007.

¹⁰ Gates, *From the Shadows*, 425.

Ministry spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov remarked that it would be possible for Soviet troops to leave within seven to twelve months. Towards the end of November, both Politburo member Nikolay Ryzhkov, speaking in New Delhi, and Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Rogachev, speaking in Moscow, suggested that Moscow was ready to make an offer on the time-frame.¹¹

Gorbachev hoped that the improving US-Soviet relationship (or the Gorbachev-Reagan relationship) would make it possible to reach an acceptable agreement. He expressed this idea in a meeting with Najibullah in Moscow on November 3. "Maybe at the sunset of their rule the Reagan administration will want to show that it contributed – along with the USSR – to the settlement of the situation in a hot spot such as Afghanistan," Gorbachev told Najibullah. At the moment, the US attitude remained unacceptable, because the Reagan administration "would want a settlement in which the PDPA would be pushed to the back ..." but that could change. After all, the PDPA government represented the reality on the ground.¹² Gorbachev believed that he could get Reagan to accept this status quo if Soviet troops withdrew.

The test of Gorbachev's new approach was the Washington summit in December 1987. Although the keystone of the summit was the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, for Gorbachev its importance lay not only in arms control talks but in being able to truly set the US-Soviet relationship on a new footing. This included regional conflicts, and, in particular, Afghanistan. Determined to explore the possibility that he could get a concession out of Reagan, Gorbachev pressed the issue during at least two meetings with Reagan and Shultz and one with vice-president George H.W. Bush. The interpretation of these meetings greatly affected Soviet actions in the weeks that followed. Shevardnadze and Gorbachev seemed to believe that they had secured an important understanding regarding arms supplies, while the US denied

¹¹ Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot*, 233.

¹² Record of conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and Najibullah, November 3, 1987, NSA READD/RADD Collection, Box 9.

that any such concession had ever been made.¹³ In fact, there was good reason for Soviet leaders to think that a concession had been made. At the same time there was reason for them to be sceptical.

In the first conversation, on December 9th, Reagan urged Gorbachev to move forward with an announcement regarding the start of the withdrawal. Although he promised that the US would do everything to ensure that Afghanistan would become a neutral state, he balked at Gorbachev's request that the US stop supplying the *mujahadeen*. Gorbachev had again tried to take the initiative by promising a quick end to Soviet participation in operations: "I can tell you that the day the announcement is made about the withdrawal of Soviet troops, they will not participate in military operations, except for self defense."¹⁴ Reagan stuck to a familiar motif justifying continuation of US supplies: "The president of Afghanistan has an army, the opposition does not. Therefore we cannot ask one side to put down their arms while the other keeps them."¹⁵

The next day, Reagan's position seemed even less compromising. He suggested that the DRA government should disband the army. Gorbachev insisted that there could be no question of troop withdrawal if the US did not agree to stop supplying the opposition. "Only under the condition that it is tied with the question of stopping US aid to the opposition forces; that is, the day Soviet troops start withdrawing should be the day that American military aid is stopped."¹⁶ If not, Gorbachev pointed out, the situation in the country would deteriorate, "making a Soviet withdrawal impossible." Here he tried the tactic he had earlier mentioned to Najibullah during their November meeting. Perhaps he could entice Reagan with the promise of a major diplomatic resolution. He

¹³ Shultz, *Turmoil* 1087; Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 177.

¹⁴ Excerpt from conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and President Reagan on Afghanistan, December 9, 1987, NSA READD/RADD Collection, Box 9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Excerpt from conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and President Reagan on Afghanistan, December 10, 1987, NSA READD/RADD Collection, Box 9

suggested that it was time the US and USSR made a move together: “And regarding the cessation of American aid to the Afghan opposition. Let’s agree on a timetable and announce it. And if you need more time to think than please do think. But we are inviting you to take a concrete joint step. This would allow us to check if the US administration is genuinely trying to find a solution to the situation in Afghanistan.”

Shultz, perhaps indeed thrown off balance by this last statement, remarked that “At the Geneva talks a suggestion was made that the US could stop supplying Afghan freedom fighters deadly weapons 60 days after the start of the Soviet withdrawal.”¹⁷

Both the Russian and US records show Gorbachev being firm on the point of the US stopping supplies to the opposition. His position remained consistent with the brief prepared by the Chief of the General Staff, Marshal Akhromeev. The brief pointed to a few basic preconditions: the end of arms supplies to the resistance and a guarantee of neutrality for any future Afghan government. Other issues, like the timetable for withdrawal, were more flexible. The troop withdrawal could easily be completed in less than twelve months, as long as other issues were settled.¹⁸ Reagan proved largely unreceptive to Gorbachev’s demands, insisting that if the US cut off arms supplies it would amount to an unacceptable “monopoly of force” for the Najibullah government.¹⁹

Curiously, Shultz did seem to endorse the possibility of cutting off arms, remarking that the US, like the USSR, supported the Geneva agreements, which stipulated that outside support to the opposition would cease 60 days after the start of the Soviet withdrawal.²⁰

Thus Shultz showed willingness to meet the Soviets on the issue of arms supplies, and it seems that this had been considered by mid-level diplomats. Steve Coll, in his extensive study of the US involvement in Afghanistan, points out that US

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Memorandum from S.F. Akhromeev, Afghanistan: The Position of the USSR, December 3, 1987, GFA #944.

¹⁹ Memorandum of Conversation in the Oval Office, December 9, 1987, NSA End of the Cold War Collection, Box 3. Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 556.

²⁰ US Memorandum of Conversation of Working Luncheon, December 10, 1987, NSA End of the Cold War Collection, Box 3. See also the Russian record: excerpt from conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and President Reagan on Afghanistan, December 10, 1987, NSA READD/RADD Collection, Box 9.

negotiators had been preparing to accept an end to CIA involvement around this time, while in late 1987 the American press treated the question of arms supplies as settled.²¹ The confusion reflected the split between “bleeders” and “dealers” in the Reagan administration, as well as differences between State Department officials on the one hand and CIA officials and the vocal “Afghan lobby” in Congress on the other.²² It is possible that Shultz was trying to maneuver Reagan toward his department’s position, while Reagan was mindful of the political pressure he might face if he “abandoned” the *mujahadeen* to face the DRA army alone. Although Reagan had said in a television interview prior to the summit that the US would not stop sending arms, senior officials after the summit reaffirmed that the US was in fact prepared to do so and that the main sticking point remained an acceptable timetable.²³ These confusing signals would have serious consequences for how Gorbachev saw his prospects for a suitable agreement.

Gorbachev apparently left the meeting believing that he and the US administration had reached a new understanding.²⁴ There was certainly reason for him to think that this was the case, although he should have remained suspicious. There had been no official agreement, nothing made public in the communiqué.²⁵ Gorbachev’s belief that he was finally reaching a new understanding with the Reagan administration that would lead to increased cooperation defined Soviet policy in the weeks following the summit and affected the way the Geneva negotiations ultimately played out.

²¹ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 177.

²² The “bleeders” in the administration and Congress preferred to see the Soviet Union remain in Afghanistan and take losses from US supplied *mujahadeen*.

²³ Soon after the summit the *Washington Post* reported that Undersecretary of State Michael Armacost, who was involved in the high-level talks on Afghanistan, as well as several other senior officials confirmed that the US would end aid to the Afghan opposition once Soviet troops had withdrawn. “Aid to Rebels Would End With Soviet Pullout,” *Washington Post*, December 14, 1987.

²⁴ This is the opinion of long-time Soviet ambassador to the US, Anatolii Dobrynin, who at the time was serving on the Afghanistan commission of the Politburo. See Halliday, “Soviet Foreign Policymaking,” 687.

²⁵ Only a general statement on cooperation in Third World conflicts was made. See “Joint US-Soviet Summit Statement,” *USSR-US Summit Washington December 7-10, 1987, Documents and Materials* (Moscow, 1987), 67.

Initiatives and Concessions

Moscow placed great importance on a US guarantee of non-interference for several reasons. Such a guarantee would show that the US was easing its demands as a positive response to the Soviet initiative. It would also change the dynamics of the fighting in Afghanistan by removing the element of “outside interference” and thereby justifying a Soviet withdrawal. The guarantee would provide a cushion for Najibullah once the Soviet withdrawal began. Within a highly factionalised government, Najibullah would not be able to hold power for long if it seemed like he was being left alone against a US-backed opposition. Firm guarantees that US supplies would cease could strengthen Najibullah’s position, perhaps even allowing him to achieve some of the goals set out in the Policy of National Reconciliation. Finally, Soviet leaders always had to contend with the possibility that their Afghan “clients,” although their geo-strategic influence was minimal, could act as spoilers, refusing to sign the accords if they felt their interests were not addressed. This would undermine the possibility of withdrawal, create an unnecessary public breach between Moscow and an ally, and destroy the credibility of New Thinking in front of the world.

Shevardnadze travelled to Kabul on January 4, 1988 to talk with Najibullah and senior Afghan leaders. The main topic of discussion, of course, was the progress of negotiations.²⁶ Although the records of this conversation are not available, the timing as well as statements made by Shevardnadze before and after the trip suggest that he felt some pressure to reaffirm a commitment to the Najibullah regime. In particular, he stressed that any agreement endorsed by the USSR and US would mean an end to arms supplies to the opposition when Soviet troops withdrew. In an interview before his departure, Shevardnadze told the Bakhtar news agency that “The American side has agreed to act as a guarantor and, accordingly, to end its assistance to armed groupings

²⁶ “Shevardnadze in Kabul for talks with Najibullah, sees good prospects for Soviet troops withdrawal within 12 months,” *Pravda*, January 7, 1988, *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, XL, No.1, 1988, 13.

that are engaged in military operations in Afghanistan against the people's regime."

This point formed the basis of the agreement that he and Najibullah had reached during their talks. If the US made a commitment to end outside interference, Soviet troops could begin their withdrawal and complete it in less than twelve months.²⁷

While Gorbachev increasingly came to terms with the idea that Najibullah might not retain power, Shevardnadze believed that the USSR had a responsibility not only to work for a neutral Afghanistan, but also to help Najibullah stay in charge. General Liakhovskii, who was present at many of Shevardnadze's meetings in Kabul, believes that the "personal" factor played a big role in the Foreign Minister's relentless support of Najibullah.²⁸ During the January 6 interview with Bakhtar news agency, he spoke of the need to leave Afghanistan with "a clear conscience," which meant with assurances that supplies to the opposition would end. Shevardnadze's sense of a "personal" commitment, combined with his belief that a "strong-man" would be needed in Afghanistan, certainly played a role. Tellingly, in one of the few pages on Afghanistan in his memoirs, he wrote that he was bothered by a sense that the USSR was "abandoning" its Afghan friends, although he also noted that he had other worries besides his personal commitment to Najibullah.²⁹

During the first few months of 1988 Shevardnadze still hoped that the Geneva accords could become a proper instrument of guarantees and enforcement. That way they could give Najibullah a chance of surviving and protect Soviet credibility with other Third World countries. On January 15, 1988 he told his Politburo colleagues that National Reconciliation was having an effect and that the PDPA would be able to play a leading role in the government if it could avoid factionalism.³⁰ By contrast, in May of the previous year he had reported that the effect of National Reconciliation had been

²⁷ "Interview with the Bakhtar News Agency," *Pravda*, January 7, 1988, CDSP, XL, No.1, 1988, 14.

²⁸ Author's interview with Aleksandr Liakhovskii, July 2006.

²⁹ Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom*, 69.

³⁰ Diary notes of Politburo meeting. Vorotnikov, *A Bylo Eto Tak*, 219.

quite limited. This new line reflected Shevardnadze's growing faith in Najibullah, as well as his belief that without a strong pro-Soviet leader Afghanistan would not remain a friendly country.

While the idea of ending supplies to the *mujahadeen* in exchange for a Soviet withdrawal may have been acceptable to US negotiators, it proved unpalatable to the Reagan administration, perhaps because it was so politically risky. Shevardnadze's interview on January 6 supposedly surprised and angered US Secretary of State George Shultz, who immediately sent a telegram to Moscow clarifying that Reagan had never made any such promise and denied it publicly as well.³¹ The incident put Moscow in a bind. It had promised Najibullah that the USSR could get the US to stop supplying the opposition. Shevardnadze had followed this up publicly with an interview carried around the world and had then been rebuffed by Shultz and Reagan in an equally public manner.

Shevardnadze also seems to have genuinely believed that the Geneva Accords could be more than just a fig leaf for the Soviet withdrawal. He insisted to subordinates that by signing the accords, Pakistan was binding itself to stop interference and would have to respect that agreement.³² In a meeting with Cordovez in January 1988, he pressed for a strong enforcement mechanism so that the USSR could be reassured that "Pakistan would respect all the provisions of the agreement."³³ Pakistan's willingness to be bound by the accords was important not only for Afghanistan, but for Shevardnadze's relative standing within the Soviet leadership.

Reagan's public reversal on supplying the opposition threatened to undermine Gorbachev's and Shevardnadze's positions with the "conservative" elements in the

³¹ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1087.

³² "Afghanistan stoil nam 15 milliardov dollarov v god" [Afghanistan cost us 15 billion dollars a year] (Interview with Nikolai Egorychev), *Kommersant Vlast'*, No.46, November 25, 2002.

³³ "Notes of Meeting with Shevardnadze," December 15, 1987, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 9.

military and government.³⁴ While most segments of Soviet bureaucracy were in favour of withdrawal, there were still differences over the manner in which both the withdrawal should take place and Moscow's relationship with Kabul should evolve. The military, for example, favoured either a unilateral withdrawal or one conducted through the Geneva process, but only if it provided concrete guarantees of parallel disengagement on the part of Pakistan. General Varennikov wrote that his team petitioned Moscow numerous times to work for symmetry in withdrawal. He suggested to both Shevardnadze and Diego Cordovez, the UN mediator, that for every military facility Soviet troops left, Pakistan should dismantle one of the *mujahadeen* facilities on its territory.³⁵ According to Liakhovskii, the top Soviet military leadership in Afghanistan felt that the Geneva process was pointless unless it brought real guarantees of the kind Varennikov demanded.³⁶ Aside from trying to lobby Shevardnadze, Gorbachev, and the Politburo, however, they could do little in terms of affecting the Geneva process. Reagan's flat refusal to provide such guarantees made Gorbachev's recent enthusiasm for an agreement with the US seem foolish and could have become fodder for conservative critics if withdrawal was followed by disaster in Kabul or if the still nascent rapprochement in US-Soviet relations collapsed.

With Reagan and Shultz rejecting the possibility that they would cease supplying the *mujahadeen* in exchange for a Soviet withdrawal, Gorbachev and the Politburo were faced with a stark choice. They could either retrench, refusing any further concessions until the US agreed to stop weapons supplies, or push forward, hoping that the US would come around if conservative "bleeders," who Moscow believed (correctly) to be responsible for America's hard-line policy, could be

³⁴ According to Nikolai Kozyrev, a Deputy Foreign Minister who was the chief negotiator at Geneva, Shevardnadze felt vulnerable within the Soviet leadership, which moved him to take a more conservative line on Afghanistan and also to ally himself more closely with Kriuchkov. Author's interview with Nikolai Kozyrev, Moscow, November 15, 2008.

³⁵ "Sud'ba i Sovest'" (Interview with General Valentin Varennikov) (Moscow, 1993), 51.

³⁶ Author's interview with Aleksandr Liakhovskii, July 2006.

convinced that the intent to withdraw troops was genuine. The first approach was the one favoured by the military, by Shevardnadze, and to some degree the Foreign Ministry negotiators in Geneva. The danger, however, was that such a retrenchment could stall the whole withdrawal process, leaving Soviet troops in Afghanistan because of diplomatic hurdles.

At this critical moment, with the talks stalled, the Reagan administration proving completely uncooperative, and his colleagues and advisers at loggerheads about how to proceed, Gorbachev opted for yet another bold, unilateral announcement.³⁷ In a statement aired on Soviet television he announced that the Soviet withdrawal would begin on May 15. Commitment to a withdrawal start-date had been a long-standing American demand, and Gorbachev was hoping that by committing to a date he could nudge the Americans to revisit the issue of arms supplies. Georgii Kornienko, the deputy foreign minister, claims that he introduced the idea of the announcement in the belief that such a statement from Gorbachev would accelerate the Geneva process.³⁸ Bolstered by comments made by US officials during his trip to Washington in January 1988, Kornienko argued that announcing a withdrawal date would allow the US to apply greater pressure on Pakistan and would convince Najibullah to sign. Shevardnadze rejected this approach, agreeing only to a statement to the effect that "a withdrawal of troops could begin in May 1988 if a settlement agreement could be signed in February – March." The Politburo accepted this phrasing and Shevardnadze

³⁷ The talks had stalled in 1988 in part because of disagreements regarding the Afghani-Pakistan border, the "Durand line" that separated Pushtun clans into two political entities. Cordovez writes that, although the superpowers seemed to be closer than ever to an agreement at this time, Pakistan and Afghanistan were becoming more intransigent. This was not Moscow's main concern, however. After all, a commitment from the US would really have been the key to getting Afghanistan to sign and would have isolated Pakistan as the sole obstructionist player. Harrison and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 323. Kornienko believes that Pakistan's new stubbornness had to do with Shevardnadze encouraging Afghanistan to use Indian attitudes toward Pakistan as justification for Afghan positions at negotiations. The effect, as he puts it, was to "wave the red flag before the bull." Kornienko, "The Afghan Endeavor," 14. But Riaz M. Khan, the chief Pakistani negotiator at Geneva, believes that it had more to do with Pakistan president's Zia ul Haq's fear of isolation should a US-Soviet rapprochement on Afghanistan make him an unnecessary ally. See Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot*, 236-237.

³⁸ Kornienko, *Kholodnaia Voina*, 257.

and Kriuchkov carried the message when they went to see Najibullah in Kabul to discuss the planned announcement. At the last minute, however, Gorbachev opted for stronger wording, personally writing it into the Politburo decision by hand.³⁹

Kornienko claims a key role in this last-minute decision, but it is quite consistent with Gorbachev's preferences in similar situations. An announced start-date had been a frequent demand of the Reagan administration, repeated during the Washington summit and frequently in the press. Gorbachev chose to make the announcement in order to take the initiative, to do what his counterparts in the US doubted he would do. The disagreement between him and Shevardnadze was that between a politician and a negotiator. Although Shevardnadze was often more the former than the latter, in this instance he saw that the announcement meant going into the next round of negotiations holding fewer cards than ever before. This too was consistent with the role that Shevardnadze had been playing in the previous months, that of Najibullah's top ally in Moscow and chief negotiator on the international scene.

The statement, read on Soviet television on February 8th and printed in both *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*, committed the USSR to start the withdrawal on May 15th as long as an agreement had been reached at Geneva by March 15. It also committed the USSR to "front-load" the withdrawal, that is, to include a larger proportion of troops in the first half of the withdrawal. "Front-loading" had been a US and Pakistani demand, intended to make sure any partial withdrawal was irreversible. Finally, the statement made it clear that the withdrawal would be de-linked from the formation of coalition government, an earlier Pakistani demand.⁴⁰ Non-interference was only mentioned once, as "one of the aspects of the settlement." Najibullah released a parallel statement the same day. It is unfortunate that the records of Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze's meetings

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Statement on Afghanistan by M.S. Gorbachev," *Pravda*, February 9, 1988, p.1, CDSP Vol. XL, No.6, pp.1-2.

with Najibullah that week are unavailable, as they would make for lively reading. It is highly unlikely that Najibullah was particularly enthusiastic.

With regard to the talks in Geneva, the February 8 announcement, made despite Shevardnadze's opposition, had the desired effect. Pakistani President Zia al-Huq, previously non-committal regarding Pakistan's role in the last stage of negotiations, now told Cordovez that Pakistan would "fully participate" in the upcoming talks.⁴¹ Although there would be further hurdles prior to signing the Geneva agreement, February 8 became a turning point. Cordovez describes it as the breakthrough he had been waiting for, allowing him to announce the talks would resume on March 2.⁴²

While the withdrawal announcement facilitated the Geneva process, it undermined the Soviet position at the talks. From the point of view of Soviet
negotiators, any flexibility on their part was met with a firmer hand from Islamabad and Washington.⁴³ In his analysis of the accords, Soviet negotiator Nikolai Kozyrev pointed out that prior to December 1987, statements regarding the Geneva process made in Moscow reflected recommendations made by the Soviet team in Geneva. After December, the statements were often made without consulting or warning the Geneva team.⁴⁴ Shevardnadze's staff in Geneva had opposed previous announcements, such as Gorbachev's December 1987 and Shevardnadze's January 1988 statements that the USSR would be willing to withdraw its troops within twelve months in exchange for the creation of a broad coalition government in Kabul and the cessation of aid to the *mujahedeen*. According to Kozyrev, these announcements "devalued the position of our delegation at talks, put it in an awkward spot and gave the opposite side extra motivation to pressure Moscow in the hope that the Soviet leadership would agree to

⁴¹ Harisson and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 335.

⁴² Ibid, 334.

⁴³ N.I. Kozyrev, "Zhenevskie Soglashenie 1988 goda i Afganskoe Uregulirovanie" Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Moscow, 2000), 21.

⁴⁴ Kozyrev, "Zhenevskie Soglashenie," 22.

further concessions.”⁴⁵ Even as they pushed the talks towards an agreement, Gorbachev’s unexpected announcements took away some of the leverage that Soviet diplomats hoped to employ in negotiations.

The withdrawal announcement should be seen in the context of Gorbachev’s political style as well as his changing conception of foreign policy in early 1988. While the comment on interference barely took up a line in the statement, some twelve sentences were devoted to the connection between a resolution to the Afghan conflict and other third-world hot spots. This included the Iran-Iraq war, southern Africa, Cambodia, and Central America. Using language he had previously used to describe the Afghan war to the CPSU, he called these hotspots “bleeding wounds capable of causing spots of gangrene on the body of mankind.”⁴⁶ But if Gorbachev was a true believer in his reforms and his vision of a new foreign policy focused on cooperation, as both his detractors and supporters say, then the linkage made sense. A politician’s intuition told him that he was not the only leader dealing with a thorny problem. Reagan could be persuaded to see the mutual advantage of a new approach, but he would have to start in Afghanistan.

The February 8 statement was not pure propaganda. Several weeks later, meeting with Politburo members to hear a report on the Afghan situation, Aleksandr Iakovlev, a close Gorbachev aide and a Politburo member in charge of ideology (as well as a member of the Afghanistan commission) told his colleagues to take this line as policy. The formal statement had been about Afghanistan, but “our announcement is a real solution for one regional conflict and a possible formula for others. Let us approach with the same sense of responsibility and international participation to other regional

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “Statement on Afghanistan ...”

problems, be it Angola and the SAR, or the Near East, or Central America.”⁴⁷ For Gorbachev, the new formula was more important than losses at the negotiating table.

Gorbachev’s announcement helped to clear one of the last hurdles to completing the formal Geneva document. The Pakistani side had demanded the formation of a coalition government largely excluding the PDPA before the withdrawal of Soviet troops.⁴⁸ Gorbachev’s rejection of this proposal met with no resistance from Shultz, who had not found it reasonable and only reluctantly agreed to carry Zia’s demand to Moscow.⁴⁹ As one senior official told reporters just after Shultz’s Moscow trip, it would be wrong of the US to now ask the USSR to “stick around” until a political settlement had been reached.⁵⁰

While the announcement helped to move the negotiations at the Geneva level, the US did not agree to stop supplying arms to the opposition. It had become clear to the US administration that the Soviet Union was desperate to leave, and there was no reason to take a political risk domestically by giving any concessions.⁵¹ Shevardnadze kept trying to convince the US to agree to halt arms supplies with the start of the Soviet withdrawal. When Shultz came to Moscow in February, Shevardnadze accused the US of “switching signals” on the question of arms supplies.⁵² After all, the USSR had done all it was asked to do, including the announcement of a start date and offering a short timetable for the withdrawal. Shevardnadze emphasised that Najibullah was working towards a coalition government that would include the opposition while marginalizing the most extreme elements. Shultz remained adamant that a US cut-off would come only if the USSR also stopped supplying Kabul. In Washington the following month, Shevardnadze again pressed this point, but Shultz refused to back down. After the

⁴⁷ Record of a Politburo meeting chaired by Iakovlev, February 22, 1988, NSA READD/RADD Collection, Box 9.

⁴⁸ Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 338.

⁴⁹ Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 287; Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1089.

⁵⁰ “Shultz Sure of Soviets’ Afghanistan Pullout,” *Washington Post*, February 24, 1988.

⁵¹ Author’s interview with Ambassador Jack Matlock, January 1, 2008.

⁵² Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 286.

February meeting, Shultz said he “had no doubt that Soviet troops would be withdrawn.”⁵³ Shultz knew that further concessions were unnecessary, that Moscow now wanted the accords more than the U.S; there was no need to take steps that would cause a conservative backlash back home

Gorbachev should perhaps have realised that the Reagan administration would avoid a politically risky step if it could. Conservative commentators and politicians in the United States had been edgy since the Washington summit, worrying that Reagan would give away too much.⁵⁴ Even the mainstream press did not see any reason why aid to the *mujahadeen* should be stopped. The day after the February 8th announcement, the *Washington Post* argued that support for the *mujahadeen* was a duty of the United States, a responsibility “to sustain a brave people fighting to repel a foreign aggression.”⁵⁵ Gorbachev had easy access to this kind of information via the KGB and foreign ministry and should have realised that there was nothing to gain for Reagan politically by stopping supplies to the Afghan opposition.

Despite having lost out on the key issue of arms supplies, Gorbachev held out hope that a new, broader understanding with the US would lead to a peaceful resolution of the conflict some time after Soviet troops withdrew. Shultz did accept Gorbachev’s broader framework for conflict resolution. In a closing meeting on February 22, he pointed out that the most valuable parts of the visit were understandings about how conflicts in Angola, Cambodia, and Iran-Iraq could be settled. Gorbachev concurred: “I think that we have to set an example for the world in these questions. If we develop this sort of cooperation, one can hope that conflicts will be decided in a way that addresses the interests of all sides.” The most curious thing about this conversation, however, was that the issue of a US aid cut off was not even mentioned. Gorbachev restricted himself to urging Shultz to ensure that the next round of Geneva talks was the last and to

⁵³ Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 340.

⁵⁴ There was very open opposition in the Senate, see Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 285-6.

⁵⁵ “The Afghanistan Announcement,” *Washington Post*, February 9, 1988.

highlighting that the USSR would not now accept a linkage of a coalition government with troop withdrawal. To this latter point, Shultz readily agreed.⁵⁶

Towards the Geneva Accords

By mid-February 1988, Gorbachev had reconciled himself to the idea that a Soviet withdrawal would not bring about the cessation of US aid to the *mujahadeen*. Although Gorbachev was prepared to accept a weak agreement as long as it paved the way for Soviet troops to withdraw, Shevardnadze kept trying to push for a new agreement.

It is quite possible, in fact, that Gorbachev had made the February 8 announcement fully expecting to begin the withdrawal without a US agreement to cut off aid. On February 11th, he seemed to be preparing the Indian Minister of Defense, Krishna Pant, for a Soviet acceptance of a weak accord. When Pant pointed out that US weapons could fall into the hands of rogue terrorists, Gorbachev replied that the question of arms supplies was difficult, but if the USSR pursued it, the US could counter by pointing to Soviet weapons held by the Kabul regime, “and then the whole process could get stuck. And we don’t want to leave Najib naked.”⁵⁷ At the February 22 meeting with Shultz, Gorbachev did not bring up the question of arms supplies at all, suggesting that he was prepared to accept an agreement that did not stop the US from supplying the opposition via Pakistan. He needed a withdrawal to prove he was serious about putting the Soviet Union on a new foreign policy course. Agreement or not, the USSR had to withdraw. As he explained to his Politburo colleagues on March 3, “The country, the world, is ready for us to do this. In politics it is not only what you do that matters, but also when and how.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Record of conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and US Secretary George Shultz, February 22, 1988, NSA READD/RADD Collection, Box 9.

⁵⁷ Record of conversation with K. Pant, February 11, 1988, NSA READD/RADD Collection, Box 9.

⁵⁸ Politburo meeting, March 3, 1988, GB PB 1988, 89.

