

# REASSESSING SOVIET MOTIVES FOR INVADING AFGHANISTAN

## A Declassified History

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**ABSTRACT:** This article reassesses Soviet motives for invading Afghanistan in 1979, based on newly available archival materials, especially from the former USSR. The article argues that these Soviet documents show that the 1979 invasion reflected defensive rather than offensive objectives. Specifically, the USSR sought to restrain extremist elements of the Afghan communist party, who were undermining stability on the southern Soviet frontier. The findings of this article are at odds with long-standing views that the invasion of Afghanistan was part of a larger Soviet strategy aimed at threatening the Persian Gulf and other western interests.

The December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was clearly a major turning point in the history of the cold war. The invasion was the largest single military action by the Soviet Union since 1945, and the Afghan crisis had a major influence on U.S. foreign policy, triggering a shift away from the relatively restrained policies of *détente*, which had characterized the 1970s, toward the much more forceful policy that followed the crisis. At a global level, the invasion was a watershed event, delegitimizing Soviet policy, and communism more generally, in the eyes of world public opinion. The U.S. program to arm the mujahiddin guerrillas, who were fighting the Soviets, evolved into the largest single operation in the history of the Central Intelligence Agency and was a key component of the “Reagan Doctrine,” which aimed to roll back pro-Soviet regimes worldwide. Unlike other Reagan Doctrine actions — in Central America, Angola, and Cambodia, for example — that aimed at destabilizing perceived Soviet proxy forces, the CIA’s operation in Afghanistan was directed against regular Soviet combat forces.

Now, a quarter century later, we can more accurately assess why the invasion occurred, owing to the considerable amount of new information that has emerged from U.S., as well as Soviet and Eastern Bloc archives. The newly released documents provide insight into the Soviet decision-making process. Specifically, I will emphasize the Soviet collections that have been made available through the services of the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP), based at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C.,<sup>1</sup> as well as additional Soviet materials available from the National Security Archive (NSA), also in Washington, D.C.<sup>2</sup> Diplomatic historians generally regard both of these two document collections as authentic and authoritative. Together, these two collections constitute the only major holdings of English-translated Soviet documents pertaining to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. They contain the opinions of the Central Committee members, including Leonid Brezhnev, Andrei Gromyko, Yuri Andropov, Alexei Kosygin, and Boris Ustinov, as these individuals reacted to developments during the period 1978–80; they also include the views of Soviet military and diplomatic personnel within Afghanistan. With this new information, I will reassess Soviet motives in mounting the invasion.

### The Invasion

The Soviet invasion had its origins in an April 1978 coup, led by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a relatively small communist-led party. The takeover triggered a large-scale rural rebellion against the new government, leading to a major insurgency by the end of 1978. The Soviet Union supported the PDPA government in its efforts to oppose the insurgency. In December 1979, the USSR sent a military force comprising approximately one hundred thousand troops to occupy Afghanistan. This action has been overwhelmingly viewed as a Soviet invasion, and it was internationally condemned as such. The Soviet military force remained in Afghanistan until 1989, when the occupation ended.

At the time of the invasion and for an extended period afterward, few doubted that the Soviet invasion force threatened western security. It was widely believed that the Soviets sought to use Afghanistan as a strategic springboard for further offensive action — with the ultimate aim of controlling the oil resources of the Persian Gulf (and in some variants the invasion also sought to achieve Soviet control of Indian Ocean territory, thus giving the USSR a warm water port<sup>3</sup>). The perceived threat that the invasion posed for the region, and especially for the security of the Persian Gulf, was widely publicized by analysts as

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1. The Cold War International History Project (CWIHP), associated with the Woodrow Wilson International Center, in Washington, D.C., can be accessed electronically at [www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=topics.home&topic\\_id=1409](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=topics.home&topic_id=1409). Regarding the scholarly significance of this collection, see, for example, Haslam 2004.
  2. The National Security Archive (NSA), based at George Washington University, is at [www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/](http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/).
  3. See, for example, Cheema 1983, 229, 238.