Shevardnadze could not accept such a stance. His close ties with Najibullah, developed over several years and numerous meetings, pushed him to seek an agreement that would help guarantee the regime's survival after Gorbachev had given up on this. Shevardnadze made one final attempt to get the Reagan administration to stop supplying the *mujahadeen* during a trip to Washington in March. In a meeting with Shultz, he emphasised that Moscow had met all of Washington's earlier demands. The timetable had now been reduced to nine months and could be made even shorter, while the withdrawal would be "front loaded," meaning that half the Soviet troops would leave in the first ninety days. Should not the US respond by meeting a demand of Moscow's? Shultz rejected these arguments. The next day Shevardnadze tried again. Shultz consulted with the National Security Advisor, Lieutenant General Colin Powell, and Armacost, and came back to tell Shevardnadze, again, that the US would only cut off aid if the USSR did as well.⁵⁹ A few days later, however, they conferred over the telephone and agreed to set aside the question of cutting off arms. Shultz confirmed this with a letter and the stage was set for the accords to be signed.⁶⁰

Throughout this period and after the troop withdrawal had begun, Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov formed a sort of "Najib" lobby within the Soviet leadership. Shevardnadze's trips to Afghanistan had convinced him that unless a strong leader was in charge, the country would become firmly anti-Soviet. It is unfortunate that no records are available of Shevardnadze's conversations with Najibullah, since these would reveal much about the dynamics of their relationship. Nikolai Egorychev, Moscow's ambassador to Kabul, has said that Shevardnadze guarded the relationship

⁵⁹ Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, 279.

⁶⁰ Cherniaev Diary, April 1, 1988, GFA CD 1988. See also the discussion between Ambassador Belonogov and Perez de Cuellar on March 29, 1988. The Soviet position was that "symmetry" should be understood as the trade-off in the accords between the Soviet withdrawal and the cessation of arm supplies. Vorontsov had told the Pakistani ambassador that "The Soviet Union had no intention of entering into negotiations with the US on this issue." As we will see, in the end the Politburo voted to sign the accords with the US as a signatory – primarily to give the withdrawal more of an international legal framework. "Notes of a meeting of the Secretary General and the Permanent Representative of the USSR," March 29, 1988, UNA, S-1024-2-3.

rather jealously.⁶¹ According to Liakhovskii, Shevardnadze made extensive promises to Najibullah about Soviet support during their meetings.⁶² Even in April, when the accords were about to be signed, Shevardnadze argued for a revision of the 1978 Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty to permit the return of Soviet troops under certain circumstances, but Gorbachev refused this approach.⁶³

Gorbachev, however, viewed the withdrawal from Afghanistan as part of his overall political reforms as well of the USSR's standing with its allies. As Iakovlev pointed out, the USSR absolutely had to get out; most Soviet people knew this and supported the decision. However, Moscow had to keep the "national interest in mind." It was a question of authority and legitimacy: "after all, we have to explain this problem to all our people, the mothers, to public opinion. We have to look at what the reaction will be like abroad. Some people will be unhappy with this step. We have to look really carefully at the reaction in the Third World."⁶⁴ Although achieving the broader goals of New Political Thinking required ending the war in Afghanistan, it also meant preserving a sense of the USSR's power and authority, without which Moscow would very quickly lose control of its position in the world.

Gorbachev's public and private statements suggest that he would have preferred an agreement that preserved a neutral Afghanistan with a broad coalition government that included the PDPA. His commitment to New Political Thinking notwithstanding, he remained concerned with the USSR's great power status. He acknowledged that a withdrawal from Afghanistan that did not guarantee Najibullah's survival in power would invite challenges from conservatives within the USSR as well as socialist governments in Eastern Europe and the Third World. Nevertheless, Gorbachev told his

⁶¹ "Afghanistan stoil nam 15 milliardov dollarov v god" [Afghanistan cost us 15 billion dollars a year] (Interview with Nikolai Egorychev) *Kommersant Vlast'*, No.46, November 25, 2002.

⁶² Author's interview with Aleksandr Liakhovskii, Moscow, July 2006.

⁶³ Ekedahl and Goodman, *Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze*, 185.

⁶⁴ Record of a Politburo meeting chaired by Comrade A.N. Iakovlev, February 22, 1988, NSA READD/RADD Collection, Box 9.

Politburo colleagues on March 3, 1988 that challenges from the Third World and from conservatives should in no way affect the withdrawal decision:

There will be questions, even in our country. What did we fight for? What did we sacrifice so many for? In the "Third World" there will be questions. They're already coming in. You can't depend on the Soviet Union, they say. It leaves its friends to the mercy of the United States.

And here we must not budge.⁶⁵

His commitment to withdrawal from Afghanistan was now absolute. He knew, however, that he did not operate in a political vacuum, that his foreign and domestic policies would invite criticism and opposition and that he had to proceed carefully at every step. It was important, he pointed out, "to keep the authority of power before our own people and the outside world."⁶⁶

The Politburo gathered in the late afternoon on April 1st to decide whether or not to sign the Geneva accords. Gorbachev knew the accords were weak, but their existence gave hope that it would be possible to affect how the withdrawal was to be played out. It is clear that he did not expect much from the accords themselves. Rather, he saw them as a symbol of the way he wanted to conduct relations, perhaps even a stepping stone that would help establish trust. As he put it, "this will be a confirmation of our entire approach to solving international problems."⁶⁷ Every single member of the Politburo voted in favour.⁶⁸

Najibullah knew that the withdrawal was inevitable. As he told an interviewer in 1989, he took Gorbachev seriously when the latter first came to power and began talking about Soviet disengagement.⁶⁹ Yet he also knew it would be incredibly difficult to survive without the support of Soviet troops. Shevardnadze had clearly been promising him that the accords would not be signed unless the US also agreed to stop supplying arms. Over the previous month, this position had disintegrated, and now

⁶⁵ Politburo meeting March 3, 1988 GFA PB 1988, 89.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Politburo meeting April 1, 1988 GFA *Vestka v Politburo*, 312.

⁶⁸ Cherniaev Diary, April 1, 1988, GFA CD 1988.

⁶⁹ B. Padishev, "Najibullah, president Afganistana," *International Affairs* (Moscow) Jan. 1990, 20.

Soviet troops were preparing to withdraw and leave the Afghan army, such as it was, fighting largely alone.⁷⁰ He did what he could to ensure continued Soviet support.

Najibullah's resistance to an agreement that would potentially weaken him was on full display when Shevardnadze flew to Kabul on April 3. According to Deputy Minister Yulii Vorontsov, who was involved in the Geneva process and later served as ambassador to Afghanistan, Najibullah at first refused to sign. It took Shevardnadze three days of difficult persuasion to make the Afghan leader agree to the accords.⁷¹ It also took extensive promises of Soviet support and even the possibility of leaving 10-15,000 troops in the country.⁷² Shevardnadze stayed in Kabul until April 5, then returned to Moscow and announced that Najibullah had accepted the agreement. The next day he flew to Tashkent with Gorbachev, Kriuchkov, and Cherniaev to meet with Najibullah. By the time Gorbachev met Najibullah in Tashkent on April 7, all of these questions had largely been solved, and Gorbachev assured Najibullah that the Soviet government endorsed completely the agreement reached between Shevardnadze and the Afghan leader over the previous days.⁷³

The accords were a threat to Najibullah not only in that they deprived him of Soviet troops without any cut-off of supplies to the *mujahedeen*, but also because this meant that his authority within the government could be further eroded. This was

⁷⁰ Details regarding the condition of the Afghan armed forces is beyond the scope of this study, but a report made on March 9th by General Varennikov is quite telling and worth citing. Varennikov noted that desertion was on the rise and very little had actually been accomplished in terms of improving the Afghan army during the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. "Meeting of political workers and advisers in the Officer's House of the 40th Army in Kabul," March 9, 1988, in Plastun and Adrianov, *Najibullah v Tiskah Geopolitiki*, 208-212.

⁷¹ Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, 281.

⁷² Najibullah, knowing Gorbachev was eager to sign, asked about the possibility of leaving 10-15,000 troops both for training purposes and to help guard economic targets. Gorbachev left the question open but pointed out that it might be possible to do so within the framework of the Geneva agreement if these were sent as "advisors" who would train Afghans working with Soviet armaments: "after all, it is natural that when military technology is provided, there is a demand for help in mastering it. This is normal, everyone acts this way." While it could be argued that Gorbachev said this only to humor Najibullah and get his approval of the accords, Gorbachev's decision making in the fall of 1988, discussed in chapter 5, suggests that he really did believe in supporting Najibullah. Record of Conversation of MS Gorbachev with the President of Afghanistan and General Secretary of the CC PDPA Najibullah April 7, 1988 National Security Archive, READD/RADD Collection, Box 9.

⁷³ "Record of conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and the president of Afghanistan, Najibullah" April 7, 1988 NSA READD/RADD Collection, Box 9.

highlighted when DRA Foreign Minister Abdul Wakil refused to sign the accords in Geneva, saying that to do so would be to betray his people.⁷⁴ While Shevardnadze and Gorbachev met with Najibullah, Nikolai Kozyrev worked on Wakil in Geneva.⁷⁵ In his hotel room, Wakil put on a great show of emotion, ripping napkins and screaming that the Afghan people would never forgive him. Although Najibullah had agreed to the accords, Wakil still refused to sign, and only relented after Soviet deputy foreign minister Vorontsov, who flew to Geneva at Kozyrev's request and spent six hours alone with Wakil, made it clear that if the Foreign Minister did not sign, another official would be sent from Kabul.⁷⁶ The intense effort put in by Shevardnadze and his aides could only increase the Foreign Minister's sense of commitment to the Najibullah regime. More importantly, it highlighted how fragile Najibullah's position could be if it was not absolutely clear that he had complete Soviet support.

Gorbachev needed the meeting in Tashkent just as much as Najibullah. As he explained to Alessandro Natta, the General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, the imminent withdrawal from Afghanistan was already causing rumblings among Soviet allies, particularly in the Third World. The essence of this criticism, according to Gorbachev, was "you're 'abandoning' Afghanistan, and you will 'abandon' us."⁷⁷ While Gorbachev needed to demonstrate that the USSR really wanted to do business in a new way, he also needed to show that it was not about to leave its friends in the lurch. Proving that the Soviet Union could do both meant expressing confidence in Najibullah as a leader who could survive without the aid of Soviet troops. This was a key purpose

⁷⁴ Wakil insisted that the main obstacle was the issue of borders, i.e. the Durand line, which all parties pledged to respect. In fact, it was probably an attempt to scuttle the accords, which Wakil feared would mean the end of his government. Author's interview with Nikolai Kozyrev, Moscow, November 14, 2008.

⁷⁵ Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 359.

⁷⁶ Ibid; Author's interviews with Yulii Vorontsov, September 11, 2007 and Nikolai Kozyrev, November 14, 2008.. See also "Zalozhnik Istorii" (Interview with Nikolai Kozyrev) Moskovskiy Komsomolets March 5, 2004, No.49, pg.9.

⁷⁷ Record of conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party A. Natta, March 29, 1988, NSA READD/RADD Collection, Box 9.

of the April 7 meeting in Tashkent, a “heads of state meeting” that was supposed to represent the beginning of a new relationship between two sovereign states.

Gorbachev used the meeting to provide political cover for his approach.

Between April 1, when the decision to sign the accords was discussed, and April 14, when the signing ceremony took place, Gorbachev personally briefed communist bloc leaders and party bosses, telling them that Najibullah was a capable leader who was gaining in authority and that the USSR would continue to support him politically. This, and the usefulness of the Geneva accords, were central themes of his conversations with Cuban leader Fidel Castro on April 5 and with Czechoslovak President Husak on April 8.⁷⁸ At meetings with regional party secretaries called to Moscow in April after the Nina Andreyeva affair, which had alerted Gorbachev to the strength of conservative feeling in the country and within the leadership, he again stressed the importance of withdrawal. He admitted that there could be an unfavourable turn of events, but insisted the Geneva accords would help settle the political crisis.⁷⁹

Although Shevardnadze formed a united front with Gorbachev just prior to the signing of the accords, he was clearly unhappy with the result. On April 1, 1988, Shevardnadze told the Politburo that with the Geneva accords there was a “legal basis” for the withdrawal, which meant that the US could no longer use Pakistani bases to resupply the *mujahadeen*, and that there would be 150 monitors to make sure the accords were carried out.⁸⁰ In fact, Shevardnadze’s support for the accords was half-hearted at best. He had fought hard to secure an agreement to end arms supplies. In his memoirs, Shevardnadze confesses that he left Geneva with mixed feelings: “I knew that we would not lessen our political efforts for a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan, but still I could

⁷⁸ Record of telephone conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and F. Castro, April 5, 1988 GFA Document # 20686; Record of conversation between MS Gorbachev and President of the CSSR G. Husak (Czechoslovakia), April 12, 1988, GFA Document # 20684. Nina Andreyeva was a Leningrad chemistry teacher who published an article entitled “I will not forsake my principles” in *Sovetskaia Rossiia*. The article was applauded by more conservative party members. Brown, *Gorbachev Factor*, 172-175.

⁷⁹ Gorbachev’s meeting with the third group of Obkom secretaries, April 18, 1988 GFA PB 1988, 191.

⁸⁰ Politburo Meeting April 18, 1988 (Medvedev’s Notes) GFA PB 1988 211.

not rid myself of a sense of personal guilt toward my friends.”⁸¹ The accords were a much weaker document than what many in the Soviet government and the PDPA had sought. Although they did contain non-interference clauses, the question of arms supplies was left open. The accords contained no guarantee of a role for the PDPA in a future government and had only a weak enforcement mechanism. The latter point in particular greatly irked both the diplomats and the Soviet military.⁸²

For Gorbachev, the Geneva accords served a dual purpose: they could be used as a shield against conservatives as the withdrawal got underway and as proof of the USSR’s commitment to political solutions for Western audiences. Despite the weakness of the proposed document, Gorbachev argued that it was the best way to get out, in part because it would allow Moscow to maintain a degree of leverage in future discussions. The biggest caveat was the political victory. Arguing for signing the accords rather than a unilateral withdrawal, he put the issue in the wider context of his domestic and international challenges: “it is hard to overestimate the political value of settling the Afghan problem. This will be a confirmation of our new approach to solving international problems. Our enemies and opponents will have their strongest arguments knocked out of their hands.”⁸³ The limited discussion of Afghanistan in his memoir stresses this aspect: “The significance of this unprecedented settlement went far beyond its regional implications. It was the first time that the Soviet Union and the United States, together with the conflicting parties, had signed an agreement which paved the way for a political solution of the conflict.”⁸⁴ Gorbachev was less concerned with the fate of Afghanistan than with the success of his broader foreign policy.

For all the rhetoric about changing the way conflicts were solved and the way the USSR behaved in its foreign relations, Gorbachev had to go to great lengths to show

⁸¹ Shevardnadze, *Future Belongs to Freedom*, 69.

⁸² Liakhovskii interview; “Sud’ba i Sovest,” 51.

⁸³ Politburo meeting April 1, 1988 GFA *Vestka v Politburo*, 312.

⁸⁴ Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 458.

that in many ways things were still the same. One phrase in particular from the April 7 Tashkent meeting captures this. Seeking to reassure Najibullah that the USSR intended to keep supporting the regime with arms, Gorbachev framed the commitment in thoroughly uncompromising terms: "Even in the most difficult, harsh circumstances, even under conditions of strict control, in any situation we will provide you with arms."⁸⁵ This was a far cry from the talk of mutual settlement of conflicts that had come from Gorbachev so often on previous occasions. As often throughout his tenure, Gorbachev manoeuvred between two positions: one that was imaginative and reformist, the other much closer to traditional Soviet policy and priorities. While this rhetoric was presented to different audiences, Gorbachev's willingness to make contradicting promises and statements would come to haunt him during the withdrawal period, when some of his advisers expected him to stick to the letter of the accords, while other insisted that he honour his promises to Najibullah.

Conclusion

Between the August of 1987 and April 1988 Moscow took a series of steps to begin its disengagement from Afghanistan. These initiatives followed the failure of earlier policies to create the conditions necessary for an honourable withdrawal. Moscow's hopes in late 1987 and early 1988 focused on enticing the US to sign an agreement that would make the Soviet withdrawal justifiable in the eyes of its allies. The withdrawal ultimately began without the key US agreement on cutting off supplies to the *mujahadeen*. Moscow could have withdrawn unilaterally or delayed the withdrawal until a later date in the hopes of gaining concessions at the bargaining table. The military supported the first option, while Najibullah and his most fervent supporters in Moscow, Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov, did not want to sign any accords that left the

⁸⁵ "Record of conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and the president of Afghanistan, Najibullah," April 7, 1988, NSA READD/RADD Collection, Box 9.

Kabul government facing an enemy still supported from the outside without the Soviet army to carry on the fight. It was Gorbachev's decisions and actions at key points that decided the actual turn of events.

It has been pointed out that around mid-1987 Gorbachev, increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of reforms, began to see all of his country's problems as interlinked and solvable either all at once or not at all.⁸⁶ This observation helps explain Gorbachev's Afghanistan policy in the period discussed in this chapter. In previous periods, Gorbachev had approved different policies that would improve the situation within Afghanistan. Now he took a more direct, personal role to try to bring the Soviet intervention to an end. There were two reasons why Gorbachev was willing to abandon seemingly strong negotiating positions. Firstly, he hoped that this would help achieve a broader improvement in relations with the US. Secondly, and most importantly, he did not want to drag out the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan any longer, because by the end of 1987 he had lost faith in most Soviet military and political efforts within that country. Gorbachev's initiative proved crucial in ensuring a withdrawal date was announced in February 1988 and that the accords were signed in March. He overrode objections from the military as well as people closer to him, like Shevardnadze, to bring this about. Gorbachev chose this course because he believed that he could sacrifice a favourable settlement on Afghanistan for a broader improvement in relations with the West.

Many of the people around Gorbachev were not so sanguine about the chances of a US – Soviet rapprochement leading to a favourable resolution in Afghanistan. Quite correctly, they saw that the Reagan administration was not inclined to give up aid to the *mujahadeen*; not only did Reagan himself believe in the moral value of that aid, but there was a vocal congressional lobby that was sceptical of even his very limited

⁸⁶ Zubok, "Gorbachev," 61-100.

engagement with the USSR on this and other regional issues.⁸⁷ More importantly, some of the most senior officials around Gorbachev were very closely involved with the Kabul leadership and saw themselves as responsible for representing the PDPA's interests. This included the KGB chairman Vladimir Kriuchkov and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. Shevardnadze may indeed have felt a great deal of "personal" responsibility, but with Kriuchkov it was also an issue of maintaining Soviet (and KGB) commitments to client governments. Perhaps they saw the abandonment of Kabul as a precedent for the Soviet government to abandon all of its commitments – a domino effect started from the centre. Najibullah exploited this situation fully, securing promises from Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov in return for his cooperation in Gorbachev's diplomatic game. This explains the frequent references to protecting "friends," a concern which Gorbachev acknowledged but was willing to set aside.

For all of his emphasis on New Political Thinking, which was genuine, Gorbachev could not ignore such concerns. He had to think about his political strength at home and also about the USSR's relationship with its allies. His promise of support and arms supplies to Najibullah "no matter what" was only one example of his willingness to conduct relations with Third World client states much the way his predecessors had. On April 1, the day that the Geneva accords were discussed, he approved a major airlift of arms to Colonel Haile Miriam Mengistu's regime in Ethiopia – ignoring the objection of Cherniaev as well as reports from Marshall Akhromeev, the chief of staff, which showed that the situation was hopeless.⁸⁸ Similarly, for all the talk about applying New Political Thinking to other international problems, Gorbachev made no serious effort to tie in Soviet aid to the Sandinistas or to the MPLA in Angola.

⁸⁷ On April 12, two days before the signing ceremony in Geneva, Reagan complained in his diary: "Another meeting with leaders of hard Conservative leaders [sic] Paul Weyrich, Gen. Graham etc ... As usual they had us on the wrong side in Afghanistan settlement, Mozambique, Chile & Angola. It's amazing how certain they can be when they know so little of what we're really doing." Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 595.

⁸⁸ Cherniaev Diary, April 1, 1988, GFA CD 1988. Cherniaev notes that he had attached a memorandum to the plan for supplies urging Gorbachev to focus on making Mengistu change his approach to the Eritrean separatists, but Gorbachev simply pulled it off and signed the supply plan.

The “conservative” (in this case) critics who were unhappy with the accords did not offer viable alternatives, however, and this explains why support in the Politburo for signing the accords was nearly unanimous in March 1988. Delaying the withdrawal would have brought more Soviet deaths at a time when Gorbachev had already called the war a “bleeding wound.” It might also have undercut the enormous leap he was about to take in US-Soviet relations. A unilateral withdrawal would have provided the USSR with greater freedom of action in the future, but it would have done the same for both the Pakistanis and the Americans. The Geneva Accords at least created a precedent for international agreement, and, by convincing all parties that the USSR was serious about pulling out, helped achieve a relatively bloodless withdrawal.

In developing New Political Thinking, Gorbachev had to reconcile two often contradictory positions, maintaining Soviet prestige while increasing cooperation with the West. This was most difficult in relation to Afghanistan, where the minimum necessary to enable an “honourable” Soviet withdrawal was far from what was sought by the United States and its allies. The key issue, as Gorbachev saw it, was to build up trust, rather than continue to undermine it by stalling at negotiations, which in any case would lead to a prolonged stay in Afghanistan. It was no longer a question of “winning” in Afghanistan, but rather of converting the withdrawal into a foreign policy triumph in other areas. As he put it to the Politburo after the accords were signed, “having lost in Afghanistan we have to win in the world.”⁸⁹

In April 1988, Gorbachev believed that the concessions made to the United States over the past several months were worth the price, since they would lead to a new relationship between the two countries and the solution of problems in Third World “hot spots.” The behaviour of Shevardnadze, Kriuchkov, and even Gorbachev, showed that

⁸⁹ Politburo meeting, April 18, 1988 GFA PB 1988, 215.

there was a limit to how far Moscow would go in backing away from support to its client in Kabul.

Chapter 5: Politics and Diplomacy During the Withdrawal

In a memorandum written for Gorbachev in 1986, Aleksandr Iakovlev, the “architect of Perestroika,” argued that Soviet foreign policy making was hampered by the competition and in-fighting that took place between various bodies, including the KGB and the military. The only way to overcome this, Iakovlev said, was to create a body to oversee the co-ordination of foreign policy making in the model of the National Security Council.¹ Nowhere was Iakovlev’s critique more applicable than in the case of Afghanistan, where the military, the KGB, the party, and the foreign ministry conducted different, often contradictory policies. All of them operated with the same ostensible goal in mind: to create a stable government in Afghanistan that could stand on its own two feet even after Soviet troops withdrew. In practice, each had its own view of how this was to be accomplished.

The signing of the Geneva Accords and the start of the troop withdrawal only exacerbated these divisions, which reflected not only disagreement on Soviet priorities within Afghanistan but also very different assessments of the situation. To take one example, senior Soviet military officers in Afghanistan, organizing the transfer of over 100,000 troops and assorted materiel through largely hostile territory along treacherous and poorly defended roads, looked for arrangements that would ensure the safety of their soldiers. For this reason they tried to convince both Moscow and the PDPA leadership in Kabul to make peace with the Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. The KGB and Shevardnadze believed that the best way to ensure such an outcome was by showing that Najibullah had the complete support of the Soviet Union even if its troops were withdrawing. This meant not only meeting all his requests for materiel, but also being willing to go to battle on his behalf, thus showing his detractors within the PDPA leadership that Najibullah was still top man and demoralizing the opposition.

¹ On Certain Measures to Reform Foreign Policy, 1986, GARF, F. 10063, op.2, d. 69

When Najibullah refused and insisted that the Soviet military help attack Massoud, he had the backing of the KGB as well as Foreign Minister Shevardnadze.

Gorbachev's own position changed several times during this period. In July 1987 he insisted that further Soviet participation in military action was out of the question and that there was no possibility of the troops withdrawal being delayed. Later in the year he changed his mind on both counts; by February 1989 he would change it back again. The Politburo seemed to lurch back and forth between contradictory positions. The fate of Afghanistan was far from inconsequential for Gorbachev and other Soviet leaders, and they looked for ways to withdraw without leaving behind chaos. The situation that played out between April 1988 and March 1989 showed that there was still no consensus on what needed to be done.

There were two conflicting forces pulling on Afghan policy between the signing of the Geneva Accords and the end of the Soviet withdrawal in February 1989. The first was the desire to capitalise on the improvement in relations with the US, which seemed on the verge of radical transformation in the Spring of 1988. The second was the desire and political necessity of demonstrating that Moscow could carry out this radical transformation in its relations with the capitalist world without "abandoning its friends" in the Third World. Gorbachev himself maneuvered between various positions and streams of advice. His preferences were dictated first and foremost by his larger foreign policy priorities and challenges, less so the developments in Afghanistan.

Making the Best of the Geneva Accords: The Moscow Conference and After

Moscow signed the Geneva Accords, accepting "negative symmetry," to end direct Soviet involvement in a long and bloody war. Gorbachev and other Soviet leaders also hoped that withdrawing troops would improve Soviet relations with the US. The new relationship might then pay dividends in the form of greater cooperation on the part

of the United States in enabling reconciliation in Afghanistan. Throughout the withdrawal period (May 1988 to February 1989), Moscow sought to make the most of the Geneva accords by continuing talks with the United States, trying to press for enforcement of the accords through the United Nations and continuing negotiations with opposition leaders and with Pakistan. At the same time, however, Soviet leaders subordinated largely subordinated the Afghan problem to the key goal of building on the Washington summit and improving US-Soviet relations.

As the last chapter showed, the Geneva Accords were a much weaker agreement than what Soviet diplomats had worked towards over many years. It did not obligate the United States to stop supplying the opposition via Pakistan, although technically it did bind Pakistan to stop the flow of arms. The accords had a weak enforcement mechanism: a small UN observation force that could take note of violations and pass them on to UN headquarters. Nikolai Kozyrev, the Soviet diplomat who negotiated the accords, wrote that “the legal documents of the Geneva accords, even if they were not faultless, could, if strictly adhered to, lead to a settlement of the most important foreign policy aspects of the Afghan problem: the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country, barring any outside interference into the affairs of Afghanistan, and return to the country the main body of refugees.”² Yet even he admits that in practice, the Geneva accords as signed in April 1988 were a face saving exercise that allowed the USSR to “withdraw its troops in a dignified manner” and continue to support the Kabul regime, as well as soften the negative reaction to the withdrawal from countries such as Cuba and India.³

In conversations with Politburo and party colleagues as well as foreign leaders, Gorbachev spoke of the Geneva accords as the first great success of new thinking. This had several important implications. If he used force now, it could cost him some of the

² Kozyrev, *Zhenevskie Soglashenie*, 35.

³ Ibid, 46.

political capital accumulated as a result. If, however, Najibullah fell too quickly, it could be ammunition for the conservatives and could harm the Soviet Union's relations with its allies. At a Politburo meeting on April 18, he made it clear that new political thinking was more important than worrying about what allies might think: "we have an agreement, there could be turns in the development of the situation. But we will not allow ourselves to violate the agreement, especially before the face of the whole world."⁴ Significantly, he also assigned Aleksandr Iakovlev, the most liberal of the reformers in the Politburo, to the Afghanistan commission. The Afghanistan commission, Gorbachev said, had to take advantage of the Geneva accords and continue "unting the knot of collision of interests on the world, regional, and Afghan scales."⁵ Assigning Iakovlev to the Afghan commission reflected a commitment to new political thinking.

In the months after the withdrawal began it became clear that, in violation of the Geneva accords, Pakistan was continuing to aid the *mujahadeen*. Soviet and Afghan diplomats filed numerous complaints with the UN office in Kabul. Among the complaints were reports that Pakistan continued to operate training centers, supply hardware for the opposition, and even actively participate in transporting fighters over the border from Pakistan.⁶ Gorbachev had three choices: he could halt the withdrawal, undertake major operations to knock out *mujahadeen* positions, or he could limit his protests to the diplomatic arena. More than the withdrawal was at stake. As Gorbachev told his colleagues at a Politburo session on April 18th "We have to get the most out of the Geneva accords. It's not just about Afghanistan. We are taking major steps towards realizing new thinking, a recognition of a balance of interests, and the search for paths of cooperation."⁷ Afghanistan had been one of the major issues impeding improvement

⁴ Politburo Meeting, April 18, 1988 GFA PB, 211.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Liakhovskii *Tragedia i doblest'*, 588.

⁷ Politburo Meeting April 18, 1988 (Medvedev's Notes) GFA PB 1988 213.

in Soviet-American relations since 1979; now the Geneva accords offered an opportunity not only to remove that obstacle to a new *détente* but to provide a model for how the superpowers would settle similar difficult issues in the future.

The behavior of Soviet diplomats in the weeks around the Moscow Summit showed the US that Moscow was looking first and foremost for an improvement in bilateral relations. When the US Chargé d’Affaires in Kabul, Jon D. Glassman, met the Soviet Ambassador, Nikolai Yegorychev, the latter avoided any discussion of violations of the Geneva Accords by either the Pakistan or the US. When the US chargé brought up Afghan allegations that the accords were being violated, Yegorychev replied that the “Soviet Union works with the Afghan government but is not responsible for its actions. Nor...is the United States responsible for the acts of the *mujahadeen*.” In his report back to the State Department, Glassman noted that “Yegorychev appeared to be dissociating the Soviet Union from RA allegations of Pakistani Geneva violations.”⁸

Why was Gorbachev suddenly willing to leave Afghanistan off the table in his relations with the US? In the spring of 1988, US-Soviet relations were on the verge of an unprecedented breakthrough. The Moscow summit promised to be the culmination of Gorbachev’s “peace offensive.” Gorbachev’s standing and popularity rose in the US, Europe, and even at home.⁹ The presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan had been a major obstacle to improving the US-Soviet relationship, and signaling the seriousness of Soviet intentions to withdraw in September 1987 had helped the ultimate success of the Washington Summit that December.¹⁰ Concerns about sustaining this momentum eclipsed, for the time being, concerns about what might happen in Afghanistan following a Soviet withdrawal. Further, despite the disappointing US attitude on arms supplied in the winter of 1988, Gorbachev still held out hope that eventually the Reagan administration might prove more cooperative, particularly if there were gains in other

⁸ US Embassy, Kabul to State Department, May 21, 1988 NSA End of the Cold War Collection, Box 3.

⁹ Brown, *Gorbachev Factor*, 236-238.

¹⁰ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 987.

areas of the relationship. Finally, Moscow would try to rely more heavily on the UN in helping to regulate the conflict and limit Pakistani interference.

Moscow's reluctance to let Afghanistan mar the improvement in US-Soviet relations was evident at the Moscow summit itself in May. Afghanistan was discussed at the experts and foreign ministers level, along with a host of other regional issues, including the Horn of Africa and Central America. The Soviet Union and the United States were still far apart when it came to resolving regional problems. Shevardnadze reported at the plenary session that, on each of the topics discussed, "deep and serious issues remain. In a few areas, the method and procedures for a settlement seemed in sight, but further work was required." Yet on Afghanistan Shevardnadze restricted himself to commenting on Pakistani violations of the accords and the importance of upholding the accords in general.¹¹

In the plenary session Gorbachev tried to push both his broader ideas on regional conflicts as well as on Afghanistan. The American side should take him seriously, he said, when he spoke of finding a new way in which regional conflicts were solved. The US side could be assured that "The hand of Moscow would be a constructive hand." Afghanistan, he told his counterparts, was a "thing of the past," and should be seen as the first example of Third World conflict resolution by the United States and the Soviet Union. But he also urged the United States to help settle the conflict. He did not want to see a fundamentalist Muslim government there, but he would support the transition to a coalition government. Unlike earlier discussions on Afghanistan, here Gorbachev did not accuse the United States of playing an obstructionist role; all of his complaints in this regard were reserved for Pakistan.¹²

¹¹ Moscow Summit, Second Plenary Meeting, June 1, 1988 NSA End of the Cold War Collection, Box 3, pg. 4.

Reagan's comment during the summit that he no longer saw the USSR as an "evil empire," seemed to show that Gorbachev's strategy was working.

¹² Ibid, pg. 12.

While unwilling to press the issue too forcefully on a bilateral level with the Americans, particularly around the time of the May summit, Moscow did try to bring up violations with UN officials. Soviet and Afghan diplomats sent numerous reports of violations to UNGOMAP, citing the existence of bases on Pakistani territory as well as the continued movement of arms across the border.¹³ They also made appeals in public and in a confidential manner to the UN officials.¹⁴ In the fall the Ministry of Foreign Affairs even published a “white-book” called *Fulfillment of the Geneva Accords is in the Interests of all Humanity*. Towards the end of the summer, when the military situation within Afghanistan was becoming particularly difficult, the tone of Soviet protests became harsher. An editorial in the September 1988 issue of the Soviet journal *International Affairs* complained about the “gross violation” of the Geneva Accords by Pakistan: “The Pakistani President pretends that there is nothing worthy of attention in the Geneva accords but the withdrawal of the Soviet armed forces from Afghanistan. Foreign interference in Afghan affairs did not stop after May 15 but intensified.” The editorial even went on to criticise the US directly: “Nor can we understand the attitude

¹³ The United Nations Good Offices Mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a team of fifty military observers sent to monitor the Soviet withdrawal. See Perez de Cuellar, *Pilgrimage for Peace*, 198-199.

¹⁴ See, for example, the MID letter passed to the UN Secretary General’s Office, dated June 2, 1988, or record of conversation between DRA Foreign Minister Abdul Wakil and Perez de Cuellar, June 2, 1988, both in SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10. The UN’s inability (or unwillingness) to do anything about Pakistani “interference” is evident in Cordovez’s report on his visit to the area and investigation of Soviet-Afghan allegations. Apparently, he was satisfied with Pakistan’s response that Islamabad intended to follow the Geneva Accords to the letter and that whatever violations took place were the result of 3,000,000 Afghan refugees whose “legitimate political activities” Pakistan could not restrict.

“Implementation of the Agreements on the Settlement of the Situation Relating to Afghanistan: Progress Report by the Representative of the Secretary-General,” July 26, 1988, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 102; See also Cordovez to S. Shah Nawaz, Pakistan’s Permanent Representative to the UN, 10 June 1988. Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 110. In a later letter to Abdul Wakil and Yaqub Khan, dated October 20, 1988, Cordovez insisted that the UN could not issue judgments on complaints and that the “letter and spirit” of the Geneva Accords required the parties to sort the problem out amongst themselves. Cordovez also begged both sides to be more selective in their complaints. Such meetings as Cordovez mentioned were envisaged in the accords; Pakistan initially rejected them, then agreed to conduct them at a Charge level. They never took place. Later reports of UNGOMAP investigations from 1988 generally either noted that Afghan/Soviet complaints regarding Pakistani activities (as well as Pakistani complaints about alleged Soviet/Afghani bombing on or near Pakistani territory) could not be investigated or did not constitute “clear violations of the Geneva Accords.” UN officials admitted the difficulty of fully investigating most of these complaints, due to “insufficient information and details, frequent impossibility of locating the positions mentioned...as well as difficulties of terrain and security conditions.” Note for the Secretary General, 7 October 1988, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 110. One might add that the small number of UNGOMAP staff would also have made investigating a large number of complaints extremely difficult. See also Afghanistan: Recent Developments (Note for the SG) December 2, 1988 SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 110.

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Since February, US officials were convinced that the Soviet Union would pull back its troops. This had allowed Shultz to maintain a tough line on symmetry when negotiating with Shevardnadze in March and to brush off any hints that Moscow might halt the withdrawal.¹⁷ The acting US Secretary of State, Michael Armacost, summarised the US position in a conversation with Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in June: “There was no evidence of Soviet suspension of withdrawal. It was hard to see how they could now do so. Forces impelling continuing withdrawal were greater now than they were when the withdrawals had begun.”¹⁸

By September, with the situation in Afghanistan growing more desperate for Najibullah, Moscow began to look for ways to regain some leverage vis-à-vis Pakistan and the US. At a Politburo meeting on Afghanistan, Gorbachev agreed that Moscow would have to start taking a harsher line. Rather than saying publicly that the Soviet Union was committed to withdrawal, officials should emphasise that the complete return of Soviet troops was linked to the developing situation in Afghanistan. In other words, if the United States and Pakistan continued to be uncooperative, Moscow might reconsider its commitments under the Geneva Accords.¹⁹

Moscow needed to set a precedent in order to show that it took the accords seriously and that it expected the other contracting parties to do so as well. Soviet diplomats cited the accords at every opportune moment.²⁰ They tried to use the UN as a forum to highlight US and Pakistani non-compliance and to display on the seriousness of Soviet threats to keep its troops in Afghanistan. Soon after the September 18 Politburo meeting, Shevardnadze asked the Security Council to convene a meeting to discuss violations of the Geneva accords and threatened to delay the troop withdrawal.

¹⁷ Author’s interview with Ambassador Jack Matlock, January 1, 2008.

¹⁸ Armacost to US Embassy, New Delhi, June 9, 1988 NSA End of the Cold War, Box 3.

¹⁹ Politburo Meeting, September 18, 1988, GFA PB 1988.

²⁰ Author’s interview with Ambassador Yulii Vorontsov, Moscow, September 11, 2007.

²¹ At the meeting, the Soviet representative charged UNGOMAP with “not doing its job properly,” an accusation the US rejected.²² Throughout the autumn of 1988, Soviet diplomats would continue to insist that if the situation in Afghanistan were not settled by February 15, Soviet troops would stay beyond the deadline. The bluff failed to work. US diplomats saw such claims primarily as a tactic and had little doubt that Soviet troops would withdraw by the deadline.²³

Even as the possibility of threatening a continued Soviet presence faded, new opportunities presented themselves to solve the problem through diplomacy. Since the launch of National Reconciliation, Soviet diplomats, advisers, KGB officials, and the military had been engaged in an effort to negotiate with rebel leaders to bring them into a coalition government. With the start of the withdrawal these efforts intensified. One Soviet foreign ministry official even earned the nickname “mujahed” from his colleagues because he spent so much time negotiating with rebel commanders.²⁴ In the summer and fall of 1988 these efforts even began to show some success.

Soviet diplomats and others working to open channels to the *mujahadeen* between March 1988 and February 1989 were operating with two goals in mind. They needed to ensure the safety of Soviet troops during the withdrawal. For this reason they were willing to accept cease-fires that did not necessarily extend to the Afghan army.²⁵ At the same time they were also trying to continue the long-term work of forming a stable government in Afghanistan.

By continuing talks with Pakistan as well as individual commanders, Moscow was able to take advantage of Islamabad’s earlier desire to create a coalition

²¹ Rogers, *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, 45.

²² Afghanistan: Recent Developments (Note for the Secretary General) October 28, 1988 SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 110.

²³ Record of meeting between Mr. Benon Sevan and Mr. Michael Armacost, November 14, 1988 SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 103.

²⁴ Author’s interview with Pavel Palazchenko, Moscow, RF March 20, 2008; Author’s interview with Leonid Shebarshin, Moscow, RF March 19, 2008.

²⁵ Notes on a meeting between US Under-Secretary of State Michael Armacost and Benon Sevan November 14, 1988 SML Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 103.

government in Kabul. Pakistan had originally refused to discuss the issue, then demanded it be resuscitated when the Geneva Accords were about to be signed. Moscow, which had been trying to push a coalition government since the end of 1986, did not want to delay the start of the withdrawal any longer by agreeing to wait for one to be formed.²⁶ Now that the withdrawal had started, however, Pakistan's interest in a coalition government offered Soviet diplomats a new opportunity.

For Moscow, this development seemed to herald a new opportunity to work for the formation of a coalition government that included the Soviet Union's own allies and moderate opposition elements and was at the same time strong enough to stabilise the country. Parallel to talks with rebel leaders, Soviet officials continued talks with Pakistan about the possibility of a coalition government. In the summer of 1988, Zia told Vorontsov, Moscow's ambassador to Kabul, that he would support a solution in which a third of the government would be PDPA, a third would be the "moderate" opposition, including royalists, and a third would be from the "Peshawar seven." Vorontsov passed the message on to Moscow and received a positive response.²⁷ Although such an arrangement might face opposition from Najibullah or others in the PDPA, the opportunity to form a government that contained Moscow's allies but was also recognised by Pakistan was too good to pass up.

Zia's death in a plane crash that summer put an end to that particular opening. Other opportunities appeared, however. In December Secretary General helped to arrange a meeting for Vorontsov and *mujahadeen* leaders, including Rabbani, in Saudi Arabia. Although the meeting itself was a sign of how far the Soviet Union was willing to try to find a settlement in Afghanistan, it did not produce any concrete results.²⁸ The bigger problem for the Soviets in trying to negotiate a coalition government was the

²⁶ See chapter 4.

²⁷ Author's interview with Ambassador Yulii Vorontsov, Moscow, September 11, 2007.

²⁸ Author's interview with Ambassador Yulii Vorontsov, September 11, 2007. See also notes on Gorbachev and Perez de Cuellar Meeting, December 7, 1988, and Talking Points prepared for Perez de Cuellar: SML Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 103.

continued difficulty of pushing Najibullah and the PDPA toward an agreement.

(Another problem was the continued in-fighting among the “Peshawar-7” and their ISI interlocutors, which, in the Soviet view, had only gotten worse since Zia’s death.)²⁹ As we will see below, disagreements among different Soviet offices and services, particularly among the KGB and the military, made the effort to press for a coalition government even more difficult.

Moscow’s effort to use diplomacy to strengthen the Geneva Accords between April 1988 and February 1989 brought few concrete results. Soviet diplomats could threaten to suspend the withdrawal, but hardly anyone seems to have taken such threats seriously. It had become very clear to US policymakers in February 1988 that the Soviets wanted out and were unlikely to go through with threats to put off the withdrawal. Gorbachev’s desire to build on the improving relationship with the US made such a possibility even less likely. But his earlier concerns about how the withdrawal was perceived in the Third World and the possible reactions of conservatives at home had not disappeared; he was keen to prove that he could protect Soviet prestige even while engaging with, and making concessions to, its main enemy. When the Geneva Accords were signed, Gorbachev said that they could be a model for the new way of solving conflicts. Thus Moscow still looked for ways to protect its interests within Afghanistan and avoid a collapse of the PDPA government. The failure to do this through diplomacy and the UN led Gorbachev, in the fall of 1988, to entertain and accept proposals for desperate last minute offensive measures.

The KGB and Najibullah, the military and Massoud

For some time a conflict had been brewing among senior Soviet officials working on Afghanistan. As chapter 3 showed, the Soviet military and the KGB had taken sides in

²⁹ Record of Conversation between Vladimir Petrovsky, Deputy Foreign Minister of the USSR, and Perez de Cuellar on October 21, 1988. SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 102.

the Khalq/Parcham split almost from the beginning of the intervention. The critical situation in the summer and fall of 1988 brought these divisions out. Rival DRA leaders tried to take advantage of the differences among Soviet officials to gain advantage. The disagreements of Soviet officials within Afghanistan echoed uncertainty at the Politburo level, whose members were divided about the best course to pursue in Afghanistan. Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov continued to believe that Moscow had to put all its weight behind Najibullah, while others were willing to see a Najibullah-less PDPA enter into a coalition with opposition movements.³⁰

One of the biggest areas of disagreement was the extent of support for Najibullah. An area where the split emerged initially was regarding the formation of a “presidential guard.” The formation of the guard, which was supposed to be loyal to Najibullah alone and provide for the defense of the government in Kabul, reflected how little confidence the Afghan president had in his own military. Soviet military officers did not support the idea. In an August 4th meeting with Shevardnadze during the Foreign Minister’s visit to Kabul, Varenikov argued that the guard was doing more harm than good, upsetting Afghan army officers who complained that guard officers were earning 5-10 times more than they did.³¹ With Shevardnadze’s support, however, Najibullah was able to continue developing the guard.

Najibullah’s support among other PDPA leaders had never been absolute. On the one hand, he was not trusted by Khalqis any more than Karmal had been. His previous tenure as the chairman of the dreaded secret police, or Khad, also did not win him many friends. Key to Najibullah’s ability to stay in power had been absolute support from Moscow. With Soviet troops withdrawing, this aura of absolute support had begun to

³⁰ This confusion is reflected in a conversation between Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Petrovsky and Perez de Cuellar on October 21, 1988. Although Moscow seemed to be throwing all its weight behind Najibullah (see below) Petrovsky “indicated” that [Najibullah] would leave the scene.” SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 102.

³¹ Mikhail Sotskov *Dolg i Sovest: Zakrytie Stranitsy Afganskoi Voiny* (St. Petersburg: Professional, 2007), I: 101-108. This argument was also presented to Shevardnadze by Muhammad Gulabzoi, the Minister of Internal Affairs. Handwritten notes taken at Shevardnadze’s meeting with Gulabzoi and Tanai, September 1988, provided to the author by Dr. Antonio Giustozzi, LSE.

fade. Najibullah's rivals within the PDPA came out of the woodwork and tried to win the support of Moscow.

The most serious challenge to Najibullah's power to emerge in the fall of 1988 was that of Shahnawaz Tanai and Seid Muhammad Gulabzoi. The two had similar backgrounds. Tanai had joined Khalq in the early 1970s, taken part in the 1978 uprising and subsequently risen through the ranks of the military and the party. Between 1985 and 1988 he was chief of the general staff. In the meantime he had also been elected a member of the central committee and in 1987 became a candidate member for the Politburo. That summer, apparently as a result of Soviet insistence, he was made Minister of Defense.³² Gulabzoi had taken part in the 1973 uprising against Daoud and played a key role in the Saur uprising. He had a falling out with Amin, returned under Karmal, and then risen to the post of Minister of Internal Affairs.³³

On September 2nd, Tanai approached Sotskov, the recently appointed Soviet military adviser in Kabul, and tried to get his support to have Najibullah replaced. Tanai told him "you, comrade Sotskov, have to understand something else: everything that Najibullah is doing is to save his own regime, that of the Parchamists. And he will do this going forward, whatever it costs him. The main thing is that he hopes to hold power in his hands."³⁴ Tanai told Sotskov that, at a PDPA Politburo meeting the previous day, he had made arguments in line with the thinking of the Soviets, and the military command in particular: a coalition government needed to be formed with representatives of all opposition group, the defense of Kabul and its communications needed to be improved. Now he made a series of points to Sotskov in support of his bid to oust Najibullah:

- 1) The army is the only real force in Afghanistan, I have 50 thousand troops and Gulabzoi has 30 thousand.

³² Slinkin, *Afganistan vremen Taraki i Amina*, 295-296.

³³ Ibid, 211-212.

³⁴ Mikhail Sotskov, *Dolg i sovest: zakrytie stranitsy Afganskoiv Voiny* (St. Petersburg: Professional, 2007), I: 113.

- 2) Ahmad Shah will not become president, since he only has support in the north-west. The people know me and support me. Ahmad Shah knows that I have all the power...I have channels to him and can meet him personally but... first, the Soviet Union has to support me and sanction a meeting.
- 3) Ahmad Shah must know that you are supporting me. The war could be stopped by dividing spheres of influence.
- 4) I will be backed not just by Khalqists but by honest Parchamists as well
- 5) Real power is needed in Kabul. The [presidential] guard is inadequate.³⁵

Tanai asked for this information to be relayed in Moscow, but that it not be shared with any other Soviet representatives in Kabul except Varennikov. Sotskov relayed this information in a cipher on the evening of Sept 2nd.³⁶

Tanai did not give up, and tried to open channels to other Soviet military advisers. On September 6th Leonid Levchenko, advisor to the General Staff, brought Tanai and Gulabzoi to see Sotskov. This time Gulabzoi made the case for their position, saying that Najib could not hold the reigns of power and needed to resign. He suggested Mohammad Hassan Sharq as a temporary leader, and spoke of opening direct contacts with Hekmatyar and Rabbani. When Sotskov reported this to Marshal Akhromeev, the latter told him to sit on the information until Gulabzoi and Tanai came to Moscow at end of September.³⁷

Gulabzoi and Tanai's bid failed. It never received any support in Moscow, in part because it never had more than the tacit support of Soviet military advisors in Afghanistan and probably had none from the Minister of Defense, Yazov. Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze, on the other hand, were strongly opposed to challenges to Najibullah's authority. For months KGB representatives had been aware that a conflict was brewing between Gulabzoi and Najibullah and had tried to convince the former to make peace. Kriuchkov even met with Gulabzoi directly, and Shevardnadze met with both Gulabzoi and Tanai. Shevardnadze urged Gulabzoi to focus on maintaining unity

³⁵ Ibid, 113-115.

³⁶ Ibid, 116.

³⁷ Ibid, 118-119.

within the leadership, insisting that “if a split happens it will be the end of the Khalqists and the Parchamists.” What he said next was particularly revealing about Moscow’s concerns: “if you suffer a defeat [*porazhenie*], this would be a serious political defeat [*porazhenie*] for the USSR.” Gulabzoi insisted that he was a faithful friend of the USSR, but he did not trust Najibullah.³⁸ While Tanai was more open to calls for unity, Gulabzoi proved intransigent. Evidently, the rift between him and Najibullah had grown too wide. On October 6, a week after his meetings in Moscow, Gulabzoi was relieved as head of the Kabul garrison. A month later he was sent to Moscow as ambassador, where he could no longer pose an immediate threat to Najibullah.³⁹

Sotskov and Varenikov were willing to listen to Gulabzoi and Tanai not just because they represented the Khalqi faction and the Afghan military, but because what the two Afghans said corresponded to their own reading of the situation. The Soviet military had been arguing that it was necessary to open talks with Massoud, even that it would be possible to entice him into some sort of coalition government. With Najibullah rejecting talks with Massoud and pressing instead for further military operations against him, Tanai and Gulabzoi naturally appeared the more appropriate partners. The incident had enraged Kriuchkov, who resented the military’s undertaking of political and diplomatic activity. On September 26 Kriuchkov called in Sotskov and berated him: “You are expected to help the army fight successfully, not engage in politics. Najibullah is supported by our leadership and by Mikhail Sergeevich. We and all of the representatives in Kabul need to support Najibullah.”⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the Policy of National Reconciliation meanwhile continued, at least nominally. Yet this policy too was undermined by the disagreements within the party and among Soviet intelligence officers regarding which commanders to focus their

³⁸ Handwritten notes taken at Shevardnadze’s meeting with Gulabzoi and Tanai, September 1988, provided to the author by Dr. Antonio Giustozzi, LSE.

³⁹ Author’s interview with Leonid Shebarshin, Moscow, RF March 19, 2008.

⁴⁰ Sotskov, *Dolg i Sovest*, 120.

efforts on. The biggest point of disagreement was over Ahmad Shah Massoud. An accommodation with him was particularly important for Soviet troops during the withdrawal, since Massoud controlled territories in Northern Afghanistan through which they would have to pass. The “Kabul-Khairaton” highway, which might fall under his control after the withdrawal of Soviet troops, was particularly important since it was the only artery for delivering Soviet supplies by land to Kabul. He had agreed in principle to hold his fire while Soviet forces withdrew.⁴¹ Further, Soviet officers and advisers believed that Massoud could play a constructive role in reconciliation and in a coalition government. They were very unhappy with Najibullah’s efforts, beginning in the summer of 1988, to draw the 40th army into battle against Massoud.

Relations with Massoud became a major point of disagreement between Najibullah and the Soviet command. Varennikov found Najibullah’s hatred of Massoud “pathological.”⁴² Not long before the Geneva accords were signed Varennikov met with Najibullah to discuss measures to be taken in preparation for the withdrawal of Soviet troops. According to Varennikov, Massoud remained the only sticking point. Najibullah insisted that Soviet troops “liquidate” him, because a political compromise was impossible. Varennikov suggested that Najibullah order his own special forces to conduct the attack. The latter replied that they could not handle such an operation.⁴³ The incident illustrates not only Najibullah’s antipathy to Massoud but also Varennikov’s considerations at this point. If he attacked Massoud now, prior to the withdrawal, he would be putting his troops at risk in the months ahead, since Massoud might not show restraint after being pummeled by Soviet planes and artillery.

The deteriorating military situation during the first phase of the troop withdrawal and immediately after its completion heightened the urgency of Najibullah as well as his KGB advisors. They needed to show that Najibullah was in control to neutralise

⁴¹ Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 651.

⁴² Varennikov, *Nepotovrimoe*, 376.

⁴³ Ibid, 369-370.

opposition to him within the DRA. This meant being able to show that he could call on Soviet support to attack Massoud. The military saw things differently. In August Varennikov sent a report to the Defense Minister, Yazov, explaining the military's position and offering short and long term reasons for avoiding military confrontation with Massoud, and focusing instead on political efforts. Varennikov argued that since Soviet troops would be withdrawing through areas controlled by Massoud, it was in their interest to remain on the best possible terms with him in the near future. To do otherwise would put Soviet troops in unnecessary jeopardy.

In our view, accepting the president's proposal to pull the 40th army into battle with A. Shah [Massoud] could put our troops into a very difficult position during the second phase of their withdrawal from Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, there will be additional major losses, and the organization of their withdrawal in general could be disrupted. At the same time achieving the main goal – the destruction of A. Shah – is impossible, since it is necessary to know where he is located, and this is impossible because Afghan intelligence has not been able to do this over the last 8 years.⁴⁴

Varennikov urged his superiors to focus on reaching an accommodation with Massoud, which was in the Soviet interest because Massoud had let it be known that he had no particular animus against the USSR and would be willing to maintain contacts. The DRA government, he argued, should be willing to accept "any compromise," including granting autonomy to the northern provinces. Varennikov continued to argue that a military operation against Massoud was unadvisable. Aside from being impossible militarily it would put Soviet troops "in a very difficult position during the second phase of troop withdrawal."⁴⁵ An operation against Massoud would not only contradict Varennikov's policy but also complicate preparations for withdrawal and put Soviet troops in great danger.

Varennikov was not the only one who held this view. There was a consensus among the top Soviet brass in Afghanistan, if not the Minister of Defense in Moscow.

⁴⁴ Liakhovskii and Nekrasov *Grazhdanin, Politik, Voin*, 169.

⁴⁵ V.I. Varennikov, Memorandum to the USSR Minister of Defense Comrade D.T. Yazov August 1988 in Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 656.

Notes similar to Varennikov's were sent both by Generals Boris Gromov, the commander of the 40th army who gained fame for commanding its withdrawal, and Mikhail Sotskov. In another memorandum they complained that Najibullah seemed to have no long term plan, aside from finding ways to keep Soviet troops involved in the fighting. They asked the leaders in Moscow to make it clear to Najibullah that this was not an option.⁴⁶

Soviet commanders had been using their channel to Massoud to create some stability in the north and find some arrangement between government-friendly forces and the Lion of Panjsher's fighters. In their view this would not only further the process of reconciliation, it would help create a counterweight to the more extremist Hekmatyar. Varennikov drafted a series of proposals, with Tanai's support, to create three militia divisions, to be supplied from the USSR, which would collaborate with Massoud but stay loyal to Kabul. Najibullah rejected these plans, and instead pushed for the formation of a special division to take on Ahmad Shah Massoud.⁴⁷

The tenacity of Varennikov and other senior officers in trying to come to some accommodation with Massoud in this period, over the objection of Najibullah, the KGB, and their superiors in Moscow is testament to the importance they attached to their initiative. Throughout the fall of 1988, Varennikov tried to arrange meetings with Massoud. In one message, he offered seven points for discussion, including the creation of a Tajik autonomous region within Afghanistan, the creation of regular units built around on Massoud's forces, as well as economic aid not only from the Kabul government but also from the USSR.⁴⁸ On three occasions when meetings were set up, however, RA forces carried out attacks in the southern Salang area, forcing Najibullah to call off the talks. Efforts to open a dialog with Massoud continued, but were

⁴⁶ Sotskov, *Dolg i Sovest*, 111-113.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 548-550.

⁴⁸ Letter to Massoud in Liakhovskii and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, Politik, Voin* 193-194.

undermined by the insistence of Najibullah that the focus should be on military activity against Massoud.⁴⁹

As in earlier periods of the war, the commanders on the ground found it difficult to have an advocate for their views in Moscow. It was becoming clear that their point of view was losing out to the Kriuchkov/Shevardnadze line. On the morning of September 5th, Sotskov received a phone call from Yazov, who made it clear that the line being taken by Sotskov and Varennikov would not hold: “Our strategy is to keep Afghanistan friendly. If we keep 50% we have solved our problem, if we run away – they’ll come up to the borders of the USSR. Yesterday Mikhail Sergeevich called me in, he demanded a blow be delivered to Ahmad Shah, against whom you need to be active. MS [Gorbachev] is very worried about Ahmad Shah and that he’s gaining strength but not being hit. The confrontation between us, the Ministry of Defense, the KGB and the embassy he does not support. We have to act together and do everything so that something can remain. You have so many forces there and yet you’re being hit. You have to think about defending Kabul... You have to work with the Minister of Defense, and you keep talking about Najib.”⁵⁰

The Politburo records available at the Gorbachev Foundation Archives, while incomplete, help give a picture of how these intra-service disagreements played out at the most senior policy-making level. Yazov did not ignore the arguments made by commanders in Afghanistan. At the September 18 Politburo meeting he spoke for an agreement with Ahmad Shah, explaining that “he is difficult to beat because he has the support of the population.”⁵¹ Kriuchkov did not respond directly to this statement, but complained of the “separatist actions of the GRU,” an open criticism of the military’s efforts to reach out to Massoud. Gorbachev also chided Yazov for allowing “individuals in the working-group” to pursue policies different from those approved by the Politburo,

⁴⁹ Ibid, 195-202.

⁵⁰ Sotskov, *Dolg i Sovest*, 129-130.

⁵¹ Politburo Meeting, September 18, 1988, GFA PB 1988.

but agreed that contacts with Ahmad Shah could be attempted. If they did not bring results, however, the 40th army would have to attack him.⁵²

The KGB-military rivalry was nothing new. Najibullah's intrigues only stoked the flames of this conflict and brought it to the fore. Kriuchkov complained that military intelligence conducted its own policy without any supervision.⁵³ Kriuchkov greatly resented the military's conducting secret talks with the opposition because he viewed this as encroachment on KGB territory. During his trips to Kabul, he would question officers working under Varennikov hoping to prove that the military sought a separate peace.⁵⁴

Such inter-service accusations need to be taken with a grain of salt. There was a long-standing rivalry between the KGB and the GRU and distrust between the KGB and the military as a whole; military officers came to see the Afghan war in particular as the result of foolish KGB adventurism. Nevertheless there is some truth to the fact that both Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov sought to sideline their opponents on the Afghanistan commission. Two casualties of their effort to monopolise control of Afghan policy at this time were Georgii Kornienko and Marshal Akhromeev. Kornienko had been at odds with Shevardnadze on Afghan policy earlier in the year, when Kornienko had gone over Shevardnadze's head and convinced Gorbachev to include a deadline for the withdrawal of troops in his statement on February 8. His removal came in the fall of 1988, when he fought against Shevardnadze's and Kriuchkov's efforts to provide almost unconditional support to Najibullah.

According to Kornienko, both he and Akhromeev were ultimately removed from the commission for arguing that Najibullah should cede power. Kornienko and Akhromeev pressed this point at a "working group of four" meeting in early September

⁵² Ibid. At this meeting, Shevardnadze also supported talks with Ahmad Shah. Later, as we will see, he became a forceful proponent of an attack on the Tajik leader.

⁵³ Sotskov, *Dolg i Sovest*, 129-130.

⁵⁴ Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'* 669.

1988, which included Kriuchkov and Vorontsov. Shevardnadze apparently complained to Gorbachev that “Akhromeev and Kornienko were not following the Politburo line.”⁵⁵ Soon after, Kornienko was sidelined from all Afghan affairs and Akhromeev received a strong reprimand from Gorbachev. Both men left their respective posts in November. Kornienko was asked to resign, Akhromeev left of his own volition.⁵⁶ The removal of Kornienko and Akhromeev from Afghan affairs silenced the chief voices for a settlement not focused on Najibullah.⁵⁷

With Kornienko and Akhromeev removed, this period represented the peak influence of Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov on Afghan affairs. Gorbachev followed their line not only on policy towards Najibullah but also with regard to the military’s efforts with Ahmad Shah. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the military to the Politburo: “We must carry out the line of the Politburo and not adapt it to individuals in the General Staff or the working group.” At a meeting with Rajiv Gandhi in Delhi on November 19th, Gorbachev told the Indian leader, “our people once tried to undertake something by going around Najibullah. This became the subject of a serious investigation, and we have taken measures to eliminate similar [initiatives.]” This signaled a renewed commitment to Najibullah, one closer to the kind Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov urged. Gorbachev seemed committed to treating Najibullah as a partner: “Najibullah is a figure of high caliber. He is prepared to go far. But we will do everything not behind his back but with him.”⁵⁸

Naturally, in these policy battles, Gorbachev’s voice was decisive. Why did he side with the more hawkish line of Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov rather than the one

⁵⁵ Kornienko, *Kholodnaia Voina*, 260.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 261.

⁵⁷ This version of events was also confirmed by Andrei Urnov, who dealt with Afghan policy in the International Department between 1986 and 1989. Author’s interview with Andrei Urnov, March 25, 2008. However, there was another element to this story as well: the rivalry between Shevardnadze and Kornienko. Shevardnadze believed that the Gorbachev was using Kornienko to “balance” his influence in foreign policy. By 1988, Shevardnadze saw Kornienko as a potential opponent who would have to be removed. Author’s interview with Shevardnadze, Tbilisi, Georgia, May 9, 2008.

⁵⁸ Third Conversation of M.S. Gorbachev and R.Gandhi (India) Delhi, November 19, 1988. National Security Archive READD/RADD Collection, Box 9.

advocated by Kornienko and Akhromeev? In all likelihood, Gorbachev was acting on his considerations regarding broader Soviet commitments and his own standing within the USSR, rather than any firm belief that one or the other approach was best for Afghanistan. Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze's arguments appealed to Gorbachev's sense that the Soviet Union had to show its ability to remain faithful to old friends. If the Soviet Union now "abandoned" Najibullah after backing him so enthusiastically for three years, it could put a strain on Gorbachev's relations with other leaders in the socialist camp.⁵⁹ The critical situation in the late summer and fall of 1988 only heightened these concerns.

The second reason has to do with politics at the top of the Soviet hierarchy in the context of Gorbachev's concessions to the US. By 1988 Gorbachev and Shevardnadze had their first confrontations with the military over arms control. Their decision to pursue a treaty on Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces independently of an agreement on START and Anti-Ballistic Missiles, a longstanding Soviet position, as well as to include the Soviet SS-23 rockets in that agreement were taken over the protests of the military and Akhromeev. At the time, opponents in the military were kept in line by being warned that they were trying to oppose decisions taken by party leadership.⁶⁰ Gorbachev was clearly beginning to feel threatened by the military, and seemed to welcome the opportunity to reassert his primacy in foreign policy decision-making. The confrontation may also have pushed him closer to Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov. Since

⁵⁹ Indeed, there is evidence that leaders of foreign communist parties were making their concerns about the Soviet withdrawal known to Moscow. A paper on Vietnamese Foreign Policy from IMEMO, a bastion of new-thinking, noted that while the Vietnamese leadership saw the invasion of Afghanistan as a mistake, they were very unhappy with the way the Soviet Union had gone about the withdrawal. The paper, submitted to the Central Committee on August 30, 1988, noted that the Vietnamese were still dealing with a difficult situation in Cambodia and viewed the Soviet withdrawal in that light: "The Vietnamese are making it known that having taken the path of settling the Afghan problem, the Soviet Union has made excessive concessions to the opposing side. Soviet troops are being withdrawn hastily, despite the unfavourable development of events within Afghanistan, the unceasing aid of the USA and Pakistan." "Regarding the Foreign Policy of Vietnam" IMEMO Policy Paper, submitted to the CC CPSU August 30, 1988. IMEMO Archive.

⁶⁰ Svetlana Savranskaya, "Voenno-Politicheskie Aspekty Okonchaniya Kholodnoi Voiny" in Vladislav Zubok, ed. *Konets Kholodnoi Voiny: Novye Fakty i Aspekty* (Saratov, 2004), 62-64; Kornienko and Akhromeev, *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata*, 131-133.

the latter represented the security forces, his support was key for any initiative that could make Gorbachev vulnerable to charges of ignoring national interests.⁶¹

Prolonging the agony

After the first phase of withdrawal was completed on August 15th, Najibullah increased his efforts either to have Soviet troops launch a “decisive blow” or halt their withdrawal and put pressure on the opposition. Unwilling to undertake such operations while it was concentrating on withdrawal, the Soviet military resisted Najibullah’s requests and urged him instead to focus on negotiations with leaders like Ahmad Shah Massoud.. As his relationship with Soviet military commanders deteriorated, Najibullah increasingly sought the help of Shevardnadze and KGB chairman Kriuchkov which led to a significant halt in the withdrawal, and eventually, the operation against Massoud that Najibullah had been requesting for many months. Gorbachev, initially persuaded by Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov, ultimately abandoned his support for their tactics and reasserted the policy he had followed for the previous two years: focus on withdrawal as a priority and use diplomatic channels to work for a neutral Afghanistan.

Although willing to provide Najibullah with massive economic aid and military hardware, Gorbachev for the most part resisted requests for major military operations involving Soviet troops. In the summer of 1988, during the first months of the withdrawal process, Najibullah asked about the possibility of conducting a joint campaign with India against Pakistan, with the USSR also providing troops. The military situation had been deteriorating since the start of the Soviet withdrawal in May, with rebels taking over some positions previously held by Soviet troops and Afghan government troops being forced back from the Pakistani border.⁶² But Gorbachev refused, for now, to consider allowing Soviet troops to resume taking part in offensive

⁶¹ Thus in his conversation with Gandhi, cited above, Gorbachev was demonstrating that his control over the military had been restored.

⁶² Tom Rogers *Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan: analysis and chronology* (Westport: 1992), 144.

operations. He did not want to undermine the political and diplomatic gains he had made by signing the Geneva accords. Thus Gorbachev rejected Najibullah's request for several major operations in which Soviet troops would participate, albeit in a secondary or tertiary role. The only way such an operation would be possible, Gorbachev told Najibullah, was if "an attack on our [Soviet] troops is committed."⁶³

Understanding the split between Soviet commanders and Najibullah is crucial to understanding the halts in withdrawal in 1988 and the military operations undertaken in early 1989.⁶⁴ Najibullah did not trust Massoud and resisted negotiating with him.

Instead, he sought to bypass his Soviet military interlocutors and, through Shevardnadze, convince Moscow to order major strikes on Massoud's positions. One such strike was ordered in January 1988. According to Liakhovskii, Varennikov and his staff made every effort to show that such an operation was militarily unadvisable, compiling aerial photographs of the snow covered mountains they had been ordered to attack. A team, which included Liakhovskii, flew to Moscow on February 14 to present the case against the operation. The operation was set aside, but the episode added to tensions between Najibullah and Soviet military advisors.⁶⁵

Najibullah used every possible channel to force the 40th army to attack Massoud. In September he wrote a letter to Gorbachev in which he claimed that Massoud was gaining strength and receiving arms directly from the Americans. Unfortunately, the text of the letter is unavailable, but the Politburo discussion of the letter gives us a general idea of its content. The idea of a major operation was rejected for the time being, but Gorbachev took a more hawkish line. The main focus still had to be on "political settlement and normalization." For the first time, however, Gorbachev

⁶³ Record of Conversation of MS Gorbachev with the President of Afghanistan and Najibullah June 13, 1988 National Security Archive READD/RADD Collection, Box 9. Najibullah also suggested that the Soviet Union, Afghanistan, and India launch a war against Pakistan, though it does not seem this ideas was ever taken seriously. See Cherniaev Diary, June 19, 1988, GFA CD 1988.

⁶⁴ For a fuller account of the military's relations with Massoud, see Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 630-688 and Liakhovskii and Nekrasov *Ahmad Shah Massoud: Chelovek, Politik, Voin* (Moscow: 2007).

⁶⁵ Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 651-652.

signaled that he might consider delaying: “we have to stop saying that we will withdraw no matter what. We must tie the schedule of withdrawal with the current situation.” This was to be the new line in talks with Reagan and other politicians as well as in the press and UN. Similarly, if Ahmad Shah did not want to talk, then the military should consider operations.⁶⁶

In the fall of 1988 the situation became increasingly desperate for Kabul. As the opposition increased its attacks on Kabul airport and the Khairaton-Kabul highway, Najibullah looked for new military commitments from Moscow. In October an entire “Scud” missile division was sent to the outskirts of Kabul to hit resistance positions near the capital.⁶⁷ There were calls from Najibullah, via Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze, to halt the withdrawal. The military was opposed, according to Gromov, for three reasons: 1) it meant that the USSR would be violating international accords, 2) the Soviet military would have had to conduct major operations in the North, endangering the highway, 3) it would have made the refugee problem much more difficult.⁶⁸ Of the three reasons it is fair to assume that the second was the most pressing: the security of the highway had been a priority of the military since the start of the withdrawal. Yet again, the voices of Gromov and Varennikov did not carry the day. On November 5, Moscow suspended the withdrawal.

Some in Gorbachev’s “inner circle” opposed the new line. Cherniaev had believed his boss simply meant to use talk of halting the withdrawal to put pressure on Pakistan and the US. He expressed great surprise when, a month later, a request came in for a major operation against Massoud. After all, Cherniaev insisted, Gorbachev had told Shevardnadze “we will not change our decision regarding the withdrawal, the Afghans have to fight for themselves...under no circumstances could we *in fact* return to participating in this war.” Chernyaev feared just such a return would be considered.

⁶⁶ Politburo Meeting September 18, 1988 GF PB 1988.

⁶⁷ Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 616; See also Rogers, *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, 45.

⁶⁸ Gromov, *Ogranichennyi Kontingent*, 324-325.

He warned his boss that such operations were not likely to save Najibullah and that, even if they did, the price would be too high.⁶⁹ In his memoir, Kriuchkov points out with some anger that Aleksandr Iakovlev, a closer friend of Gorbachev's and now a member of the Afghanistan commission, also argued for timely withdrawal and against new operations.⁷⁰ For the moment, however, the voices of Iakovlev and others who argued against the operation faded into the background.

It is unlikely that Gorbachev ever considered anything as drastic as stopping the withdrawal completely. As he pointed out to Rajiv Gandhi, only the "tactical steps," not the "general line" on Afghanistan had changed.⁷¹ This new "tactical" line included not only a halt in withdrawal and new supplies of weaponry, but, ultimately, the major operation against Ahmad Shah Massoud that Najibullah had requested through Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov for the past year.

Najibullah could still exert influence in Moscow, primarily through his interlocutors from the Kremlin, Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov. The Foreign Minister and the KGB Chief made their last pre-withdrawal trip to Kabul on January 12, 1989. The trip was not unlike Shevardnadze's visit on April 3, 1988, when Shevardnadze prepared Najibullah for signing the Geneva accords. Gorbachev had already confirmed with his colleagues that withdrawal would resume at a meeting on December 28, 1988.⁷² Now Shevardnadze had to prepare Najibullah for this decision. Najibullah, however, was still obsessed with Massoud. According to notes from their meeting, Shevardnadze promised Najibullah that he would work for an operation against Massoud. This would be a major strike, not a small operation: "it is clear that no local or limited measures will be

⁶⁹ A.S. Chernyaev, Memorandum (for special 1606 from Kabul) October 26, 1988 GFA #1553.

⁷⁰ Kriuchkov, *Lichnoe Delo*, 257.

⁷¹ Third Conversation of M.S. Gorbachev and R. Gandhi (India) Delhi, November 19, 1988. National Security Archive READD/RADD Collection, Box 9; For a summary of Soviet "hints" that the withdrawal might be suspended indefinitely, dropped throughout November 1988, see "Afghanistan: Recent Developments" (Note for the SG) December 2, 1988 SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 110.

⁷² Politburo Meeting December 28, 1988 GFA PB 1988, 527.

sufficient to solve the problem of Ahmad Shah [Massoud].”⁷³ Shevardnadze carried this request back to Moscow, where he managed to get approval for what would become “Operation Typhoon.”⁷⁴

Military officers who had long opposed such an operation fought a losing battle to convince Moscow to avoid it in the winter of 1988-89. Throughout December, Varennikov and other members of the operating group drafted and sent memos where they explained that such an attack now would mostly harm civilians, damage communications with Kabul, make the withdrawal more difficult for Soviet troops, and harm the chances of any future reconciliation.⁷⁵ Officers of the 40th army were unhappy with the order. Some spoke openly of refusing to fight, or even returning medals they had earned in the war, although none appear to have followed through with this threat. A distraught Varennikov approached Vorontsov, the ambassador, asking what he should do. On the one hand, an order had come down and would have to be followed. On the other hand, it had upset the officers who felt it was wrong both strategically and morally. Vorontsov advised Varennikov to carry out the order, but limit the strikes to areas where there were no inhabitants. In the end, the military managed to limit the operation to artillery attacks from the highway itself. This minimised Red Army and possibly civilian losses but still resulted in extensive damage to villages in the area.⁷⁶

The military had remained unhappy about the operation throughout, and were strongly opposed to the idea of leaving a small force behind. General Sotskov has

⁷³ Memorandum of Conversation between Najibullah and Shevardnadze, Kabul, January 13, 1989. Liakhovskii, 670.

⁷⁴ Unfortunately, there is no record available of how this decision was taken. However, Vorotnikov’s diary does contain part of a January 13 Politburo meeting where Shevardnadze talks about an imminent economic blockade of Kabul. According to Vorotnikov’s notes, Gorbachev said: “We must not leave the DRA to its fate. Work. think about propaganda. But first we leave, and then we act through the UN, Security Council, and others.” (See Vorotnikov, 280) It’s difficult to evaluate Gorbachev’s attitude from this fragment. On the one hand he seems to be in favour of getting out and only using diplomacy to protect the DRA, on the other hand he clearly emphasises that the USSR has to take responsibility for the DRA. However, since the operation was approved, we must assume that Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov convinced Gorbachev of its necessity.

⁷⁵ Bogdanov, *Afganskai Voina*, 296-298.

⁷⁶ Author’s interview with General Aleksandr Liakhovskii, Moscow, July 2006. Author’s interview with Yulii Vorontsov, Moscow, September 11, 2007.

written of “Typhoon” that “almost ten years of the war were reflected as if in a mirror in three days and three nights: political cynicism and military cruelty, the absolute defenselessness of some and the pathological need to kill and destroy of others. Three awful days absorbed in themselves ten years of bloodletting.”⁷⁷

Gorbachev’s closest advisors disapproved of his tilt towards the Kriuchkov-Shevardnadze line and tried to convince their boss that he was making a mistake. Cherniaev sent him a memorandum at the end of October arguing against a number of developments in Moscow’s policy, including the halt of the withdrawal and the planning an operation against Massoud that was being requested by Kabul.⁷⁸ Similarly, Georgy Shakhnazarov warned Gorbachev in December that Najibullah’s approaches to Hekmatyar (whom the DRA leader preferred to Massoud) were dangerous because Hekmatyar was an extremist and not likely to compromise. He disagreed with claims that Massoud and Rabbani would be more likely to cause problems in Soviet Central Asia than Hekmatyar.⁷⁹ And in January Vladimir Zagladin, another aide, warned Gorbachev not to order military action against Massoud, since it would hurt any chances of forming a Soviet-friendly coalition government.⁸⁰

In all likelihood, those who saw Najibullah’s salvation in a deal with Massoud and those who believed in backing a “Pashtun” government led by Najibullah were exaggerating their case. Massoud was a brilliant commander, an able administrator, and relatively moderate, but he had used previous truces to rebuild his forces and go back to war. Supporters of the “Pashtun” option, on the other hand, were too quick to dismiss the possibility of an influential Tajik figure taking part in a government. Yet what swayed policy at the Politburo level in the fall of 1988 had little to do with these debates about how best to form a government in Kabul. Instead, it was Gorbachev’s

⁷⁷ Sotskov, *Dolg i Sovest*, 531.

⁷⁸ Memorandum to Gorbachev, October 26, 1988 GFA #1553.

⁷⁹ G. Shakhnazarov, Memorandum to MS Gorbachev Regarding Najibullah and Hekmatyar December 16, 1988, GFA #18188

⁸⁰ Zagladin Memorandum on Afghanistan, January 1989, GFA #7178.

considerations about his standing with other Soviet elites and concern about how the withdrawal would be perceived that led him to side with Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov, who believed that the Soviet Union's priority was to show support to Najibullah.

Why was Gorbachev, who was generally averse to using force, willing to undertake the Operation "Typhoon" over the protests of many of his advisers and the military? First and foremost, of course, was the desire to leave some sort of stable government within Afghanistan that would not collapse after February 15. He had hoped to do so through diplomacy, but by January 1989 it was clear that the Geneva Accords had done little or nothing to advance an internal Afghan settlement. Operation "Typhoon" may have appeared as a way to give Najibullah additional political breathing space, even though in practice its military value was limited. Gorbachev still believed in the importance of maintaining Soviet prestige in the Third World, which in turn made him more open to arguments by Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze that Moscow first and foremost had to show support to its friend.

Even more important, at this stage, was that Gorbachev (and Shevardnadze) was increasingly worried about protecting his "right flank" internally. Kriuchkov was a crucial supporter, without whom fending off attacks from conservatives would be very difficult. If the Kabul government collapsed soon after the withdrawal – a serious possibility in late 1988 and early 1989 – Gorbachev would need Kriuchkov's support against any attacks on his handling of the problem. It thus made good political sense to follow the KGB chairman's advice. Moreover, by this point he had allowed Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze to dominate Afghan policy. Their ability to direct information and block opposing arguments was crucial to Gorbachev's understanding of the problem, particularly as demands for his attention grew in the face of mounting economic problems and political difficulties.

Back Over the Friendship Bridge

After the “pause” in November-December, Soviet troops continued their withdrawal in January 1989, and were on target to complete it by February 15, the deadline mandated by the Geneva accords. Yet the situation had not markedly improved for Najibullah in this time. He still faced the same hostile opposition, now emboldened, and a government and military whose loyalty to their president was shaky at best. Moscow now had to decide how to shape its relationship with Kabul: would further military involvement be possible? How many military advisors could stay behind? These questions were still not settled in the first months of 1989. The crisis of the Najibullah regime in this period forced Moscow to solve them by improvising in response to the situation as it developed.

Just how much Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze believed in the importance of protecting Najibullah’s regime became evident when, in the final weeks of the withdrawal, they pushed to have 10-15000 Soviet troops stay behind, guarding the roads and thus providing a life-line for the regime. It was an idea that first originated sometime between February and April 1988. Moscow’s decision to sign the Geneva accords without a US agreement to stop supplying arms to the opposition had put it in an awkward situation before Najibullah and his allies. Since this had been a key precondition for Soviet and Afghan negotiators in earlier years it might look like a betrayal, weakening Najibullah in the eyes of both the PDPA and the opposition. It also meant that the armed forces of the DRA would be facing an opposition that still received substantial support from Pakistan and the US as well as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

In the remaining weeks before the February 15th deadline, Soviet officials wrestled with the still unsettled question of how to define the Soviet-Afghan relationship after the withdrawal. As in earlier periods, Gorbachev looked for ways to

avoid a chaotic collapse in Afghanistan. In 1988 and the first months of 1989 in particular he entertained the possibility that some Soviet troops would remain, a position advocated by Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze. On January 24th the Afghan commission submitted a lengthy memorandum that suggested a number of options. It highlighted the numerous difficulties that Najibullah faced, Pakistan's violation of the Geneva accords, and the importance of maintaining a road link between the Soviet Union and Kabul. The memorandum offered a number of ways that Soviet troops could be kept in Afghanistan to guard those roads, and suggested forming volunteer divisions to carry out the task, offering soldiers a salary of 800-1000 rubles a month, unheard of at the time even for officers.⁸¹

The idea to leave some Soviet troops after the withdrawal had received its latest incarnation around the same time as "Typhoon," during Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov's last pre-withdrawal visit to Kabul. After meetings with a number of Afghan officers, officials, and Najibullah, Shevardnadze agreed that leaving behind 10-15000 troops was necessary to prevent collapse in Kabul. At a meeting with officers and staff in the Soviet embassy, Shevardnadze laid out his proposals.⁸² Varenikov and other senior officers were against leaving an exposed division to continue guarding the highway for Najibullah. It was also a question of logistics. They argued with Shevardnadze and his subordinates that it was not possible to leave ten to fifteen thousand troops because those troops would need support.⁸³ Once again, the military command in Afghanistan was pitted against officials from Moscow.

Gorbachev's more reform-minded advisers were horrified. On January 20 Iakovlev called Cherniaev, informing him that Shevardnadze was circulating a plan to send three to five thousand Soviet troops to launch a breakthrough attack on the road to

⁸¹ "On measures in connection with the upcoming withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan," January 23, 1989, *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente*, 462-482.

⁸² Bogdanov, *Afganskaia Voina*, 294-295.

⁸³ Author's interview with General Aleksandr Liakhovskii, Moscow, July 2006.

Kandahar and act as a convoy for goods. In a conference call a short while after, Cherniaev and Iakovlev pleaded with Gorbachev not to act on the proposal. Gorbachev included Shevardnadze in the conversation, who argued that the USSR had a responsibility to help Najibullah: “you weren’t there, you don’t know how much we’ve done over ten years.” Gorbachev listened to the discussion, then hung up to call Kabul.⁸⁴ The debate erupted again at a Politburo meeting on January 24, when operation “Typhoon” was already underway. Shevardnadze insisted that the USSR remained responsible for protecting the Najibullah government: “the fate of the regime is not inconsequential for us. Our Afghan friends ask us not to leave them without support.” He went on to highlight the awful state the country was in: “there’s already a blockade of Kabul. We are leaving the country in a pitiable state. The cities and villages are ravaged. The economy is paralyzed. Hundreds of thousands of people have died.” The withdrawal, Shevardnadze said, “will be seen as a major political and military defeat.”⁸⁵ No doubt the “emotional” or “personal” factor was at play here – Shevardnadze was genuinely worried that Najibullah and his colleagues, political and perhaps even personal friends, might perish in a bloody confrontation as *mujahadeen* took the city. But he also knew that Gorbachev shared his concerns about allowing the withdrawal to be seen as a defeat, and he dramatised this possibility for the Politburo.

Shevardnadze found himself isolated among his colleagues. No one else seems to have spoken up in favour of keeping troops in Afghanistan. Gorbachev rejected Shevardnadze’s arguments, calling his presentation “empty, hawkish babble.” As for the fate of Najibullah, Gorbachev said, “we are not going to save the regime. We’ve already transformed it.” Chebrikov, Ryzhkov and Iakovlev all agreed.⁸⁶ The military involvement had to end: “[we] need to hold our principled line so there is no presence of our element in their fight,” Gorbachev went on. But he agreed with Shevardnadze that

⁸⁴ Cherniaev, *Afganskii Vopros* (Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia: 2000), 47.

⁸⁵ Politburo Meeting January 24, 1989 GFA PB 1989, 48.

⁸⁶ Chebrikov was still a Central Committee member, but no longer KGB chief.

the Soviet Union still had an interest in Afghanistan and that Moscow could not “run away” from the problem. “There are some people, there are comrades who say: so what? We didn’t start it!” Gorbachev rejected these arguments as well: “capitulation, running – is unserious, wrong...we cannot appear before the world in just our underwear.”⁸⁷ As the protocol of the meeting reveals, the Politburo recognised the importance of protecting the Khairaton-Kabul road, but limited Soviet aid to supplying the Afghan divisions that would be doing the work.⁸⁸ Leaving these troops was not just a logistical challenge that the military clearly opposed; it would also mean exposing the USSR to criticism that it had no intention of withdrawing all of the troops anyway.

The withdrawal was completed on February 15th, in full accordance with the Geneva timetable, and with representatives of the Soviet and foreign press corps present. Although the pause in November-December meant that more Soviet troops had to return through harsh winter conditions, the withdrawal was effected in good order and with minimal Soviet losses, a testament to the planning and logistical preparation of the Soviet military and the diplomatic efforts of a wide range of officials.⁸⁹ The footage of General Gromov dismounting from a tank half-way across the “Friendship bridge” to Termez and walking the rest of the way to his homeland was seen the world over. Yet his statement that there were no Soviet troops left behind was not quite true – a number of advisers had stayed in Afghanistan, some of whom would later take part in key battles. Nor was the question of how far support for Najibullah could go in the future settled by the time of the withdrawal. Although the idea of keeping a whole division within Afghanistan had been discarded, Moscow had taken measures to allow for the possible use of Soviet air support and even ground troops in the future. The document formalizing the last phase of the withdrawal stated, “for the purposes of solving sudden

⁸⁷ Politburo Meeting January 24, 1989 GFA PB 1989, 48.

⁸⁸ Politburo protocol, January 24, 1989 in *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente*, 458-460.

⁸⁹ US military analyst Lester Grau has judged it an “excellent model for disengagement from direct military involvement in support of an allied government in a counter-insurgency campaign.” Lester Grau “Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos,” 260-261.

problems in the case of worsening condition on the Soviet-Afghan border or in Afghanistan, [we are] providing to temporarily maintain on the territory of the USSR in battle readiness three motorised rifle and one airborne division, six aviation divisions, and two helicopter regiments.”⁹⁰

The start of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in May 1988 brought the Najibullah regime to a crisis point. The signing of the Geneva Accords emboldened the opposition and frightened PDPA members. Despite years of training and support, the army of the Democratic Party of Afghanistan had not proven that it could fight independently. Najibullah’s requests for aid in these difficult months were meant to take some of the wind out of the sails of the opposition and at the same time build him up in the eyes of the party and non-party figures within the government. As chapter 3 showed, Soviet confidence in Najibullah helped him come to power and consolidate it in 1986 and 1987, but not to the point where Najibullah could truly claim to have a solid independent power base even within his party.

Soviet policy in response to this crisis was dictated by two conflicting priorities. On the one hand, the US-Soviet relationship was improving rapidly in 1987 and 1988. As the previous chapter showed, Moscow saw the Geneva Accords both as result of this improvement as well as a catalyst for further detente. This priority was well reflected in Moscow’s attitude around the time of the Moscow summit in May 1988 and the months afterward. Soviet leaders and politicians at all levels kept violations of the Geneva Accords out of discussions with their US counterparts; when the issue was brought up, they were careful to blame Pakistan and not the United States.

The growing crisis, however, forced Moscow to reassess its priorities. Starting in the late summer key Soviet policymakers began urging the Politburo to approve additional military strikes within Afghanistan. The two most senior supporters of this

⁹⁰ Regarding the completion of withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Republic of Afghanistan, CC CPSU memorandum, 16 Feb 1989, Volkogonov Papers, Reel 17/Box 26.

policy, KGB Chairman Kriuchkov and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, pressed the idea on Gorbachev. They faced formidable opposition from other policy-makers, not just “liberals” like Iakovlev and Cherniaev but even more cautious reformers like Kornienko. Although Gorbachev resisted similar pleas from Najibullah earlier in the summer, he now increasingly sided with the Kriuchkov-Shevardnadze line.

There are several reasons for this. First, it was becoming clear that Geneva had failed to pay any dividends as far as the situation within Afghanistan was concerned. When he had signed the accords, Gorbachev still hoped that the withdrawal itself would prompt the United States to stop supporting the *mujahadeen* and make a settlement which included the PDPA more favourable. In practice, the blatant violation of the accords by Pakistan was an embarrassment, as it highlighted that the accords were really little more than a fig-leaf.

Second, concerns about the effect of a withdrawal on other Soviet third-world allies had not gone away. Indeed, at a time of profound changes in Moscow’s international relations, Gorbachev had to maneuver very carefully to avoid upsetting the entire system of relations in the Soviet sphere. In their complaints to Soviet visitors in August 1988, North Vietnamese leaders expressed concern over not only the withdrawal from Afghanistan, but also the Soviet opening to China. Similarly, the cautious Soviet opening to South Korea worried the North.⁹¹ We know that other countries, such as India and Cuba, had made their concerns about a hasty Soviet retreat known earlier. While the limited archival access makes it difficult to assess precisely how widespread this sentiment was among Soviet allies, it is clear that this concern only became greater during the withdrawal period.

The withdrawal also coincided with a pivotal phase of *perestroika* and a difficult period for Gorbachev politically. On the one hand, he had been successful in packing

⁹¹ IMEMO Policy Paper, submitted to the CC CPSU August 30, 1988. IMEMO Archive.

the Politburo with his own allies and removing most hard-liners he had seen as a threat. His foreign policy, particularly vis-à-vis the west, seemed to be showing significant results (see chapter IV). On the other hand, a worsening economic situation was causing discontent in the Soviet population at the same time as nationalist movements were increasingly making their presence felt. The extent of growing opposition to *perestroika* within the party was brought home to Gorbachev in April 1988, with the publication of a letter by a Leningrad school-teacher entitled "I cannot part with my principles."⁹² The Gorbachev described by Zubok, who sought "good relationships with Western statesmen" and had an aversion to the use of force, was also highly aware of the fragility of his position and his reforms.⁹³ His shifts from dovish to hawkish positions and back again, described in this chapter, presaged and echoed similar "zig-zags" in other areas of foreign and domestic policy, particularly in 1990-1991.⁹⁴

Third, the events described in this chapter highlight the problems of Soviet foreign-policy making in general and in Afghanistan in particular. Splits between Soviet officials on the ground, particularly the military and the KGB, translated into policy battles fought out in Moscow. All sides involved felt that they were acting in the best interest of the Soviet Union, but their policies were often incompatible. The military's relationship with Massoud was incompatible with the KGB's goal of supporting Najibullah, since the latter believed that Najibullah should be allowed to define who he makes alliances with. What is striking, moreover, is that these debates were not aired out fully in Politburo meetings but decided, as in many instances during the war, *kuluarno* – i.e., in some sort of informal framework. Thus phone calls or private conferences between Shevardnadze, Kriuchkov, and Gorbachev often pre-determined the results of Politburo decisions. At the same time, the sidelining of officials like Kornienko proved an effective way for Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze to increase their

⁹² *Sovetskaia Rossia*, 13 March 1988.

⁹³ Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 314-317.

⁹⁴ Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 87-92.

dominance in the foreign policy-making process. Thus after a brief period of a more “democratic” approach to policymaking on Afghanistan—which saw long, heated debates involving the full Politburo—a pattern resembling the early 1980s, when Andropov-Ustinov-Gromyko reemerged essentially set Afghan policy between themselves, re-emerged.

As we will see in the final chapter, some of these factors were still defining Soviet policy-making on Afghanistan in the Soviet Union’s last years. Although the importance of Third World client states began to fade in the face of the acute internal situation from late 1989, Soviet leaders continued to look for ways to maintain influence in those areas. More conservative leaders, like Kriuchkov, were particularly anxious to arrest the decline of Soviet influence in the world. Gorbachev, often cautious about offending that end of the political spectrum, was doubly so in the tumultuous years of 1990 and 1991.

“I didn’t want to be president, you talked me into it, insisted upon it, and promised support. Now you are throwing me and the Republic of Afghanistan to its fate. How is one to understand this?”¹ –Najibullah to Shevardnadze, personal letter, 1991.

Chapter 6: Politics, Aid and Diplomacy after the Withdrawal

The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, completed on February 12, 1989, left many questions about Moscow’s future policy in that country unresolved. In the years after Soviet troops departed, Najibullah would make requests for Soviet military intervention during several crises. Although all of these requests were ultimately denied, there were certainly those in Moscow who believed such interventions should not be ruled out. Long after the Soviet government had lost the ability to support him materially it continued to insist that Najibullah be included in any transition government.

In many ways Moscow’s policy towards Afghanistan followed the same basic principles after the withdrawal as before. The main goal of Soviet policy was still to prevent a collapse of the Kabul government and to show that it had achieved a controlled transition there. Despite the growing financial and economic crisis within the Soviet Union, military and material aid continued to arrive in Kabul on Soviet transport planes. Soviet advisors stayed behind with the Afghan army. And Soviet diplomats continued their efforts to negotiate for recognition of the regime and the cessation of US arms supplies to the opposition.

Following the Soviet withdrawal, internal developments in Afghanistan continued to be important to Soviet leaders. First, Gorbachev’s reforms and outreach to the west were no longer going unchallenged. Although nobody in the leadership opposed

¹ M.A.Gareev *Afganskaia Strada (S Sovetskimi voiskami i bez nich)* (Moscow: Insan, 1999), 316.

the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, many, like KGB chief Vladimir Kriuchkov, were skeptical of the new multilateral approach to foreign relations and thought that Gorbachev was going too far. Bringing the war in Afghanistan to a peaceful conclusion that allowed Moscow's client to play a key role would help neutralise their criticism, particularly if it was done with the cooperation of the UN, the US, and Pakistan. Second, Afghanistan continued to be important after 1989 for some of the same reasons it had been important in 1979 – it shared a 2000 kilometer border with the Soviet Union. Even if fears of Afghanistan becoming a US base had diminished somewhat, rising nationalism and anti-Soviet sentiment in the republics bordering Afghanistan gave Soviet leaders new reasons to work toward stability there. Finally, Afghanistan continued to be important because the war was now too much in the public consciousness to be ignored. Not just Gorbachev but even reformers like Iakovlev worried about the political fallout should the war be declared meaningless – which it may have been if Moscow no longer played a role in events there.

Nevertheless, soon after the withdrawal Soviet policy on Afghanistan was adrift. This is not surprising, considering the escalating crises that Moscow faced from 1989 onwards in both the domestic and foreign spheres. The collapse of Eastern-European communism in 1989, the secessionists movements that grew in strength from 1990, and the challenge of trying to fundamentally transform the Soviet state now loomed as larger, more threatening and immediate problems than the war in Afghanistan. Although preventing a collapse in Kabul was still important to Moscow, the imperative of guarding the Soviet Union's reputation as defender of global national-liberation movements decreased as the country's superpower status evaporated at the end of 1989.

Gorbachev's greatest success with regard to the withdrawal was on the propaganda front. The withdrawal was welcomed by the Soviet public, which largely credited Gorbachev with ending the war. Moreover, a carefully controlled propaganda

campaign allowed him to criticise the war without facing questions about why it had dragged on long after he came to power. Moscow continued to support Najibullah even as it sought a diplomatic solution to the conflict. This was partly because until August 1991 there were still people in the Soviet government who supported propping up the Najibullah government with supplies. Even after the failed August 1991 coup, however, the dying Soviet state continued to back Najibullah politically.²

Setting a precedent for non-intervention: the battle for Jalalabad and after

If Moscow had a clear Afghan policy in February 1989, we have no evidence of it. Indeed, it seems that Soviet leaders were unsure to what extent they needed to continue supporting Najibullah. Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov continued to argue for active support for the Kabul regime, even to the point of using Soviet air support during in critical battles. Gorbachev himself seemed less interested in propping up Najibullah, and was too preoccupied with other problems to give Afghan policy much direction. As a result, Afghan policy continued on inertia, with the KGB playing the most active role.

To some extent Soviet policymakers may have expected events to resolve the issue. The CIA had been predicting that the Najibullah regime would not outlast the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, and their lack of confidence was shared by their Pakistani counterparts. Similarly, some in Moscow, such as Minister of Defense Dmitrii Yazov, did not think the regime would last more than a few months.³ As in 1980, the spring thaw, the traditional start of the fighting season, would reveal the military balance between the opposition and the government.

² The study of this period poses particular methodological problems. As Gorbachev manoeuvred between different factions, decision making became increasingly chaotic. At the same time, his effort from 1990 onwards to distance himself from the party and create a new governing apparatus meant in practice that decisions were increasingly taken informally or at the ministerial level. I have attempted to reconstruct some of the decision making for this period through a reading of newspaper reports, memoirs, and the few archival documents available.

³ Gareev, *Moia Poeslednia Voina*, 127.

The first test of Soviet resolve to refrain from further direct military involvement came within two months of the withdrawal. US and Pakistani officials were confident that Najibullah would fall quickly once Soviet troops withdrew. On March 6, 1989, Benazir Bhutto, the recently appointed Prime Minister of Pakistan met with the "Afghan Cell," a group of senior ISI and military officers, to discuss what steps to take next. Her advisers, in particular ISI chief Hamid Gul, urged a frontal attack on Jalalabad. Although it was heavily defended by government forces, Gul was confident it would fall within twenty four hours. US ambassador Robert Oakley, who was present at the meeting, believed Gul was right. The plan was approved and soon the CIA began directing Toyota pick-up trucks and weapons to positions outside Jalalabad.⁴

Several days later the attack began. It was the first major attack since the withdrawal, with hundreds of young Afghan men and boys recruited from refugee camps taking part. In Kabul, Najibullah grew nervous. Several urgent telegrams were sent to Moscow. Jalalabad, Najibullah said, was about to fall, and then the road would be open to Kabul. He requested support in the form of air cover and bombardment delivered by pilots flying in from Soviet bases.⁵

Gorbachev called together a meeting of Politburo members and Central Committee secretaries at the Novo-Ogarevo *dacha* to discuss possible responses. Once again, his colleagues took familiar positions. The main supporters of a Soviet intervention were Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov. And it was Shevardnadze, as before, framing the question in terms of loyalty, saying that if the Soviets let Najibullah fall it would be betrayal and that the Soviet Union's friends in the Third World would see it as such. Yazov, the defense minister, was more cautious, saying that the air bombardment would do little, and Soviet involvement would be impossible to hide. Apparently it was Iakovlev who spoke most forcefully against intervention, though he had the support of

⁴ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 192-193; Liakhovskii and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, Politik, Voin*, 217-219; Yousaf and Adkin, *Bear Trap*, 226-228.

⁵ Ibid, 194. Cherniaev, *Afganskii Vopros* (Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia: 2000), 49-50

others at the meeting. In the end Gorbachev said that he was “categorically” against any Soviet bombardment of Jalalabad.⁶ Although the Politburo approved additional supplies and the organization of a special supply train, Soviet bombers did not come to Najibullah’s rescue.⁷ The behaviour of Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov demonstrated that the “Najib lobby” would keep working to ensure Moscow’s support long after Soviet troops had gone home. If they could not involve Soviet troops, they would at least make sure he had all the means to keep fighting on his own.

According to Cherniaev’s diary entry, Gorbachev had declared himself categorically against using Soviet pilots to defend Jalalabad because he didn’t want to go back on a promise the Soviet Union had made before the world. This is disingenuous. Gorbachev had proven on numerous occasions in the previous nine months that he believed the Soviet Union had to continue supporting the Najibullah regime or risk undermining its own authority. He had authorised Operation “Typhoon” even though there was strong opposition to it on the grounds that it made the USSR look disingenuous; he had entertained the idea of leaving troops behind after the withdrawal, in contravention of the accords. Yet on this occasion he sided against Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze, thus keeping Soviet troops out of direct involvement.

We cannot be sure why exactly Gorbachev acted the way he did in March 1989. It is important to remember, however, that his decision not to send in Soviet pilots was largely consistent with his attitude prior to the later summer and early fall of 1988 – the Soviet Union would continue to support the DRA regime with material aid and diplomacy, but not with any military involvement. Gorbachev must have realised that his reaction to Jalalabad would set a precedent – if Moscow sent in pilots, it would be expected to do so on every occasion where the Najibullah government felt it was in

⁶ Cherniaev, *Afganskii Vopros* (Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia: 2000), 49-50; Politburo notes, March 10, 1989 GFA PB 1989, 202. Cherniaev was not at the meeting, and the information in this diary entry comes second-hand from Iakovlev. This version agrees in general with the notes in the Gorbachev Foundation Archive, which were taken by Medvedev.

⁷ Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 682.

immediate danger. The war would then drag on indefinitely and he would no longer be able to take credit for withdrawing troops. Further, his decision offered a compromise between those arguing for direct Soviet involvement and those arguing for no involvement whatsoever. Whereas Moscow had ceased supplying the Afghan military from the time of the withdrawal, it now committed itself anew to providing military materiel. This too set a precedent – Najibullah's military continued to receive Soviet arms until the end of 1991.

There is also some evidence that Gorbachev was increasingly unconcerned with supporting Najibullah or the PDPA and including them in a future government. Emboldened perhaps by the positive public response to the withdrawal, he was less worried about the potential political damage from not supporting Najibullah. At a Politburo meeting on March 23, 1989, he said that the actual composition of the government in Kabul no longer carried great importance for the Soviet Union: "For us the main thing is that a hostile government doesn't appear [in Kabul]. The rest...let it be any governing combination – not our problem."⁸ In practice, however, he never quite made this sentiment official policy.

Najibullah survived the Jalalabad attack. The *mujahadeen* recruits proved unequal to the task the CIA and ISI had confidently predicted would be accomplished. The RA troops in Jalalabad, after being forced to give up several border posts in the first hours of the battle, held their ground over many weeks. Not only did the Afghan military hold out better than expected, but the Soviet military materiel, some of it turned over during the withdrawal, overpowered the attackers. The Afghan air force, flying Soviet bombers, successfully carried out the bombings Najibullah had asked Moscow to

⁸ Cherniaev's notes of March 23, 1989 Politburo meeting in Cherniaev, *Afganskii Vopros*, 50.

conduct. And Soviet advisers helped operate the Scud missiles that had been turned over to the Najibullah regime during the withdrawal.⁹

The Jalalabad attack changed the shape of the conflict. In March Najibullah had appealed to Moscow in panic, but it was a confident and emboldened leader who spoke at the 11th anniversary of the Saur revolution. The defense of Jalalabad, he told party members “can be considered a strong blow to those who were speaking of the collapse of our revolution.”¹⁰ The foreign press reported that the *mujahadeen* were showing themselves a divided fighting force, incapable of taking full advantage of the heavy arms provided by the United States. There were reports of growing resentment of Islamabad’s involvement and support for the most radical groups.¹¹ Najibullah’s ability to continue governing without the presence of Soviet troops began to impress many Soviet advisors still involved in Afghanistan. The Jalalabad victory emboldened not only Najibullah, but also many of his supporters in the KGB and among Foreign Ministry advisers in Kabul. General Mahmut Gareev, a military theoretician sent to serve as the senior Soviet military advisor in Afghanistan, wrote that by the end of 1989, there was increasing talk of moving the Afghan army from defensive to offensive operations.¹²

Gareev did not share the optimism of these advisers. Najibullah and the regime were still very vulnerable. The budget deficit grew as the state’s economic links frayed and it relied increasingly on cash payments, including to militias, for maintaining support.¹³ More desperate than ever for Soviet support, Najibullah asked for more arms and for Moscow to take a stronger line on Pakistan, to at least consider demonstrative flights over that country’s territory. He threatened to take the initiative himself, writing to Moscow “on our side we are considering the question of rocket attacks on targets on

⁹ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 193-194; Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, 230-232; “After Jalalabad’s Defense, Kabul Grows Confident,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1989.

¹⁰ “After Jalalabad’s Defense,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1989.

¹¹ See, for example, “The encircling gloom,” *The Guardian* April 10, 1989.

¹² Gareev, *Moia Poslednia Voina*, 127.

¹³ Militias had been used since 1980, but played an increasingly important role in the latter half of the 1980s, and particularly after the withdrawal. The militias’ loyalty to the Kabul government hinged largely on the payments and resources provided to them. See Giuozzi, *War, Politics, and Society*, 198-231.

Pakistani territory.”¹⁴ Although no record is available of Moscow’s response, the request must have made most Soviet officials bristle. They could not but be horrified by the thought of the war expanding at a time when the USSR could barely afford its already shrinking commitments to Kabul and when Soviet leaders were looking to their former Cold War enemies for economic support.

The withdrawal of Soviet troops removed Afghanistan from Gorbachev’s day to day agenda. In this context, the policies and views of individual officials gained increasing importance. There was disagreement not only over the USSR’s future role in Afghanistan, but also the prospects of the Najibullah regime. These were evident when General Gareev, went for pre-departure briefings with senior officials in Moscow. According to Gareev, Dmitrii Yazov told him “go there [to Kabul] for two-three months, and then we’ll see,” meaning that he did not expect the Najib government to last much longer.¹⁵ Kriuchkov, on the other hand, urged him to work hard to continue supporting Najibullah.¹⁶ Nor had the KGB-military rivalries, discussed in the previous chapter, been resolved. In his meeting with Gareev, Kriuchkov harped on the importance of developing a good working relationship with Najibullah as well as the KGB representative in Kabul. When Gareev tried to suggest that Moscow needed to push Najibullah towards improving his relationship with his own army, Kriuchkov showed his displeasure and criticised the “improper position” taken by “certain military advisors working in Kabul.”¹⁷ The in-fighting between the military and the KGB did not end with the withdrawal.

Whatever strengths Najibullah had shown after the Soviet withdrawal, he still faced bitter divisions within his own government. For one, the troubled relationship with Defense Minister Shanawaz Tanai, discussed in the previous chapter, had not improved.

¹⁴ Gareev, *Moia Poslednia Voina*, 120.

¹⁵ Gareev, *Moia Poslednia Voina*, 127.

¹⁶ Gareev, *Moia Poslednia Voina*, 92.

¹⁷ Gareev, *Moia Poslednia Voina*, 92. Gareev shares the frustration of other Soviet military officers who felt that their voice was often silenced by Kriuchkov. See Gareev *Afganskaia Strada*, 276-277.

By February 1990 Tanai emerged as the leader of a plot to oust Najibullah. As in 1988, Tanai tried to win Soviet support for his plans. This support was not forthcoming. Like General Sotskov, Gareev found himself being approached as a messenger to Moscow as well as a mediator in the intra-PDPA rivalry. Tanai tried to convince him that the Soviet Union was making a mistake in putting so much support behind Najibullah and the Parcham wing. Gareev could do little besides try to mediate some sort of truce between the two sworn enemies. By January 1990 the conflict within the government had grown so acute that, Gareev found, most of the leadership had given up governing and had devoted themselves full time to infighting.¹⁸

Najibullah's behavior did not help matters. He relied on his support in the state security apparatus to try to weed out plotters, ordering the arrest of 137 army officers he believed might be loyal to Tanai. When Gareev pointed out that the arrests might provoke Tanai, Najibullah rejected the suggestion. Gareev told the president that he was relying too much on the Ministry of State Security, urged him to be more inclusive with Khalqists, and pointed out that in some ways Tanai had a legitimate gripe. Gareev even suggested offering Tanai another promotion and then sending him to Moscow for training, but Najibullah did not believe Tanai would go. By early March, the atmosphere had become so tense that meetings of the Commander in Chief's Staff had been abandoned, Tanai refusing to enter the President's residence for fear of arrest. Nor did he agree to Gareev's request to meet with Najibullah, saying it was useless and that he would make no more compromises.¹⁹

Moscow largely remained aloof from this conflict. When Tanai told Gareev that he and his supporters "were ready to deliver a blow," Gareev passed on the information to Yazov. The latter said he believed he could get them to meet were he there, but never

¹⁸ Gareev, *Moia Poslednia Voina*, 132.

¹⁹ Gareev, *Moia Poslednia Voina*, 132-133.

made the trip.²⁰ Although reports on the situation within the PDPA would probably have been available at Politburo meetings in Moscow, we have no records to indicate what discussion they sparked or which options were discussed. The position of Kriuchkov or the KGB advisers during this episode is, unfortunately, also unknown.²¹

In the event, Tanai launched his bid for power on March 7, 1990, ordering jets to bomb Najibullah's palace. Meanwhile, forces loyal to Tanai tried to open a path for Hekmatyar's fighters. The bombs did not kill Najibullah, and the coup failed within several hours. Units loyal to Kabul routed the defecting units, and Hekmatyar's force never entered the capital.²² As it emerged later, Tanai's plot involved more than the removal of Najibullah. As in 1988, he believed that he could reach out to the opposition and form a new government. This time, however, rather than appealing to Massoud, he had made contacts with Gulbaddin Hekmatyar. As the journalist Steve Coll has shown, this was part of a planned double coup, funded in part with Osama bin-Laden's help, to remove both Benazir Bhutto in Islamabad and Najibullah in Kabul.²³

Available evidence suggests that the possibility of using Soviet planes to help quash the rebellion was at least briefly considered in Moscow. Several Politburo members spoke in favour of such an operation, citing familiar arguments. Lev Zaikov, a CC CPSU secretary responsible for the military-industrial complex and a Politburo member, said "If Najib falls, people will say – what did we fight for?" Yet even Shevardnadze was now opposed to using Soviet planes. Najibullah's request was denied.²⁴

The Tanai rebellion marked the last time that Soviet leaders seriously discussed the possibility of using the Soviet military to support the Najibullah regime. Indeed, by

²⁰ Gareev, *Moia Poslednia Voina*, 134.

²¹ Although not surprisingly, there was some suspicion among Soviet diplomats and officers in Kabul that the whole plot was hatched by the KGB. Gareev, *Moia Poslednia Voina*, 135. Considering Kriuchkov's support for Najibullah both before and after the coup, it is most unlikely that the KGB would have been supporting Tanai's bid for power.

²² Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 212; Rubin, *Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 253.

²³ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 212; Gareev, *Moia Poslednia Voina*, 134-135.

²⁴ Politburo meeting, March 7, 1990, GFA PB 1990, 169.

the fall of 1990 Najibullah's supporters in the KGB were becoming concerned that aid would eventually be cut off entirely by the Council of Ministers, where both ability and willingness to continue any sort of foreign aid was eroding. Shebarshin tried to make Najibullah aware of this trend through the KGB's representative in Kabul. Meanwhile, he and Kriuchkov agreed that they would try to push through as much aid as possible before the tide turned completely against supporting Najibullah.²⁵

Officials in the KGB and the military now began to worry about the effects of events in Afghanistan on the USSR's Central Asian republics. As chapter 2 showed, this was not a great concern in the early years of the war. Yet in 1989 and 1990 separatist and Islamist groups were beginning to make their presence felt, particularly in Tajikistan. Gareev, Kriuchkov, Shebarshin, and others worried about the potential of a spillover effect if extremists did come to power in Kabul.²⁶ This concern became another argument for those who wanted the USSR to continue supporting Najibullah politically and economically. In a Politburo memorandum following a trip to Afghanistan in August 1989, Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze pointed out that their conversations with party leaders in Uzbekistan confirmed that "Islamist fundamentalist" groups there and in other Central Asian republics were waiting to take advantage of a *mujahadeen* victory in Afghanistan.²⁷ Nevertheless, it does not seem that any particular response was discussed at the Politburo level.

The Tanai coup highlighted the fact that Afghan policy was adrift in Moscow. A few weeks later Cherniaev wrote a memo to his boss suggesting that he request some policy reviews, involving various experts, towards a "fundamental redevelopment" of Soviet policy towards Afghanistan.²⁸ Such policy reviews did take place through the summer of 1991. Yet none of them led to a fundamentally new policy. In the context of

²⁵ Shebarshin, *Iz Zhizni Nachalnika Razvedki*, 24-25.

²⁶ Author's interview with Leonid Shebarshin, March 19, 2008; Gareev, *Moia Poslednia Voina*, 107-108.

²⁷ "Regarding talks in Kabul and our potential further steps..." August 11, 1989 in *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente*, 692.

²⁸ Cherniaev memorandum to Gorbachev, GFA Fund 2, Opis 1, Document 8242.

state collapse within the USSR itself in 1990 and 1991, this is hardly surprising. Further, in March 1990 the Politburo commission on Afghanistan was dissolved. This eliminated the one senior body with coordinating capacity, and at the same time served to increase Kriuchkov's dominance of Afghan policy.²⁹

Najibullah's ability to hold on to power after Soviet troops left was a testament to his own political skills, to the work of Soviet advisors who had trained the Afghan military and militias, and to the weakness of the *mujahadeen*. His survival proved to be a political boon to Gorbachev, who did not have to face the political fallout of a bloody collapse in Afghanistan. It also posed a challenge – as long as he stayed in power Moscow had some obligation to keep its promises and offer him support by way of aid, advice, and representation on the world stage. Key officials who had been instrumental in steering Afghan policy in earlier periods, including Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov, continued to exert enormous influence and press for a more active involvement. Although they failed to secure continued military involvement, they succeeded in ensuring that supplies would continue to flow to Kabul. While Gorbachev accepted their insistence that military and economic aid would continue, he rejected the possibility of allowing any Soviet troops to return. Sending the Soviet air force into Afghanistan could have compromised the political gains of the withdrawal and Gorbachev's new reputation as a global peace-maker, increasingly the only source of his waning popularity.

Continuing diplomatic efforts: the UN, Pakistan, and the US

Although the Geneva talks had culminated with the signing of the accords in April 1988, Moscow continued to look for ways to steer the situation in Afghanistan toward some sort of acceptable resolution. While the increasing dialogue with the United States, Pakistan, and Iran seemed to provide new opportunities for a diplomatic solution, Soviet

²⁹ Author's interview with Nikolai Kozyrev, November 14, 2008.

leaders and diplomats now had to operate in an arena where they had much less leverage and where Soviet power in general was in rapid decline. This decline made multi-lateralism all the more crucial, for it offered the only real possibility of protecting Soviet interests in Afghanistan in a way that was consistent with New Political Thinking. It was also part of Gorbachev's drive to show his conservative critics that he had not abandoned Soviet interests by moving away from confrontation with the USSR's recent enemies.

From the signing of the Geneva Accords onwards, Gorbachev repeatedly expressed his belief that Moscow could resolve the Afghan conflict through multi-lateral diplomacy and the United Nations. Pakistani leaders also expressed interest in a greater UN role. Having failed to get a coalition government set up before the Geneva Accords were signed, Pakistan had to be content with a mechanism that allowed the UN to stay involved. Yet the UN Secretary General was reluctant to involve his organization in the conflict any further.

At a meeting with Perez de Cuellar on the day of the signing ceremony, the recently appointed Foreign Minister of Pakistan tried to push the UN Secretary General to commit his organization to a continued role in Afghanistan. The accords themselves, he said, "would not lead automatically to peace in Afghanistan. That could only be achieved with the formation of a transitional government. All the Geneva parties were in agreement that Mr. Cordovez should continue his efforts towards reaching an understanding to that end with all the parties concerned." Perez de Cuellar was unwilling to commit the UN again because the Geneva process itself, which had taken the better part of the decade, had brought his office under fire from a number of quarters. He insisted that it would be difficult for the United Nations to get involved, since the organization was "enjoined from interfering in the internal affairs of member countries."³⁰

³⁰ Meeting between UN Secretary General and H.E. Mr. Zain Noorani, Foreign Minister of Pakistan, April 14, 1988. SML, Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 102. Cuellar's resistance to a UN role was broken

Moscow offered its own proposals before and after the withdrawal. In New York for the UN General Assembly in December 1988, Gorbachev met with Perez de Cuellar. Moscow was ready to accept a neutral government, Gorbachev told the Secretary General, but to ask Najibullah to step down ahead of time was unfair. Later, speaking before the assembly, Gorbachev proposed a cease-fire that would begin on January 1, 1989, a halt of arms supplies to both the government and the opposition, and the "deployment of UN peacekeeping forces in Kabul and other 'strategic centers.' His proposals were rejected by virtually every country.³¹ Another Soviet proposal in March that called for a group of experts representing the US, USSR, Pakistan, Iran, the Najibullah government and the *mujahadeen* also went nowhere.³²

If during most of the war Soviet leaders often sought to keep the UN at arms length, between 1989 and 1991 they increasingly looked to it to help reach a resolution in Afghanistan. As leaders in Moscow felt their own ability to influence events in Afghanistan slipping, their calls for UN involvement became more strident. In February 1989, Gorbachev tried to appeal directly to US President George Bush to accept the idea of an international conference proposed at the UN two months earlier. Bush refused.³³ During the Jalalabad battle in March a Soviet representative delivered an angry message to Perez de Cuellar, accusing him of not taking an active role in Afghan affairs and allowing the situation to slip out of control.³⁴ Soviet officials continued to push for the idea of an international conference, under the auspices of the UN Secretary General, to

by a UN resolution, and he ended up playing a direct role, while Cordovez left the UN to serve as Foreign Minister for his own country, Ecuador. See Cuellar to Cordovez, November 11, 1988 UN Secretary General's Files S-1031-60-25 and Cuellar, *Pilgrimage for Peace*, 196-197.

³¹ Perez de Cuellar, *Pilgrimage for Peace*, 202.

³² Ibid. See also a copy of the proposal handed to Perez de Cuellar, March 15, 1989, and the Note for File on US and Pakistani responses to these proposals, (undated but after March 16 1989), in SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 104.

³³ Carolyn McGiffert Ekedahl and Melvin A Goodman, *The Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze* (University Park, 1997), 193.

³⁴ Note of the Secretary-General's Meeting with the First Deputy Representative of the USSR, March 22, 1989, 1989 SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 109.

increase the size of UNGOMAP, and for the Secretary General and his representatives to play an activist role for the next several years.³⁵

The turn to the UN reflected Gorbachev's own faith in that body, and his growing belief in the importance of broad international agreements. It also reflected Moscow's growing realization of its own impotence to dictate the course of events. Moscow counted on the UN to help build international support for the Soviet position in negotiations; this in turn might force the US and Pakistan to modify their demands, particularly on Najibullah. It also counted on the UN to enforce those parts of the Geneva Accords that protected the Kabul government, something the previous chapter showed the UN was unable and unwilling to do. Finally, Gorbachev clearly hoped that the UN would help provide legitimacy for the withdrawal and his handling of Afghan policy. As he reiterated on numerous occasions, success in Afghanistan would prove that New Thinking could combine improvement in relations with the west and the protection of national interests.

Of course the UN was not the only venue for Moscow to work for a solution to the Afghan problem. Afghanistan continued to be on the agenda of bilateral US-Soviet meetings. Efforts over the following months to convince Washington to stop or at least reduce its support to the *mujahadeen*, however, were generally fruitless. In May, Shevardnadze made yet another in a series of private appeals to US leaders during a private dinner at the former's apartment. Shevardnadze even went beyond earlier Soviet positions, de-coupling the cessation of Soviet arms supplies to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and US aid to the *mujahadeen*. For the first time he even suggested that the Soviet Union would not insist on keeping Najibullah in a coalition government after the settlement.³⁶

³⁵ See, for example, Shevardnadze's note to Perez de Cuellar, February 17, 1989 and Vorontsov to Cuellar, November 6, 1990 SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 109.

³⁶ McGiffert-Ekedahl and Goodman, *The Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze*, 193; Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (New York, 1993), 62;

Over time, however, the attitude in Washington became more promising. On the one hand, Pakistani officials and their allies in congress still opposed the idea of a transitional government that included Najibullah.³⁷ On the other hand, there was a growing consensus that the US had reached its main objective (the Soviet withdrawal) and the realization was emerging that continued support for the *mujahadeen* might not be in US interests. Whereas in late 1988 and early 1989 CIA analysts were confident of a quick military victory, the RA army's successful defense of Jalalabad in the spring of 1989 seemed to change the calculus.³⁸ Further, now that Soviet troops had left, US officials and leaders began doubting whether a military takeover of Kabul would even be in US interests. In August UN officials had learned that both the United States and Pakistan were "reevaluating the desirability of a military solution in Afghanistan."³⁹ And in October, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee rebuked the Bush administration for holding out for a military victory. As a State Department analyst put it, two changes had taken place since February 1989: "One, the congressional bipartisan consensus on Afghanistan is breaking up. And two, the perception that we are supporting a good cause

James A. Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy* (New York, 1995), 74. Shevardnadze's hint that the Soviet Union might drop its insistence on keeping Najibullah in a coalition government was "off the record," and was not mentioned in a memorandum prepared by Soviet officials for the UN Secretary General, nor does Baker mention it in his memoirs. "USSR-USA Talks on Afghanistan," May 17, 1989 SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 104.

³⁷ In September Shevardnadze traveled to Baker's ranch at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, for two days of talks on arms controls and other bilateral issues. Although Baker and Shevardnadze spoke about the Afghan problem, they could only agree on the need for a "political settlement on the basis of national reconciliation, and for a transitional government paving the way for the creation of a non-aligned Afghanistan." "Afghanistan: US goes cool on guerillas" *The Guardian*, October 6, 1989.

³⁸ Indeed, mid level and senior officials had begun re-evaluating their policies towards support for the *mujahadeen*. In the fall of 1989, Peter Tomsen, appointed ambassador to the Afghan resistance, led an inter-agency working group to re-evaluate US policy. They decided on a new approach: pressure on Najibullah would continue, but the US would work to form a moderate government to take his place. Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 180-184, 205-207.

³⁹ Perez de Cuellar, *Pilgrimage for Peace*, 203; Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot*, 306-307. This was also evident when Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, in a meeting with Perez de Cuellar in June, noted that "the situation around Jalalabad had made everybody think in a different perspective...Pakistan was pursuing a search for a political settlement to the problem of Afghanistan." Notes on the meeting between the Secretary-General and the Prime Minister of Pakistan, June 9, 1989, SML, Perez de Cuellar, Box 10, Folder 105.

is not there any more. We are no longer fighting the evil empire. They've gone. Now it's just Afghans fighting Afghans.”⁴⁰

Perez de Cuellar and the two officials now coordinating UN efforts on Afghanistan, Benon Sevan and Giandomenico Picco, saw an opening. In the fall of 1989 they attempted to launch a new UN sponsored initiative to establish an intra-Afghan dialogue that would bring the opposition groups as well as the Kabul government to the negotiating table. Yet neither the US, Pakistan, or Moscow accepted the initiative, which represented the main thrust of UN efforts in 1989. For the former, any recognition of the Najibullah government's legitimacy continued to be anathema. Moscow continued to insist on an international conference, possibly fearing that the UN proposal might unite the chronically divided *mujahadeen*, depriving the Kabul government of a political advantage.⁴¹

Indeed, Moscow found it hard to let go of support for Najibullah. Although they may have expressed great frustration in private, Soviet leaders could hardly dump him, particularly at a point when he seemed to be gaining support within the country and increasingly capable of standing on his own two legs. In a private letter to Bush and again at the Malta summit in December 1989, Gorbachev insisted that that Najibullah could not be forced out prior to a settlement.⁴² The two sides exchanged a number of accusations about the others' contribution to the problem and failure to help find a solution. Shevardnadze even “sounded off” at Baker, upset that the “friendly”

⁴⁰ “Afghanistan: US goes cool on guerillas” *The Guardian*, October 6, 1989. See also George Bush and Brent Scowcroft *A World Transformed* (New York: Vintage Books), 134-5.

⁴¹ Perez de Cuellar, *Pilgrimage for Peace*, 203-204.

⁴² “Soviets reassert policy on keeping Najibullah,” *The Washington Times*, November 2, 1989, A7. “Soviet Support for Najibullah Blocked Political Headway at Malta Summit,” *Associated Press*, December 6, 1989. In a letter to Perez de Cuellar, Gorbachev noted that at Malta he and Bush had been able to focus their conversation on the need for a diplomatic solution. Yet he expressed his frustration that Bush refused to consider compromising on Najibullah: “It is important to see the realities of today's Afghanistan. It is necessary to take into account the fact that following the withdrawal of Soviet troops the government of the Republic of Afghanistan has felt more confident. We think that the opposition is starting to become convinced of this as well.” Gorbachev to Cuellar, December 3, 1989, GFA.

relationship established between the two men during their meeting in Wyoming was not bringing concrete results.⁴³

Moscow's support for Najibullah seemed to be as much a matter of decorum as defense of interests, at least as far as Gorbachev and even Shevardnadze were concerned. In December the *New York Times* reported that although Shevardnadze and Gorbachev had both reiterated support for Najibullah during the Malta summit, they seemed to be dropping hints "with a wink and a nod" that he was dispensable.⁴⁴ Then, at a meeting with Baker in February 1990, a frustrated Shevardnadze reportedly blurted out "Sometimes I wish all these people would just kill each other and end the whole thing." He went on to say it would be better if Najibullah could stay at his post, but although "it would be very difficult for us to force him to go, it might be acceptable if he decided to leave on his own."⁴⁵

For their part, US officials were moving closer to the Soviet position on Najibullah. Although the *mujahadeen* showed no sign of dropping their insistence that Najibullah resign before negotiations could take place, the policy review and the changing atmosphere in congress were moving the Bush administration towards dropping their insistence on such a scenario.⁴⁶ At the meeting with Shevardnadze cited above, Baker mentioned for the first time that the United States might stop insisting that Najibullah leave the scene before negotiations begin.⁴⁷ Following the meeting, Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman Gennady Gerasimov said that although the formal US proposal for a settlement still "did not take into account the situation in Kabul and the solidity of the Najibullah government," the two sides had moved closer to a settlement

⁴³ Cherniaev Diary entry, December 10, 1989, GFA CD 1989.

⁴⁴ "US Divided on Soviet Stand" *The New York Times*, December 16, 1989, 1.

⁴⁵ Beschloss and Talbot, *At the Highest Levels*, 180. See also "Moscow spells out Afghan plan," *The Independent*, February 21, 1990, p.9. Moscow's position, as laid out to the UN Secretary General, was that the US insistence on removing Najibullah during the transition period was unacceptable. However, Moscow was reading to accept the results of elections, as were Afghan leaders. Untitled memorandum on Baker/Shevardnadze talks, February 14, 1990, SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 106.

⁴⁶ "Najibullah 'can remain'" *The Guardian* February 6, 1990.

⁴⁷ Beschloss and Talbot, *At the Highest Levels*, 180

based on intra-Afghan dialogue.⁴⁸ For his part, Najibullah announced publicly his desire for UN-monitored elections and his willingness to step down if defeated, and even suggested that he might step down before the vote was held during the negotiation process.⁴⁹

A week after his meeting with Baker in February, Shevardnadze published a new set of proposals in the government newspaper *Izvestia*. His article repeated the call for an international conference and also called for a cease-fire, an end to both US and Soviet arms shipments (“negative symmetry”), and elections monitored by the UN and the Islamic Conference Organization. Perhaps the biggest innovation was the idea that both government and opposition forces could hold on to the territory they controlled during the transition period.⁵⁰

Following Shevardnadze’s *Izvestia* article, Moscow and Washington seemed to move quicker towards an agreement. At a meeting in Helsinki in March US and Soviet experts elaborated on the proposals that came out of the Baker-Shevardnadze meeting in February and the *Izvestia* article. The failure of the Tanai coup confirmed that Najibullah still had enough support within the military and party to hold on to power, even if it also highlighted the challenges he faced from rivals at the top. In May US officials said that they would agree to Najibullah participating in elections if he first stepped down. In testimony before the US congress in June, Baker confirmed that “a very, very narrow difference” separated the views of Moscow and Washington.⁵¹ US President George Bush, meeting with Perez de Cuellar in June, noted “I was dead wrong about Najibullah

⁴⁸ “Soviet Spokesman on Baker-Shevardnadze Talks in Moscow” *TASS* February 8, 1990.

⁴⁹ “Afghan leader urges UN-monitored elections” *Washington Post*, January 25, 1990, p.A30.

⁵⁰ “Soviets Offer Proposal for Afghan Settlement,” *Washington Post*, February 15, 1990, p.A45; Beschloss and Talbot, *At the Highest Levels*, 243.

⁵¹ “Superpowers plan Afghan arms freeze” *The Independent*, April 5, 1990, p.14; “US and Soviets on New Tack in Effort to End Afghan War,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 1990, A1; “Baker Notes Gains on Afghan Accord,” *The Washington Post*, June 14, 1990, p. A34. Note on Afghanistan to the Secretary General, (undated, but after May 23, 1990), SML Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 106.

– I thought he would fall when the Soviet troops withdrew.”⁵² He went on to say that he could understand the Soviet insistence on keeping Najibullah through the election period, and their insistence on following the “Nicaraguan model.”⁵³

Soviet leaders could take some comfort in the change in attitude and policy of other nations that had supported the *mujahadeen*. Relations with Iran had improved, evidenced by Shevardnadze’s high profile visit to the country in February 1989, during which Ayatollah Khomeini hailed the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁵⁴ In August Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze noted that Iran was moving towards a more “constructive” position as a result of Soviet diplomatic efforts.⁵⁵ In October, Iran cut off military aid to Shiite insurgents, even encouraging them to work with the Kabul government.⁵⁶ From that point Soviet officials began to see Iran as generally playing a constructive role in Afghanistan.⁵⁷ Similarly, China, which had once been part of the coalition supporting the *mujahadeen*, was no longer playing a hostile role.⁵⁸

On the key question of US support for the *mujahadeen*, however, an agreement remained always just out of reach. Talks continued at the “expert” level, and Afghanistan was on the agenda at the July Baker-Shevardnadze meeting in Irkutsk and again when the two met in Houston that December. An international consensus, based on a draft prepared by UN officials, was within reach. Moscow now largely accepted the idea of a transition mechanism, “the powers of which could include important government

⁵² Note of the Secretary-General’s luncheon with George Bush, June 4, 1990. SML Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 106.

⁵³ Ibid. In Nicaragua, the Sandinista’s remained in power while elections took place, then stepped down peacefully after the results were certified. Bush’s growing doubts about the situation in Afghanistan were evident again later in the discussion, when he asked Cuellar “Is Hekmatyar a bad guy?” to which Perez de Cuellar responded “I don’t like him at all, he is a fundamentalist.”

⁵⁴ “Shevardnadze, Khomeini, meet in Tehran” *Washington Post*, February 27, 1989.

⁵⁵ “Regarding talk in Kabul and our potential further steps...” August 11, 1989 in *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente*, 686.

⁵⁶ “Iran halts arms flow to Afghan Shiites,” *The Toronto Star*, October 1, 1989, H8.

⁵⁷ See the IMEMO paper prepared for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “International aspects of a settlement in Afghanistan,” July 23, 1990, IMEMO Archive and “Iran’s attitude to the settlement of the Afghan problem,” GARF F. 10026, op. 4, d. 2868.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

functions.”⁵⁹ Yet for all this progress, no agreement was reached in 1990. There were three reasons for this. First, the Moscow leadership still found it hard to let go of Najibullah. The softening of the US position in the first half of 1990 and Najibullah’s continuing hold on power encouraged Moscow to believe that sooner or later the US (and Pakistan) would accept his involvement in a transitional government. In a meeting with Najibullah in August 1990, Gorbachev reaffirmed his belief that the US would ultimately recognise that they did not have someone better to offer as a national leader.⁶⁰ Second, Moscow pointed out, with some justification, that even if the Soviet Union and the United States both cut off arms supplies, the opposition would still be able to count on support from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other minor donors. Therefore, Soviet officials insisted on a more comprehensive settlement, even offering “negative symmetry plus,” i.e. the withdrawal of weapons like the Scud missiles from Afghanistan if a complete cut-off of supplies to the *mujahadeen* could be guaranteed.⁶¹

Finally, internal political dynamics continued to play an important role as they had in earlier periods. Although the internal debate in Moscow is difficult to trace for this period, there is reason to believe that Kriuchkov, and possibly Shevardnadze, continued to insist that Najibullah should not be forced to step down prior to the formation of a transitional government. As we will see later in the chapter, it was only when both were finally out of government in the fall of 1991 that an agreement on mutual cut-off of arms supplies and “negative symmetry” was finally reached. Boris Pankin, the Minister of Foreign Affairs who took over after the failed coup in August 1991, learned that the

⁵⁹ Note for the Secretary General following talks regarding Afghanistan held with senior Soviet officials, 10 July 1990. The consensus non-paper, sent to the Foreign Ministers of Iran, Pakistan, the US and USSR, outlined a number points which were necessary for securing a settlement, including the cessation of arms supplies by all sides and a “credible and impartial transition mechanism,” with specifics on the latter point deliberately left out. “Elements for an International Consensus,” 11 July 1990. SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 107.

⁶⁰ “Record of conversation between Gorbachev and Najibullah” August 23, 1990 NSA, READ/RADD, Box 9.

⁶¹ Beschloss and Talbot, *At the Highest Levels*, 243; Ekedahl and Goodman, *The Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze*, 193; “Superpowers plan Afghan arms freeze” *The Independent*, April 5, 1990, p.14.

agreement had been prepared a year earlier, at the Baker-Shevardnadze talks in Houston, but Kriuchkov's continued opposition had blocked the signing of the accords.⁶²

Handling the home front

Even before the withdrawal began, Gorbachev and other Soviet leaders had to decide how to explain the war to the public. The Soviet media had barely discussed Soviet military activities in Afghanistan prior to 1985, and in the years that followed few details regarding either the origins of the war or its conduct emerged. As Andrei Grachev, an International Department official and later Gorbachev aide, notes in his book *Gorbachev's Gamble*, there was serious concern among the leadership about the reaction to the withdrawal from the Soviet public. While the public would probably accept the withdrawal, "official propaganda had been quite effective in concealing the truth about the real human price that had been paid."⁶³

The withdrawal coincided with a real flowering of the Soviet media as a result of *glasnost*, where the party no longer had absolute control over the press and investigative journalism was emerging, allowing a wide range of investigative reporting on everything from the origins of the war to its conduct and aftermath. It was in the public sphere that Gorbachev scored the largest success of his Afghan policy. From 1988 through the collapse of the USSR, he managed to get all the credit for ending the presence of Soviet soldiers there without having to explain why it took him four years to do so. Gorbachev benefited from the genuine relief people felt that "the boys" had returned and no more would be sent to die, but his success also reflected a PR campaign that aimed to keep the focus on the origins of the war under Brezhnev.

Soviet leaders were already discussing how to explain the war and the withdrawal in the months prior to the signing of the Geneva Accords. At a meeting with

⁶² Boris Pankin, *The Last Hundred Days of the Soviet Union*, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 117-118; Author's interview with Nikolai Kozyrev, November 14, 2008.

⁶³ Grachev, *Gorbachev's Gamble*, 103.

several Politburo members working on propaganda and ideology, Aleksandr Iakovlev told his colleagues that press discussion of the war had to increase, but to avoid any discussion of the war being a mistake: “God help us if we create the impression that our boys put their heads down for naught, that they needlessly became invalids for their whole lives, that they fought needlessly – that is absolutely out of the question.”⁶⁴ Soon after the accords were signed, the issue came up at a Politburo meeting. Gorbachev agreed with Iakovlev that propaganda should emphasise the “international duty” performed by Soviet soldiers, but at the same time it could not go too far: “after all, if everything was correct, why are we withdrawing?”⁶⁵

Gorbachev proposed drafting a letter for the party and the country that would for the first time address the human and material costs of the war, as well as the reasons for the withdrawal. The letter had to strike a balance, “so that our withdrawal does not look like running away. [The letter] must emphasise that there is no military solution.” The letter, circulated within the CPSU in May 1988, for the first time summarised many of the mistakes that had been made in the Afghan war. It spoke of the economics costs, the naivety of Soviet party advisors, as well as the mistake made with the appointment of Babrak Karmal. Losses of men and materiel, long hidden from the party as well as the public, now received wide circulation:

Combat action is combat action. Our losses in dead and wounded—and the CC CPSU believes it has no right to hide this—were growing, and becoming more and more heavy. Altogether, by the beginning of May 1988, we lost 13,310 people [dead] in Afghanistan; 35,478 Soviet officers and soldiers were wounded, many of whom became disabled; 301 people are missing in action. There is a reason that people say that each person is a unique world, and when a person dies, that world disappears forever. The loss of every person is very hard and irreparable, it is hard and sacred if one died carrying out one’s duty.

⁶⁴ Meeting chaired by Iakovlev, February 22, 1988, NSA READ/RADD, Box 9, p.17.

⁶⁵ Politburo Meeting, April 18, 1988, GFA PB 1988, 211-215. At this meeting Gorbachev also nominated Iakovlev to the Afghan Commission, presumably to handle questions of propaganda, and possibly also to have a close ally in that body.

The Afghan losses, naturally, were much heavier [than ours], including the losses among the civilian population.⁶⁶

Although the letter avoided any actual mention of soldiers having died without good reason, it is hard to see how anyone reading this letter would avoid coming to precisely that conclusion. Indeed, time would show that Gorbachev and others were perfectly content to admit the war was a mistake, as long as it meant shifting the blame back to the Brezhnev era.

A month later, at the 19th Party Conference, Gorbachev echoed the sentiments of the letter to the assembled delegates. He pointed out that the Soviet leadership had to bear the “moral responsibility” for what happened in Afghanistan, but quickly moved to distance himself from the mistakes of the Brezhnev era: “I have to tell you that many Politburo members did not know about the decision [to send troops into Afghanistan]. I, for example, a candidate member of the Politburo, learned about the introduction of troops from the newspapers.”⁶⁷ By January 1989, the Politburo was discussing openly calling the decision to invade a mistake.⁶⁸

In the new atmosphere of *glasnost* the Soviet leadership could not hope to shape public perceptions of its policies through a monopoly on information. Although most of the leadership genuinely viewed the intervention as a mistake, they still worried about allowing criticism to get out of hand, thus undermining support for the military and other Soviet institutions.

As Gorbachev aide Vladimir Zagladin argued in a memo to his boss, thus far, the Soviet press had continued to follow the old official line justifying the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.⁶⁹ This line contained a number of contradictions. Among other things, Moscow had insisted that the intervention was necessary “to repel the

⁶⁶ CC CPSU Letter on Afghanistan, May 10, 1988, NSA Documents on Afghanistan, Document 21, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv> Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya.

⁶⁷ Notes from the XIX Party Conference, June 29, 1988 GFA.

⁶⁸ Politburo meeting, January 24, 1989 GFA PB 1989, 60.

⁶⁹ “Sobliudat Soglashenie,” *Pravda* February 18, 1989.

foreign danger for Afghanistan.” But at the end of December 1979 foreign support for the opposition was still minimal. “It assumed a serious scale only after our entry into Afghanistan and to a significant degree as a result of the operation.”⁷⁰ Zagladin concluded that while it was still too early to give a full explanation of what happened, it was not advisable to return to explanations that directly contradicted reality.⁷¹ Zagladin accurately highlighted the contradictions created by Soviet propaganda that could potentially make trouble for the leadership on what was generally a popular move. In February 1989, in particular, it was far from clear if the Najibullah regime would last more than a few months. If Kabul fell soon after the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the decision to intervene had not been officially criticised, questions would almost certainly be raised about the advisability of withdrawing them, or perhaps about the conduct of the war under Gorbachev.

Zagladin’s memorandum echoed concerns of some Politburo members, including Shevardnadze. Even as he was advocating a more hawkish line in support of Najibullah at the end of January 1989, the foreign minister pointed out that “Within the party and in the country at large there are different reactions to our withdrawal. At some point we will have to announce that the introduction of troops was a gross blunder...many thought it was adventurism even then. But their opinion was not considered. Later the lies about successes started.”⁷² If years of Soviet propaganda were not reversed, Shevardnadze feared, the present leadership could be saddled with the blame for the outcome of the war.

In October, the new Congress of People’s Deputies launched an investigation into the causes and consequences of the Soviet invasion. The investigative commission, headed by Georgii Arbatov, was given a mandate to interview military figures and officials involved in the initial invasion. Crucially, however, it did not focus on other

⁷⁰ Zagladin Memorandum on Afghanistan, February 29, 1989 GFA Fond 3, Opis 1, Document 7192.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Politburo meeting, January 24, 1989 GFA PB 1989, 60 and in Cherniaev, *Afganskii Vopros*, 48.

aspects of the war.⁷³ Similarly, when Shevardnadze made a much publicised admission to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies in October 1989 that the Soviet invasion had "violated general human values," he moved to distance himself and his boss from responsibility for the war: "M.S. Gorbachev and I were candidate members of the Politburo. I found out about what had happened from radio and newspaper reports. A decision that had very serious consequences for our country was made behind the back of the party and the people. We were confronted with a *fait accompli*."⁷⁴ Several key military officers contributed, perhaps unwittingly, to Gorbachev's efforts to put some distance between himself and the emerging criticism of the war, by giving interviews where they laid the blame on Brezhnev and his cohort.⁷⁵

Even before the Supreme Soviet officially condemned the decision to invade on October 25, 1989, a number of enterprising journalists, sometimes writing in newly established newspapers, began providing the public with previously unknown information about various aspects of the war, including the decision to invade. Relying primarily on interviews with participants as well as their own experience covering the war in earlier years, these journalists for the first time presented completely new accounts of the war.⁷⁶ Official censorship rarely stepped in to block these exposés. And even when censors did move to block a piece from appearing in one media outlet, it could find its way to the public eye through another.⁷⁷

⁷³ Author's interview with Georgii Arbatov, March 24, 2008.

⁷⁴ Beschloss and Talbot, *At the Highest Levels*, 123.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Varennikov's interview in *Ogonek* and the interview with General Kim Tsagalov: "Afghanistan: Voinu proigrali politiki," *Argumenty i Fakty* No.39, September 30, 1989. Tsagalov went as far as to say "The decision to withdraw our troops is a manifestation of great civil courage on our part as well as that of the Afghan leadership. It is precisely that [courage] which was lacking in our previous leadership."

⁷⁶ Most notable is the work of Artem Borovik as well as the journalists David Gai and Vladimir Snegirev. The latter published a series of articles in *Vecherniaia Moskva* [Evening Moscow] in the summer and fall of 1989, and eventually a book, *Vtorzhenie*, that has been cited elsewhere in this thesis. See, for example David Gai, "Afganistan: Kak Eto Bylo: Voina Glazami Ee Uchastnikov" [Afghanistan the way it was: the war through the eyes of its participants], *Vecherniaia Moskva*, October 30, 1989.

⁷⁷ Such was the case with a piece prepared by Aleksandr Bovin on the situation in Afghanistan in December 1988. Bovin's report, based on his visit to Afghanistan, noted that "the withdrawal of Soviet troops is not accompanied by increased stabilization in the country" and went on to highlight the continued divisions within the PDPA and other problems. Excised from the December 11 broadcast,

Not surprisingly, journalists exposed not only the political mistakes made during the war, but also the brutal nature of the fighting, including the atrocities committed by Soviet troops. Issues like drug use and hazing (*dedovschina*) were also being written about for the first time, both with regard to service in Afghanistan as well as army life in general. Needless to say, these sort of investigative articles had been virtually unheard of in the Soviet Union. These revelations, and the emotional public reaction they evoked, contributed to the growing rift between the military and the civilian leadership, which often sided with the journalists.⁷⁸

Similarly, the proliferation of civil groups like the “soldier’s mothers” organization, which were at least partially a response to the war in Afghanistan, contributed to the loosening of state and party control over society. Some of these organizations, particularly the veterans organizations, were originally formed within the framework of traditional party organizations like the *Komsomol*. By 1990 they were increasingly emerging as fully independent organizations, openly bypassing or defying state and party organizations. Their aims, however, had little to do with high politics and more to do with immediate concerns – medical and social aid for veterans, better treatment within the military, and so on.⁷⁹

Crucially, neither Gorbachev nor Shevardnadze faced serious criticism for their policies in Afghanistan. Throughout the 1989-1991 period, criticism of the war focused on the decision to intervene and the management of the war in its early years. Partially this was a result of genuine curiosity on the part of journalists who wanted to understand the origins of the war. It was also the result of decisions by Politburo leaders to keep the focus of blame on Brezhnev and his circle.

Bovin saw to the pieces publication in *Argumenty i Fakty* less than a week later. “Pis’mo v redaktsiu: glasnost na polovinu,” *Argumenty i Fakty*, December 17, 1988.

⁷⁸ Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 750-751; Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 284-85.

⁷⁹ Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War*, 79-83.

USSR, Russia and Afghanistan

When the withdrawal of Soviet troops was completed in February 1989, the USSR was still a superpower, with satellite states in Eastern Europe, allies throughout the Third World, and the Warsaw Pact organization a seemingly unshakable counterweight to NATO. By the end of the year most of the communist parties in Eastern Europe were out of power. A year later East Germany was on its way to reunification with the Federal Republic of Germany, the Warsaw Pact had ceased to exist, and the USSR was facing economic catastrophe. By 1991 it was breaking apart at the seams.

In this context it was probably inevitable that sooner or later Soviet material support to Afghanistan would cease or at least decrease to insignificant levels. Although Gorbachev still had at least the nominal allegiance of the military up to his resignation at the end of December, the state was coming apart at the seams.⁸⁰ Indeed, in 1991 the Soviet Union was only able to deliver 10% of the fuel contracted to the RA.⁸¹ An Afghan delegate visiting the Soviet Union in the early fall of 1991 told a reporter "We saw all these empty stores in Moscow and long queues for a loaf of bread and we thought what can the Russians give us?"⁸² Perhaps most damaging for Najibullah was the loss of political support that Soviet disintegration entailed.

Najibullah harbored a justified fear that at some point or another he would be "abandoned." He was no doubt aware of the rumors circulating in the international press that Soviet officials were hinting, off the record, they might be willing to drop their insistence on keeping Najibullah in a transition government. And as he watched the early stages of the USSR's ultimate dissolution, he expressed anxiety regarding where it might leave him. Najibullah was keenly aware that his support was in decline within

⁸⁰ The assertion of sovereignty and in some cases independence by republican governments contributed to Moscow's budgetary crisis, as republic leaders curtailed taxes (as well as agricultural products) sent back to the center. See Yegor Gaidar, *Collapse of an Empire*, 228-242.

⁸¹ Barnett R. Rubin *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 171.

⁸² "Gardez victory, Soviet message of support revive Kabul regime," *Agence France-Presse* October 14, 1991.

Gorbachev's inner circle and among newly emerging political figures like Boris Yeltsin.

In a New Years' greeting to Aleksandr Iakovlev, he reminded the "architect of perestroika" that the Afghans "would never forget those who helped our people in difficult, crucial periods of our history."⁸³ In August 1990 he complained to Gorbachev that "the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR Yeltsin has publicly spoken for ceasing aid to Afghanistan." He went on to defend Soviet assistance to Afghanistan, pointing out that while the USSR had carried out its obligations under the Geneva agreement, Pakistan and the United States had not. Gorbachev assured Najibullah that the USSR had no plans to abandon him; on the contrary, the US was coming around to the Soviet view that the Kabul government had to be part of any transitional arrangement.⁸⁴

Throughout 1991 Gorbachev's power declined. Republican leaders, particularly Russian president Boris Yeltsin, increasingly saw Gorbachev and the Soviet government as competitors for power. Republican governments were declaring that their laws superseded Soviet law; many were developing their own institutions, including ministries of foreign affairs, and working to get recognition abroad. Revenues were no longer reaching the Soviet treasury. Throughout the year Gorbachev was preoccupied with establishing a new All-Union treaty, and in July 1991 a draft was approved by the Supreme Soviet. It was due to be signed on August 20. On August 4 Gorbachev went on

⁸³ Although one cannot be sure, there seems to be a strong hint of irony in the letter. Najibullah almost certainly knew the position that Iakovlev was taking on support for Afghanistan. First, he may have had such information from Kriuchkov, who had a very acrimonious relationship with Iakovlev which continued to play out long after the Soviet collapse. Second, Iakovlev's role as one of the "most liberal" people in the leadership was a matter of public comment in the Soviet and foreign press. Thus it is hard to imagine that the following is written without a trace of irony: "I am well aware of your attention and tireless efforts directed at providing aid to the long-suffering Afghan people, of the constant support the Soviet Union provides to the Republic of Afghanistan...Our government and our people highly value your persistent efforts and are grateful to you for this." Najibullah to Iakovlev, [translated from Dari], 28 December 1989, GARF F. A-10063, op.2, d. 56, 4-5.

⁸⁴ "Record of conversation between Gorbachev and Najibullah" August 23, 1990 NSA, READ/RADD, Box 9.

holiday; on August 19 a group of hardliners, including Kriuchkov and Varennikov, tried to launch a coup. Their attempt failed, but it ended up taking Soviet power with it.⁸⁵

As Gorbachev's power faded throughout 1991, his assurances to Najibullah increasingly rang hollow. When Kriuchkov and Shebarshin traveled to Kabul in April 1991, Najibullah asked for further confirmation of continued Soviet support and for more arms. Kriuchkov promised both. Later Shebarshin told his boss that he doubted whether, in the developing political climate, such ongoing support was likely. Kriuchkov replied, rather sharply, that it would continue.⁸⁶ In April 1991 Kriuchkov was still in a position to give such promises. He was a member of the leadership and chief of the KGB; furthermore, Gorbachev's "turn to the right" in the fall of 1990 and the spring of 1991 had brought him closer to Kriuchkov and other conservatives.⁸⁷ Yet much changed in the coming months. In June, Boris Yeltsin, who had advocated the cessation of supplies a year earlier, was elected president of Russia. The failure of the coup attempt led to the arrest of Kriuchkov and the ouster of Shebarshin.⁸⁸ Shevardnadze had already resigned at the end of 1990, embittered by attacks from conservatives who blamed him for giving up the Soviet empire.⁸⁹

The fall of Khost, a provincial capital and a crucial strategic center, in April 1991 also began to change the calculus within Afghanistan. The rebel's take-over of that town weakened Najibullah and Watan, much like the government's success at Jalalabad in March 1989 and the suppression of the Tanai coup in February 1990 confirmed their ability to stay in power. Pakistan now began to harden its position, while the *mujahadeen* were eager to press their success further.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Garthoff, *The Great Transition*, 457-60, 470-83; Pikhova, *Sovetskii Soiuz*, 570-632.

⁸⁶ Author's interview with Leonid Shebarshin, March 19, 2008.

⁸⁷ Brown, *Gorbachev Factor*, 270-271. It is possible that fears of a military coup, rumours of which had circulated since March 1990 to September 1990, also motivated Gorbachev to rely more closely on Kriuchkov. Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 339-341.

⁸⁸ The coup also led to the arrest of Varennikov and the suicide of Akhromeev.

⁸⁹ Brown, *Gorbachev Factor*, 277-279.

⁹⁰ Note for the Secretary General on Afghanistan, April 12, 1991 SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 107.

The failure of the August coup in Moscow, whose plotters sought to arrest the USSR's disintegration by sidelining the reformers, had immediate repercussions for the Afghan problem. Only days before Nikolai Kozyrev, who Moscow's chief negotiator at the Geneva talks and still active in Afghan matters as an ambassador-at-large, had restated the Soviet position for "negative symmetry plus," i.e. a guarantee that not only the US but other parties like Saudi Arabia would cease supplying arms to the resistance.⁹¹ Then on September 13, 1991, after a meeting between Baker and the new Soviet Foreign Minister, Boris Pankin, the United States and the USSR signed an agreement to halt arms supplies to the belligerents and issued a statement confirming the right of the Afghan people to decide their own destiny without outside interference.⁹² Kriuchkov's removal from the leadership proved crucial to an agreement finally being reached.⁹³

In one sense, Kriuchkov's assurance to Najibullah held true. The Soviet Union never publicly renounced him, and indeed public avowals of support continued in the months leading up to its final dissolution. Although Moscow had been forced to abandon its insistence that arms supplies from Saudi Arabia and other source be completely cut off, it did not have to give up Najibullah. Baker's statement after the signing ceremony implied that Najibullah was expected to stay on at least until the end of the election process, which would be organised by UN officials.⁹⁴ And Pankin writes that he had received private assurances from Baker that the US would press Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to also stop supplying the *mujahadeen*.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Boris Pankin, *The Last Hundred Days of the Soviet Union*, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 117-118. Negotiations on a mutual cut-off date had been going on throughout 1991. Moscow also insisted that a cut-off could not take place without a cease-fire. See Notes on meeting between Sevan, Picco, and Nikolai Kozyrev, March 13, 1991. SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 107.

⁹² "US, Soviets Agree to Halt Arms to Combatants in Afghanistan" Washington Post, Sept 14, 1991, 1.

⁹³ Pankin, *Last Hundred Days*, 117-118. Nikolai Kozyrev confirmed in an interview with me that Kriuchkov's influence in this period was crucial for maintaining Soviet deliveries to Najibullah. Author's interview with Nikolai Kozyrev, Moscow, November 14, 2008.

⁹⁴ "US, Soviets Agree to Halt Arms to Combatants in Afghanistan" Washington Post, Sept 14, 1991, 1.

⁹⁵ Pankin, *Last Hundred Days*, 118.

In the chaos of the Soviet Union's last months, rumors and whispers that Moscow might force Najibullah to resign, traced in the press to anonymous diplomats, became ever more common.⁹⁶ Afghan officials admitted that such reports were deeply demoralizing, but the Soviet government proved willing to reiterate its support as long as it was in a position to do so. In October, following a successful government defense of the city of Gardez against a rebel attack, Boris Pastoukhov, Soviet ambassador in Kabul, confirmed the old Soviet line that Najibullah's government could not be excluded from the peace process and proclaimed support for the Watan leaders' proposal for a government of national unity.⁹⁷

Such assurances counted for less with each passing week. Following the August coup, Gorbachev's standing within Russia and what was left of the USSR had fallen sharply relative to Boris Yeltsin's. Yeltsin's voice increasingly dominated not only domestic issues but foreign policy questions as well. As we saw earlier, Najibullah had expressed concern about this rising star in the summer of 1990. Now it was becoming clear that he needed to secure the support of Yeltsin and his associates before it was too late.

As the USSR was falling apart, Najibullah tried to make contacts with Russian leaders, perhaps sensing that there were now multiple centers of power in the Soviet Union which would be involved in deciding his fate. While Yeltsin initially seemed to react positively to the Afghan government's overtures, it soon became clear his government did not believe Najibullah could hold on to power. In November Yeltsin's vice-president, Afghan veteran Aleksandr Rutskoi, met with a *mujahadeen* delegation in Moscow, and told them that Yeltsin's government would "take all measures to bring

⁹⁶ See, for example, "No friends for Najibullah," *The Economist*, October 12, 1991, p.34.

⁹⁷ "Gardez victory, Soviet message of support revive Kabul regime" *Agence France Presse* October 14, 1991. This position was reiterated by a Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman. See "Soviet approach to the settlement of the Afghan issue," *TASS*, October 14, 1991.

about peace to the long-suffering land of Afghanistan.”⁹⁸ In the resulting communique, both sides expressed an understanding that all power ought to be passed to an Islamic interim government.”⁹⁹ Towards the end of 1991 Yeltsin’s Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev and Aleksandr Rutskoi, in Pakistan to discuss the release of Soviet POW’s, also made contacts with *mujahadeen* leaders.¹⁰⁰

The division between the Soviet and Russian positions was also evident when representatives of both governments met with *mujahadeen* representatives in Moscow. Afghanistan, and the POW issue in particular, were becoming pawns in the political battle between Yeltsin and Gorbachev, and between the Soviet and Russian bureaucracies.¹⁰¹ Rutskoi, apparently, let it known that Russia would be willing to help depose Najibullah and accept the installation of an Islamic government. Rabbani seized on this and announced publicly that Russia was now finally ready to dump Najibullah, a fact Soviet officials immediately denied. Rutskoi, meanwhile, also announced Russia’s intention to cut off supplies of fuel.¹⁰²

Lacking Soviet support and with no hope that Russia would help keep him in power, Najibullah’s days were numbered. His “lobby” in Moscow was out of the picture; the KGB, the institution which had backed him most forcefully, was in the process of being dismantled. Their importance, particularly in keeping Najibullah on life support in 1990-1991, was demonstrated by the rapid turn of events after August 1991. For Russian politicians Afghanistan primarily represented a POW issue; they felt no sense of

⁹⁸ “Afghan rebels meet Rutskoy,” *Agence France Press*, November 11, 1991.

⁹⁹ Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*, 187.

¹⁰⁰ Kniazev, *Istoria Afganskoi Voiny*, 56. See also “Boris Yeltsin’s First 100 Days,” *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* #869, November 27, 1991, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/bg869.cfm> accessed October 17, 2008.

¹⁰¹ Prior to the August putsch, the Soviet MFA had avoided allowing Russian politicians to play any role on Afghanistan. In the fall of 1991 they found this much harder, since the Russian government was increasingly treated as an equal by foreign leaders and also had easier access to financial resources. Now it was the Russian MFA that sought to sideline Soviet diplomats. I. Adrionov to Rutskoi, Memorandum “On Talks with the Delegation of Afghan *Mujahadeen*,” undated, September or October 1991, GARF Fund 10026, op. 4, d. 2840, 30-34.

¹⁰² “Rebels Say Russia Supports Their Struggle Against Kabul Government,” *Associated Press*, November 11, 1991; “Soviet-Afghan talks in Moscow,” *TASS*, November 12, 1991; “Afghan leader feels Moscow draught,” *The Guardian*, November 19, 1991; Pankin, *Last Hundred Days*, 120-121.

obligation to the Afghan regime, nor were they concerned about preserving their own superpower status.

Conclusion

When Bush and Gorbachev met at Malta in December 1989, the US leader expressed his disappointment with Soviet policies in the Third World. Bush pointed out that Soviet actions in the Third World were “out of step with ‘new thinking’ and new Soviet directions in Eastern Europe and in arms control.” Bush went on to say that “Soviet policies in regional conflicts were a major hindrance to the improvement of the overall US-Soviet relationship.”¹⁰³ Indeed, Bush hit on a central paradox of foreign policy under Gorbachev – New Thinking seemed to evolve much slower with regard to the Third World than it did in other areas of foreign policy, even though the Third World might be expected to be of lesser importance to Soviet prestige than, for example Eastern Europe or arms control.

The Russian government that competed for power against the remnants of the Soviet regime in Moscow and finally took over at the end of 1991 did not feel any long-standing commitment to the Kabul regime. Yeltsin had positioned himself as early as 1990 as an opponent of continued support for Najibullah, and no one in the Russian leader’s circle seemed interested in pushing him in a different direction.¹⁰⁴ Gorbachev, on the other hand, was never able to break with Najibullah. Despite the rumors that frequently surfaced in the Western press about Moscow’s willingness to stop supporting Najibullah, the Soviet government continued to push for his participation in a transition government until the very end. Unlike previous periods, however, Gorbachev was

¹⁰³ Summary of discussions at Malta presented to Perez de Cuellar by Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering, December 7, 1989, SML, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10, Folder 109. Bush focused in particular on Nicaragua and Cuba.

¹⁰⁴ That includes Aleksandr Rutskoi, a fighter pilot shot down in Afghanistan and briefly held as a POW. Yeltsin picked him as vice-president in part to deflect potential criticism from security forces. Although Rutskoi proved to be an unreliable ally in most ways, he never challenged Yeltsin on his Afghan policy. Indeed, as we saw earlier, Rutskoi took the lead in meeting with *mujahadeen* leaders and promising to end support for Najibullah.

probably concerned more with the political rather than the ideological ramifications of “abandoning” Najibullah. The Afghan leader still had influential backers in the Soviet government whose support was crucial for Gorbachev’s political survival.

Gorbachev’s priority in this period was maximizing the political gains of withdrawal while avoiding the fallout that might result if the Najibullah regime collapsed. The emerging free media consciously or unconsciously acquiesced in this. Most of the blame for the war was directed at the decision-makers who chose intervention. Using Soviet forces to help the regime, even during a particularly difficult moment such as the battle of Jalalabad, was out of the question. By 1989 Gorbachev and his reformers had opened up the media and allowed articles quite critical of the war to appear. There was no way to guarantee that even limited operations would not make him appear as a hypocrite quite willing to continue using the Soviet military in “adventuristic” ways. Moreover, continued or renewed intervention could undermine his greatest foreign policy achievements – his radical reorientation of relations with the United States, Europe, and China, which in 1989 still contributed to his popularity at home and made him a hero to many abroad.

Moscow did not have a coherent long-term policy for Afghanistan in February 1989, in part because many officials expected the Najibullah regime to collapse sooner rather than later. Gorbachev and many around him may have been hoping for at most a “decent interval” in those weeks after the withdrawal, a space of time prior to Kabul’s defeat that would allow them to distance themselves from the war enough to minimise the political damage of Najibullah’s defeat. The successful defense of Jalalabad in March proved that the regime could survive without Soviet troops as long as it had Soviet advisers and materiel. This was a boon politically, but also meant that Moscow was still not rid of the Afghan problem and had to continue demonstrating its involvement and support. With Gorbachev increasingly distracted by the myriad domestic problems

confronting him and not involved in Afghan issues on a daily basis, Kriuchkov could guarantee a basic level of support and fend off any suggestions about abandoning Najibullah and accepting US-Pakistani conditions for a transitional government.

On Afghan issues and foreign policy in general, in this period Gorbachev sought international consensus and agreement as a way to compensate for Moscow's rapidly declining ability to control events and negotiate from a position of strength. Soviet diplomats hoped that the UN would act to enforce the Geneva Accords, apply pressure on Pakistan and the United States, and in general take an active role in the formation of a new world order in which the USSR would be seen as a guarantor of peace. Yet UN officials proved reluctant to bear such a burden. Perez de Cuellar, for one, sought to avoid continued UN involvement. Even though the UN did continue to play a role (largely due to Soviet insistence), it proved capable of little beyond coordinating diplomatic efforts.

Finally, even as Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, and some of their advisers predicted (correctly) that the withdrawal from Afghanistan would help improve relations with the West, they also hoped that this improved relationship would facilitate a solution in Afghanistan. They had sustained this hope since at least the fall of 1987. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze showed their frustration in meetings with American counterparts precisely because they believed that an understanding, albeit informal, was being breached each time the US insisted on a settlement that excluded Najibullah and continued to provide support to the resistance. Their "cooperation" with the Bush administration in other areas was going completely unrewarded - by the end of 1990 they had acquiesced in the reunification of Germany and the US led operation against Saddam Hussein, a one-time Soviet ally. As with other questions of foreign policy, Gorbachev learned the hard way that his "friendship" with US leaders had some narrowly defined limits.

“There is scarcely a family in the country which has not the blood of kindred to revenge upon the accursed Feringhis [foreigners]. The door of reconciliation is closed against us; and if the hostility of the Afghans be an element of weakness, it is certain that we have contrived to secure it.”¹

John Williams Kaye, *History of the Wars in Afghanistan* (1851)

“We are leaving the country in a pitiable state. The cities and villages are ravaged. The economy is paralyzed. Hundreds of thousands of people have died.”

-USSR Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, January 1989

Conclusion

By January 1992, the war in Afghanistan had entered its for thirteenth year and showed few signs of ending. The Watan government still held Kabul and most provincial capitals, but with no more Soviet aid forthcoming (and no Russian aid to replace it) it could not hope to fight the *mujahadeen* indefinitely. Najibullah was economically and politically isolated. Although his military still had plenty of Soviet planes, tanks, and weapons with which to carry on fighting, the elimination of fuel supplies was taking its toll. Najibullah’s air force, which provided a crucial advantage over *mujahadeen* forces, was grounded. The government was forced to spend its rapidly depleting currency reserves on fuel from Iran.²

One by one, Najibullah’s remaining allies abandoned him. By April, Kabul was surrounded by Massoud’s forces closing in from the North and Hekmatyar’s from the south, in a preview of the carnage that would continue to envelop the country in the years to come. UN officials continued to work for the creation of an interim government, but as had often happened previously their efforts were overtaken by events. On April 12, Najibullah called the most senior of the seven remaining Soviet (now Russian) officer-advisers in Kabul to his residence. Power would soon be in the hands of the opposition, Najibullah said, and it was time for the officers to leave. The

¹ John Williams Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, (London, 1851-57), Vol II, 669.

² Rubin, *Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 71.

Soviets were traitors, he said, but nevertheless he felt obligated to see that they were sent home safely. The next day, Najibullah met the seven officers at the airport, personally making sure that the plane took off without incident.³

A day later, on April 14, Najibullah was confronted with the presence of a militia led by Rashid Dostom within the capital. Dostom's loyalty had been crucial over the past few years, particularly in putting down the Tanai coup in 1990. His division was the best equipped, most disciplined and effective in the RA military. However, now, Dostom, sensing that regime's collapse was imminent, began acting as a free agent, looking to ally himself with the forces that would soon take Kabul. Without him, Najibullah's government, or what was left of it, did not have a hope for even a decent bargaining position vis-a-vis the forces threatening to take the city.

In 1989 Najibullah had rejected Soviet offers to take refuge in Moscow. By April 1992 he understood there was little hope of holding on to power or even making a graceful exit. The President of Afghanistan went to the UN compound in Kabul and asked for help to leave Afghanistan and join his family in India. When he arrived at the airport several days later, accompanied by his bodyguards and several US officials, he found it surrounded by Dostom's militia. His escape blocked, Najibullah spent the next four years living in the UN compound – until the Taliban took Kabul in 1996, seized him, and strung him from a lamppost.⁴ In the meantime, the former *mujahadeen* proved that opposition unites much better than power does. Soon after they took Kabul, conflict erupted between the forces of Hekmatyar and Massoud, who, along with Dostom controlled the capital. Armed groups roamed the city in an orgy of looting and

³ Liakhovskii, *Tragedia i doblest'*, 702.

⁴ The story of Kabul's last weeks under Najibullah and the valiant effort of UN officials to arrange a transfer of power and avert an intra-*mujahadeen* civil war is told in Philip Corwin, *Doomed in Afghanistan: A UN Officer's Memoir of the Fall of Kabul and Najibullah's Failed Escape, 1992* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

destruction. Having survived the past thirteen years relatively unscathed, Kabul now felt the full brunt of war.⁵

Russia played a minimal role in these final months. Although Russian diplomats were involved in trying to secure Najibullah's safe passage, Moscow in no way sought to continue playing an influential role in Kabul. The Russian government's attitude was highlighted by Kozyrev's statement that "Everything in Afghanistan is ready for settlement – the only problem is the Soviet support of 'extremists' led by Najibullah."⁶ As Evgeny Ostrovenko, the ambassador of the Russian Federation sent to Kabul in 1992, told an interviewer, "By early 1992 the regime had outlived its time. We Russians had nothing to do with it."⁷

A number of former Soviet participants later spoke out against the Russian government's handling of the Afghan crisis. Varennikov, Kriuchkov, Egorychev, and others have pointed to the "betrayal" of Najibullah by Russian leaders as the reason for the chaos that later enveloped Afghanistan.⁸ Indeed, it does seem that Yeltsin's foreign policy team used the Afghanistan issue to distance themselves from Gorbachev and to identify him with the more notorious aspects of the Soviet regime, while elevating their own status as true democrats and reformers. It may also have been a way for Yeltsin to raise his profile among foreign leaders, who only grudgingly began to accept him as the leading figure in Moscow.⁹

In any case, the economic basket-case that was Russia in January 1992 could have done little to support Najibullah. The military was on the verge of collapse, and the Central Asian republics were no longer reliable staging grounds for any kind of support to Kabul, making the logistics of any such operation very difficult. Most importantly, Russia had very little diplomatic clout. Dependent on foreign aid to feed its citizens and

⁵ Rubin, *Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 265-275.

⁶ Gareev, *Afganskaia Strada*, 318.

⁷ *Pravda* – April 13, 1993.

⁸ See, for example, the interview with Nikolai Kozyrev in *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, March 5, 2004.

⁹ Garthoff, *Great Transition*, 464-465, 470-471, 489-496.

on institutions like the IMF and the World Bank to prop up its collapsing economy, it could do little to help Najibullah even if it had wanted to.

Unlike the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation in the 1990s did not see itself as the liberator of Third World states. Indeed, many Russians felt that such aid had helped undermine and impoverish their own country. The Russian Federation, so far, has not intervened militarily in support of any foreign government or movement.¹⁰ It is only in the last five years that Moscow, buoyed by high energy prices, has been able to play a serious role abroad. During the 1990s, its military efforts were limited to trying to arrest the process of disintegration that had already led to the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Soviet and US interventions in the Third World played an important part in shaping the Cold War and the history of the newly-liberated states emerging out of the collapsing European empires. For Soviet leaders, the success or failure of their clients in these Third World states often had both ideological and strategic significance – ideological because success proved the superiority of their model of modernization; strategic because it helped to maintain the balance of power in the world and to prevent US domination. In 1962, the desire to protect the Cuban revolution and also to balance Washington's superiority in inter-continental nuclear missiles led Khrushchev to place Soviet atomic weaponry on that island, taking the world to the brink of nuclear war. In later years, Moscow's aid and interventions had similar dual motivations. The recent historiography on Soviet intervention in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and the role of military aid and advisors in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East confirms this.¹¹

¹⁰ The exception, as of this writing, may be the war with Georgia in August 2008.

¹¹ On the Horn of Africa, see O.A. Westad, "The Fall of Détente and the Turning Tides of History," in Westad, ed., *The Fall of Détente: Soviet-American Relations during the Carter Years*, (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 3-33; on Hungary and Czechoslovakia, see Csaba Bekes, "The 1956 Hungarian Revolution and World Politics," *CWIHP Working Paper No. 16* (1996); Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 115- 119 and 207-209; Pikoia, *Sovetskii Soiuz*, 301-43.

Soviet involvement in the Third World, particularly direct involvement, always had its critics within the CPSU and the government. These critics argued that Soviet involvement in the Third World brought few benefits to the USSR while at the same time undermining *détente* with the United States. Throughout the 1970s they were either overruled or ignored altogether. In March 1979, as panicked Afghan communists asked for Soviet military power to put down a major uprising in Herat, the critics' views held sway, preventing an intervention. By December of that year, their ability to influence decision-making had been eroded by the more persistent lobbying of those who saw intervention as the only way to protect Soviet strategic interests as well as prestige.

Yet the decision to send troops to Afghanistan also represented the apex of Soviet interventionism and indeed of Soviet involvement in the Third World. Russian disillusionment with involvement abroad in the 1990s had its roots first and foremost in that fateful decision taken at Brezhnev's *dacha* in 1979. As the extent of the quagmire became evident, Soviet leaders, even the arch-interventionists, began to reconsider the value of propping up friendly regimes with Soviet troops. When protests threatening the socialist government in Warsaw erupted in 1980, Andropov, a key figure in the decision to intervene in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan, rejected this option for the Polish crisis, saying, "The quota of Soviet interventions abroad has been exhausted."¹² The so-called Sinatra doctrine, which allowed socialist regimes in Eastern Europe to collapse in 1989, rightly belongs to the Gorbachev era, but its roots were in the early 1980s, when Soviet leaders began to feel the full effect of the hangover that resulted from their overindulgence over the previous decade.¹³

Thus, not only had Soviet leaders *before* Gorbachev already decided that the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was too costly and began to look for a way out, they

¹² Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 267.

¹³ See Matthew J. Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). Looking at Soviet behaviour in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and early 1980s, Ouimet persuasively shows that the Brezhnev doctrine had largely been rejected by the time of the Polish crisis.

had also begun reevaluating the value of Soviet involvements more generally. Afghanistan, of course, was quite different from any other Soviet involvement in the Third World. The stakes were simply higher. For one thing, there was the sheer scale of the intervention. True, Soviet advisors and even pilots had helped armies in Africa, Latin America, and Asia fight their enemies, but here, for the first time, Soviet troops were involved *en-masse*, essentially taking on the primary duties of the host country's military. In this way, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan resembled those in Hungary and Czechoslovakia much more so than its involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict or in any of the localised conflicts in Africa. This made the intervention more costly and it raised the stakes – the loss of the Kabul government could mean not only an ideological defeat but also a military one, something which both Gorbachev and his predecessors sought at all costs to avoid.

In Afghanistan, also, Moscow was confronted with a popular uprising against a client government's rule which it had not faced elsewhere. The resistance in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, which did shake Soviet leaders in 1956 and 1968, barely merits comparison with the much wider *jihad* against the Kabul government and the 40th army. In those cases, protesters in the capitals were quickly dealt with by overwhelmingly superior force and were labeled counter-revolutionaries. The country-side stayed quiet. In Afghanistan, Soviet leaders were under no illusion that the resistance had popular support and the Kabul government had few friends in the countryside. Prior to the intervention, many in the Politburo realised that Soviet troops, if they were sent in, would end up fighting common Afghans, a disastrous situation from the ideological perspective that could be easily exploited by the USSR's enemies, a tricky issue which no amount of counter-propaganda could undo. Yet, rather than moving Soviet leaders to beat a hasty retreat, this situation also raised the stakes and moved them to look for victory. If the Kabul government could somehow be made more palatable to the

population, then a Soviet intervention, perhaps, would not look like a police action directed against the peasantry of a poor neighboring country.

Finally, as Soviet diplomats never tired of pointing out in negotiations, the Soviet Union and Afghanistan shared a 2000 kilometer border. Throughout the war Soviet leaders did not worry much about a “spill-over” effect – the possibility that the war would ignite serious uprisings in Central Asia. The issue was different – Afghanistan could become yet another state used by the US and NATO to surround the USSR. As other historians have shown, and I have noted in the introduction, the fear that Afghanistan would become a base for missiles directed at Moscow was one of the key factors motivating Andropov and Ustinov to push for intervention. Many years later, Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze made similar arguments as they urged Gorbachev to do everything possible to protect the Najibullah regime from collapsing. Indeed, as Shevardnadze argued, the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan meant that “anti-Sovietism” would exist there for a long time – and the country would now be more open to taking an anti-Soviet stance and making itself available for the USSR’s enemies.¹⁴

High as the stakes were, Moscow was not prepared to expand the war. Although one of the 40th army’s main strategic problems was cutting off the supply of arms coming from Pakistan, Soviet leaders never took serious punitive measures, either military (bombing the training and supply camps on the Pakistani side of the border) or diplomatic (breaking diplomatic relations). Such an expansion of the war, *à la* the US bombing of Cambodia and Laos during the Vietnam War, would have made sense militarily but would have caused further isolation for Moscow. The refusal to expand the war shows that Soviet leaders were trying to minimise the extent of confrontation caused by the invasion.

¹⁴ Politburo meeting, June 11, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 342.

It also points to a certain degree of confidence among Moscow's leaders that their political advice and technical assistance could help overcome the numerous difficulties faced by the PDPA regime. Parallel to the military effort of the 40th army (and Soviet advisers in the armed force of the DRA), there was also a smaller army of political advisers, technicians, educators, and the similar personnel that undertook a modernization and nation-building project in Afghanistan. These advisers and specialists dug ditches, operated mines, extracted natural gas, wrote speeches on behalf of politicians and memoranda on behalf of ministers, and went out into the countryside to help Afghan communists reach out to the local population. The last of these efforts may have often done more harm than good, but the technical advisers, at least, did create tangible benefits for many Afghans: factories provided employment, medical clinics brought modern health services to areas where they were previously unheard of, and extraction of natural resources helped keep the government solvent throughout most of the 1980s.¹⁵ Needless to say, these benefits served as poor compensation, in the eyes of ordinary Afghans, for the carnage wrought by revolution and war.

Soviet leaders believed that they needed to undertake a nation-building project in order to stabilise the country and bring their troops home. Moscow had been supplying technical and political advisers since the 1950s, and sent even more after the Saur revolution. It was the invasion, however, that turned this assistance into a nationwide project. Building socialism was not the goal. Soviet leaders believed the country was not ripe for socialism and urged their tutees in the PDPA to move away from a revolutionary agenda.¹⁶ The goal was political stabilization, with *modernization* as its

¹⁵ Rubin, *Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 164. Even the technical and agricultural aid often had unintended consequences, and the aid effort has now begun to attract attention from Western analysts. See Paul Robinson, "Russian Lessons. We aren't the first to try nation building in Afghanistan." *American Conservative*, August 1, 2009 issue, <http://amconmag.com/article/2009/aug/01/00030/> accessed July 14, 2009.

¹⁶ Many contemporary observers did not see it this way, explaining the presence of Soviet advisers as a program of "Sovietization." One observer, arguing that Afghanistan was being "Sovietised" on the Central Asian model, wrote "When Soviet leaders hint at a possible willingness to withdraw military forces, they say nothing about withdrawing their second army—the army of social and cultural

major tool. That this modernization often looked like socialism stemmed from two factors. First, that the PDPA leaders thought of themselves as revolutionary Marxists and shed this coat only reluctantly, and second, that the advisers sent by Moscow, particularly the party and agricultural advisers, only knew how to replicate their experience in the USSR and therefore could not (or would not) shed the their ideas about what modernity was.

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan was thus a culmination of the USSR's other Third World involvements during the Cold War. For decades it had been offering a version of modernization, sending its military, political, and technical advisers to emerging states that were socialist or leaning that way. Soviet modernization was a challenge to colonialism and to the American model – although, as practiced in the context of counter-insurgency warfare (for example, in Vietnam), the two models looked remarkably similar, a subject further discussed below.¹⁷ Since the scale of the effort in Afghanistan was so grand, the potential for failure was considerably heightened as well. Soviet power and influence rested on several pillars: its military might, its technological prowess, and the superiority of its political model for achieving modernization and fending off neo-colonialism. It cannot be ignored that the specter of a high profile failure, the kind that might reveal the vulnerability of all three of these pillars, hung over Soviet leaders as they tried to plot a course out of the Afghan quagmire.

transformation, spearheaded by the KGB – or dismantling the programs designed to accomplish this end.” A. Rasul Amin “The Sovietization of Afghanistan,” in Roseanne Klass, ed. *Afghanistan: The Great Game Revisited* (New York: Freedom House, 1987), 334.

¹⁷ The literature on Soviet aid efforts in the Third World is quite sparse. Although there are a number of works that distill Soviet thinking about modernization and transitions to socialism in the Third World, there is no parallel to works such as Michael Latham's *Modernization as Ideology: American social science and "nation-building" in the Kennedy era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Nils Gilman's *Mandarins of the Future: modernization theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007); or Bradley Simpson's *Economists with Guns: authoritarian development and U.S.-Indonesian relations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), which are concerned with the ideas and practice of US aid to the Third World.

A fourth pillar of Soviet power was loyalty to friends, something the country's leaders believed in quite firmly. There may have been some abstract notions of honor involved, but there were also geo-strategic and ideological reasons. A state that abandoned its allies in difficult times would not hold on to its global influence for long. Individuals (like Karmal) could be expandable, but entire governments were certainly not. It is hardly surprising that the imperative of "not abandoning Najibullah" and the potential reaction among other Soviet allies in the Third World if Moscow were to do so came up repeatedly in Politburo debates. Of course, the Soviet leaders were not alone in thinking this way. Such thinking was typical of superpower politics, and echoes of similar concerns could be heard in the US debate about South Vietnam and Taiwan.

Between 1982, when Moscow began to look seriously for a way out of Afghanistan, and 1989, when the withdrawal of troops was completed, Soviet leaders worked to buy time for their modernization and political strategies to work. They may have believed their generals when the latter said that there was no military solution to the Afghan problem, but still needed the 40th army to provide the breathing space for their other strategies to work. Those strategies included the modernization program discussed above, the effort at National Reconciliation (both after the initial invasion and in its reincarnation in 1987), and the shuffling of leaders at the top. The Soviet strategy also included the diplomatic effort, undertaken through the UN and other channels, to secure recognition for the government in Kabul and at the same time create a legal framework for a Soviet withdrawal. Important as that effort was, however, changes in US-Soviet relations were more consequential.

Although Gorbachev understood the importance of bringing Soviet troops home in early 1985, the imperative of protecting Soviet prestige and relations with client states, as well as avoiding the "ideological damage" domestically of a failure in Afghanistan, led him to support a series of initiatives during his first three years in

power. These measures included the replacement of Karmal with Najibullah, the launching of National Reconciliation, the resuscitation of the Geneva Talks, and a diplomatic push on all fronts.

The decisive turn that Afghan policy took in late 1987 and early 1988 was motivated by two factors. The first was Gorbachev's realization that none of these initiatives had done or would do much to stabilise Afghanistan. The Policy of National Reconciliation had stalled because of resistance from within the PDPA and a lackluster response from opposition forces. Najibullah proved a more capable leader than Karmal, but he was no panacea. Talks with Najibullah in July 1987 had left Gorbachev deeply disappointed.¹⁸ By mid 1987, the consensus in the Politburo on what could be achieved in Afghanistan had changed dramatically. Most of the leadership was willing to accept a secondary role for Moscow's client within a future Afghan government.¹⁹

The diplomatic effort to find a settlement on Afghanistan followed the contours of the US-Soviet relationship in the 1980s. In mid-1987, Moscow's Afghan policy seemed to be failing, but US-Soviet relations were improving. The second half of 1987 became a major turning point in the relationship between the countries. After two important, but ultimately unsuccessful summits (Reykjavik in 1986 and Geneva in 1985), the groundwork had been laid for a summit in Washington and then in Moscow. Gorbachev and his foreign policy team knew that a resolution in Afghanistan would go a long way to improving relations with the US. At the same time, Gorbachev came to believe that an improving relationship with the United States could help secure the kind of settlement in Afghanistan that he and his predecessors had been looking for.²⁰

¹⁸ Notes from Politburo meeting, July 23, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 429.

¹⁹ The new consensus in the Politburo was that the PDPA would be only one of the political forces in power after Soviet troops left. Even Kriuchkov agreed that reconciliation would have to take place not around the PDPA, but with its participation. Gromyko, too, said that the PDPA should be one of the parties in the government, but not the leading one. See Politburo meeting, May 22, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 319.

²⁰ It is worth noting here the perceptive assessment of RAND analyst Tad Daley: "The costs of staying in Afghanistan did not come to exceed the costs of leaving because of any dramatic changes in the tangible costs of the occupation. What changed instead was the new Soviet leadership's perception of the nature of

The changes in Moscow's approach to the Afghan problem in 1987 and 1988

were related to broader changes in the Politburo's approach to foreign policy problems. This was the period when, thanks to Gorbachev's efforts, like-minded reformers had been brought into the Politburo and conservative politicians, including Andrei Gromyko, were pushed out. The slow pace of change in Gorbachev's first two years pushed him to try for more radical approaches, and he increasingly linked the success of his foreign policy to improved relations with the West.²¹ This served as an added incentive to find a way out of Afghanistan, even at the risk of abandoning the key principles that had kept Brezhnev, Andropov, and even Gorbachev himself from reversing the intervention. The period 1987-88 saw the most profound change in Moscow's Afghan policy since the intervention. Yet it was not completely irreversible. Once the withdrawal had actually begun and it looked like the long-feared collapse in Kabul might actually take place, Gorbachev reverted to supporting more aggressive policies, even at the risk of aggravating tensions with the West.

One scholar, who wrote about the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, has argued that it represented a success of reformist thinking over conservative elements in Moscow and identifies this change primarily with Gorbachev.²² While it is true that this reformist thinking contributed to the change in how Soviet leaders formulated foreign policy and viewed their commitments and rivalries, the story of the withdrawal reveals remarkable continuities as well. With the minor exception of Gorbachev's first years in power, Afghan policy was made in Moscow by a small group of men, who often shut detractors out of the decision-making

those costs themselves." Tad Daley "Afghanistan and Gorbachev's Global Foreign Policy," *Asian Survey* 29(5), 1987, 497. This is particularly accurate of the months prior to the signing of the Geneva Accords and immediately afterwards—when the possibility of a major breakthrough in US-Soviet relations made a withdrawal, even one under less than ideal conditions, seem much more attractive than previously.

²¹ See Vladislav Zubok "Gorbachev and the End of the Cold War," *Cold War History*, 2(2), 2002, 79-82 and 92-93.

²² See Sarah E. Mendelson "Internal Battles and External Wars: Politics, Learning, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan" *World Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (1993), 327-360 and *Changing Course: Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal From Afghanistan*.

process. During the first years of the war in particular, when Afghan policy was dominated by the heavyweights Andropov, Ustinov and Gromyko, outmanoeuvring them proved almost impossible. Policy could only be altered when these leaders had changed their minds, which started to happen in 1981. During the Gorbachev years, it was difficult but not impossible to outmanoeuvre Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze, who had come to dominate Afghan policy, though such a move could carry serious consequences.²³

This last point raises another question; how did those who came to dominate decision-making on Afghanistan reach their individual conclusions about what policy should be followed in that country? This thesis has shown how decisions were made both within the Politburo as a whole and the broader mindset of leaders who made Afghan policy. Lack of solid evidence makes it difficult to answer this more specific question definitively, but on the basis of material presented in this thesis, several factors need to be noted.

The first factor is the impact of reporting from junior officials working in Afghanistan. Unjustifiably positive reporting was a problem in many areas of Soviet bureaucracy and it almost certainly contributed to Soviet leaders' misunderstanding of the situation in Afghanistan. Advisors and other Soviet officials working in Kabul had every incentive to make their reports more positive, since these reports were evaluations of their own success. True, there were negative, critical reports also – but if leaders like Andropov, Gromyko and Ustinov did not shut such reports out completely, in the first year of the war at least they seemed to balance negative assessments of their Afghan policy against the positive ones. Thus it is not surprising that a similar refrain could be

²³ As it did for Kornienko in the fall of 1988. Gorbachev was not completely deaf to the entreaties of his advisors who disagreed with Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze. For example, when Najibullah requested Soviet air support to defend Jalalabad against a major *mujahadeen* onslaught in March 1989, he was dissuaded despite the strong endorsement of such a move by Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov. See Cherniaev, *Afganskii Vopros* (Mezhdunarodnie Otnoshenia: 2000), 49-50; Politburo notes, March 10, 1989 GFA PB 1989, 202.

heard in Politburo discussions of the Afghan problem from 1980 until 1987: there were still problems, but progress was being made, so the right thing to do was to extend the Soviet presence in Afghanistan until the problems were solved. The debates after Gorbachev's realignment of Soviet Afghan policy showed that no one was immune to this line of thinking. Kriuchkov and Shevardnadze fell into the same trap, believing that Najibullah was making progress toward forming a more stable government and using this as an argument against curtailing Soviet support for him.

A second factor, related to the first, was the rivalry between different agencies working in Afghanistan. The rivalry affected decision-making because whichever agency had the most effective sponsor in Moscow would have the edge in presenting their point of view. In these turf wars the military usually ended up the loser and the KGB the winner, as happened in the fall of 1988. Indeed, Soviet officials were often acting as proxies in the intra-PDPA power struggle championing the position of their advisees in Moscow. As a result, decisions in Moscow sometimes reflected preference for an Afghan faction or leader even if that faction or leader did not necessarily act in Moscow's broader interests.

A final factor, the most subjective in nature and hence most difficult to evaluate, was the internal politics and power struggles within the Politburo. Andropov, Gromyko, and Ustinov were all potential successors to Brezhnev, and there were other contenders as well. Any major failure in Afghanistan would reflect poorly on them and jeopardise their chances at successfully assuming a top post or the top post in a post-Brezhnev government. Indeed, a post-Brezhnev leadership might well look for scapegoats if faced with a disaster in Afghanistan. For these men, Afghanistan had become a test of their resolve, their ability not to run from setbacks, to defend Moscow's allies, and see a foreign policy crisis through to a satisfactory conclusion. Only when they were convinced that their military, economic, and political efforts within Afghanistan were

not going to bring the desired result did they turn to UN diplomacy and reconsider other channels they had rejected earlier. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze shared similar concerns – as reformers with little foreign policy experience, a disaster in Kabul could call their ability to guide the Soviet Union through a difficult crisis into question.

The recent US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have prompted scholars, officers, and policymakers to re-examine the nature of counter-insurgency at both tactical and political levels.²⁴ The dilemma facing Soviet leaders was similar to that of other politicians managing a counter-insurgency. The most useful comparison in the Cold War context is, of course, the US counter-insurgency campaign in Vietnam. There are enormous differences between the two cases, not least of which are the very different kind of domestic pressures US and Soviet leaders faced, but there are some very useful parallels to consider.²⁵

In both cases, the military's involvement was only part of the picture.²⁶ In the early years of the Vietnam war, US policy makers, inspired by modernization theory, undertook initiatives like the Strategic Hamlets Program to win over Vietnamese peasants and show that the Diem government could provide the peasants with economic

²⁴ Most famously, the military counter-insurgency manual overseen by US Army General David Petraeus. "Counterinsurgency" (US Army, 2006) <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf> Accessed March 21, 2009. For a survey of the dilemmas faced by Great Powers fighting counter-insurgencies, see David Edelstein "Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail," *International Security* 29.1 (2004) 49-91, especially the section entitled "The Dilemma of Failing Occupations."

²⁵ For the following section I have relied on several general volumes on Vietnam, including Marilyn B. Young *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 3rd edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 1996); Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young, eds *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: The New Press, 2007). I am also grateful to several scholars who provided with me papers prepared for a conference called "The Politics of Troop Withdrawal" held at the Miller Center in June 2008 which are to appear in a forthcoming issue of *Diplomatic History*. These are Robert Jervis, "The Politics of Troop Withdrawal: Salted Peanuts, the Commitment Trap, and Buying Time" and Robert J. McMahon, "The Politics, and Geopolitics, of American Troop Withdrawals from Vietnam, 1968-1972."

²⁶ In his study comparing the US involvement in Vietnam and the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, Douglas Borer analyzes some of the political dilemmas involved as well as the effect of the wars on the superpowers. His book contains some valuable insights, including this statement on the dilemma of intervention in support of an unpopular regime: "We can now understand that superpower intervention in Vietnam and Afghanistan created an irreconcilable contradiction: without direct military support, the regimes in Saigon and Kabul could not survive; yet with superpower intervention the regimes undermined their chances of convincing their populations that they were legitimate governments." Douglas A. Borer, *Superpowers Defeated: Superpowers defeated : Vietnam and Afghanistan compared* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 197. However, Borer greatly exaggerates the effect the war had on the Soviet Union, seeing it as one of the main causes of the USSR's collapse.

and military security. Both the US effort in Vietnam and the Soviet effort in Afghanistan were motivated by a belief in a type of modernization, an ideology that often did not work well with the reality on the ground. In addition, as with Soviet “clear and hold” efforts, US advisers played a key role not only in military operations but also in political and development efforts. The strategic hamlets program, abandoned in 1963, resurfaced under President Lyndon Johnson as “New Life” hamlets. Ultimately, however, US leaders relied on military power and, eventually, international diplomacy to bring the troops home.

Although the wars in which they were involved were unpopular at home and in the international community, in both cases superpower elites were concerned about the way that withdrawal would impact their countries’ credibility, and whether it might not lead to the collapse of other allies under pressure from insurgent movements. Soviet leaders feared undermining the USSR’s position and authority as the leader of the communist movement and supporter of national-liberation movements. The possible effect of a defeat in Afghanistan on the Soviet Union’s reputation was a concern, not only of “old-thinkers”, like Leonid Brezhnev and Yurii Andropov, but also the reformist group that dominated the Politburo after 1985, which included Gorbachev himself. In the case of the US and Vietnam as well there was continuity in this regard stretching from the administrations of Eisenhower to Nixon.

Crucially, the presence of the US and USSR in Vietnam and Afghanistan respectively was extended by the elites’ belief in what their country could accomplish through military might alongside the aforementioned modernization programs and political advice. Thus, even though Soviet leaders recognised that the Soviet example was the inappropriate for Afghanistan to follow, they believed that they could go a long way towards stabilizing its client government in Kabul through a mixture of political tutelage and modernization programs. Soviet leaders prolonged their country’s presence

in Afghanistan was because of a desire to give their programs there a chance to work, much like US leaders continued to believe that their military victories and various initiatives within Vietnam would bring about desired results long after it became clear that overwhelming superiority of technology, military capability and resources were not bringing success.

Similarly, in both cases the clients proved capable of manipulating the patrons, to their own advantage, thereby extending the superpowers' involvement. Despite a general consensus at the top of the Soviet hierarchy on Moscow's goals in Afghanistan, the various groups in Kabul often made little effort to coordinate their activities with each other. These disagreements allowed Afghan communists, themselves divided, to play sides off against one another and even to develop a "lobby" for their views in Moscow. Some, like Abdul Wakil, tried to sabotage the signing of the Geneva Accords to delay the Soviet withdrawal; others sabotaged Soviet efforts to reach out to rebel commanders, as argued in Chapter 5. The US faced similar problems with its South Vietnamese clients, not least President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, who did his best to block a US agreement with North Vietnam that would end its direct military involvement.

Finally, the Soviet-Afghan conflict was prolonged by the heightened tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States in the 1980s. Soviet leaders believed that a settlement on Afghanistan would only be possible if the United States agreed to stop supporting the *mujahadeen*. At the same time, Moscow was cautious in opening a dialogue with the United States, fearing that to do so would be an admission that the invasion was a mistake and that it would lose the freedom to act as it saw fit in Afghanistan. Ultimately, however, Moscow reached out to the United States and Pakistan in hopes of reaching an international settlement that would put an end to the conflict and allow Soviet troops to come home. Similarly, Nixon and Kissinger turned to active diplomacy with Moscow and China, the patrons of North Vietnam, in the

hopes that a change in the international situation would help stabilise the situation in Indochina and allow US troops to come home.

Soviet and American interventions during the Cold War were not just about setting limits or drawing lines in the sand for the rival superpower. Leaders in Moscow and Washington undertook interventions to support elites who had declared themselves for one or the other version of modernity. Elites like the Khalqists who came to power in 1978 envisaged radical transformation in their countries. When these elites' vision met strong resistance, they called for help. Here was the culmination of the "tragedy of Cold War history," as Westad puts it, for nowhere was the anti-imperialist USSR more of a colonial power than in Afghanistan.²⁷ That this intervention was largely "colonialism by invitation" was ultimately of little comfort to the Afghan villagers trying to survive aerial bombardment or to Soviet soldiers and their families. And the requests for troops of DRA leaders were easily ignored by the USSR's enemies, who used the intervention as proof that Moscow was not, in fact, an anti-colonial power, but an aggressive, militaristic, and imperialist one.

It remains, then, to evaluate Gorbachev's handling of the Afghan problem from the time he took office. Whatever the influence of officers, advisors, or other Politburo members, his was the last and most decisive word on foreign policy, at least until late 1991. He has been attacked both for betraying "friends" and for not pulling Soviet troops out earlier. There is some justification to these criticisms. If one approaches the issue dispassionately, however, it becomes clear that Gorbachev's overall approach to the Afghan problem flowed logically from the prerogatives that were largely set by the situation he inherited in 1985.

Gorbachev believed that the invasion had been a mistake and that the war had to be stopped. If it was allowed to drag on it would remain an obstacle to his other foreign

²⁷ Westad, *Global Cold War*, 397.

policy aims. If he withdrew too quickly and the regime collapsed, he would quickly face criticism from many conservatives. Gorbachev could not withdraw Soviet troops before 1988 because seemed likely that if he had done so the Kabul regime would have collapsed. The Afghan army had only been able to take a lead in operations in 1986, demonstrating its potential to operate once Soviet troops had gone. Prior to this time, it played only a supporting role in Soviet-led battles. Babrak Karmal proved unable or unwilling either to overcome divisions within his party or to reach out to rebel commanders. Changing the Soviet strategy and giving a new Afghan leader the chance to establish himself took time, as did trying to find a diplomatic solution. As Chapter Four has shown, Moscow worked to secure Washington's agreement to end US arms supplies to the *mujahadeen*, and, after the Washington summit, Gorbachev believed that he had secured that agreement.

Some scholars believe that the Afghan war played a significant role in the ultimate collapse of the Soviet state.²⁸ While it is true that the war helped expose many of the injustices of Soviet military life, as well as some of the shortcomings of the military in general, it did not critically undermine the military as an all-Soviet institution.²⁹ The growing chorus of criticism that the military faced in the 1989-91 period was the result more of new openness and general disillusionment with the party and state than the war as such. Finally, it is worth remembering that the Najibullah regime collapsed four months *after* the USSR ceased to exist. Therefore, the withdrawal of Soviet troops never became a military defeat.

Yet if the general outline of Gorbachev's Afghan policy is understandable, even commendable, then certain aspects of how he handled it deserve serious criticism. His

²⁸ For example, Anthony Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble: Afghanistan's role in the fall of the Soviet Empire* (Novato: Presidio, 1993); Rafel Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, "The Afghanistan war and the breakdown of the Soviet Union," *Review of International Studies* (1999), 25, 693-708.

²⁹ The war's most important effect on the disintegration of the Soviet military was that it led to widespread draft evasion. But other aspects of the Soviet military's decline in 1989-91 were caused by other factors, including rising nationalism in the constituent republics, the questioning of all Soviet institutions, including the military, that resulted from *glasnost*, and the collapse of the Soviet state. See Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 247-251 and 272-304.

most important failing is that he never really took control of the Afghan problem. He trusted his deputies and colleagues to follow the general line. Usually this approach is considered smart management, but the conflict had created too many internal conflicts that reached to the top of the Soviet leadership, and, by 1987-88, it is clear that there were widely differing interpretations of National Reconciliation, the extent of the withdrawal, and the future of Soviet Afghan relations. These differences were evident not just in policy making, where they ostensibly contributed to healthy debate, but in policy implementation, where the result was contradictory and often conflicting endeavours. This fatally undermined attempts to provide real peace and reconciliation for a much scarred nation, a legacy that resonates to the present day.

All of which leads to a number of questions as to what the lessons the Soviet efforts in Afghanistan might hold for today. With NATO troops bogged down in a protracted conflict in Afghanistan at the time of writing, questions and debates as to how and when to depart are again being raised. The situation is obviously different. Gorbachev had to deal with the US supplying arms to the *mujahadeen*, a sceptical and often hostile Pakistan, as well as, after 1989, a disintegrating Soviet Union. US President Barack Obama, if all goes well, can hope for a cooperative Russia and even Iran, while Islamabad will likely continue to be supportive of US efforts. Still, many of the dilemmas are remarkably similar. Does the US commit to a reinvigorated nation-building program, with a focus on building Afghan government institutions, or does it pull back its advisors and focus instead on building up a strong leader in Kabul, a policy nicknamed “find the right Pushtun” by one think-tank.³⁰ Does it continue to back Hamid Karzai, the leader after US forces helped topple the Taliban in 2001, or does it

³⁰ “Afghanistan: New US administration, new directions” *ICG Asia Briefing 89* March 2009.

look for a new face?³¹ Would US and UK leaders be able to explain failure to their own people?³²

While it is not the place of this thesis to offer policy recommendations, what seems imperative is that we look back seriously into history not only in order to try and understand the issues, country and legacies that confront policymakers today, but also to provide the means by which they can learn the lessons of the past and thus best avoid the fate of repeating failures in the present. The Soviet experience will not offer any clear paths or guidelines, but it does point to the importance of humility, honesty, and political courage. Interventions becomes tragedies not only for the civilians caught up in conflict and the soldiers sent to fight, but also for the intervening powers themselves. Leaders that inherit the interventions, like Gorbachev and Obama, both reformers bringing a promise of change to nations in crisis, must be sure not compound previous errors for fear that they will be seen as weaklings unable to defend the interests of their countries.

³¹ See the discussion of Obama's options in a recent paper from the Council of Foreign Relations: Daniel Markey "From AfPak to PakAf: A Response to the New U.S. Strategy for South Asia" CFR Policy Options Paper, April 2009.

³² For more on this debate see the roundtable with Scott Lucas, Andrew Johnson, Scott Smith, Marilyn Young and Artemy Kalinovsky, *Neoamericanist*, Summer 2009.

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