sociated with the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), a public policy group that had lobbied in favor of an alarmist view of Soviet intentions.<sup>4</sup> Established in 1976, the CPD's founding statement claimed: "The principal threat to our nation, to world peace, and to the cause of human freedom is the Soviet drive for dominance."<sup>5</sup> The Afghan invasion was viewed as a vindication of the CPD worldview, and its members repeatedly emphasized its importance.<sup>6</sup>

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter enshrined this alarmist view of the Soviet invasion in his "Carter Doctrine," which threatened war against the Soviets if they attacked the Gulf. In his memoirs, Carter notes that "the threat of this Soviet invasion to the rest of the region was very clear — and had grim consequences. A successful takeover of Afghanistan would give the Soviets a deep penetration between Iran and Pakistan and pose a threat to the rich oil fields of the Persian Gulf area and to the crucial waterways through which so much of the world's energy supplies had to pass."<sup>7</sup> Academic analysts at the time of the invasion regarded the incident as a serious security threat to the United States and its allies; such views even appear in some recent writings on the topic.<sup>8</sup>

A rare exception was George F. Kennan. Writing shortly after the Afghanistan invasion, Kennan questioned the official logic; he expressed doubt that the invasion threatened western security. While acknowledging that the invasion was illegal — "The pretext offered [for the invasion] was an insult to the intelligence of even the most credulous of Moscow's followers" — Kennan insisted that the action reflected "defensive rather than offensive [Soviet] impulses." Afghanistan, he emphasized, was "a border country of the Soviet Union," and it represented a natural security concern for the Soviets.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I will argue that recently declassified documentary materials strongly support Kennan's view of the invasion — as an essentially defensive act — rather than the more alarmist interpretation offered by the Carter administration.

### Background to Invasion

For most of the twentieth century, Afghanistan was geographically and politically isolated and was an insignificant player in international politics. With no outlets to the sea and with few navigable rivers, Afghanistan remained throughout its history an exceptionally isolated country and also one of the poorest.

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4. Tyroler 1984.

5. From "Common sense and common danger: Policy statement of the Committee on the Present Danger," in *ibid.*, 1.

6. See, for example, Podhoretz 1980.

7. Carter 1982, 471–72. For similarly alarmist views expressed by other administration officials, see Grasselli 1996, 122–23.

8. Thus Magnus and Naby, writing in 1998, claim that the invasion was intended to achieve offensive objectives. They also imply that the PDPA acted as an instrument of Soviet policy during the period leading up to the invasion: "The Soviets through the PDPA and the covert networks they had established over decades had ensured that they would be positioned to shape the future." Magnus and Naby 1998, 115.

9. Kennan 1980.

During most of the cold war, Afghanistan played a minor role. The country had long been regarded as having little importance for U.S. or western security; it was not located near the Indian Ocean or the Persian Gulf and its rugged terrain and lack of infrastructure limited its strategic value. Little in the documentary record suggests that it held any major significance for the United States prior to 1978. The lengthy memoirs of former presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, for example, make no mention of Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup>

The country was, however, significant in one respect: Afghanistan bordered the USSR, and Soviet officials feared that the United States or other western powers might establish bases in the area. In addition, the northern groups of Afghanistan, largely Tajik and Uzbek, were ethnically linked to Tajiks and Uzbeks in the USSR itself, and this raised the possibility of internal subversion against Soviet rule. U.S. officials knew of the Soviet Union's defensive concerns regarding Afghanistan: In 1954, CIA Director Allen Dulles commented, "The Soviets were inclined to look on Afghanistan much as the United States did on Guatemala."<sup>11</sup> A more accurate comparison might be the way the United States viewed Mexico, i.e., as a country on its immediate border and therefore a security concern of special importance.

As a result of their geographic proximity, the USSR and Afghanistan established close relations. From 1954 onward, the Soviet Union became Afghanistan's main supplier of economic and military aid, and many Afghan military officers were trained at Soviet academies. Western analysts widely referred to Afghanistan during this period as a "Third World Finland," in the sense that its proximity to the USSR constrained its foreign policy. Afghanistan had little choice but to accept its inevitable economic and military dependence on its powerful neighbor. At the same time, Afghanistan remained largely free, in its domestic politics, from Soviet influence.<sup>12</sup>

The Soviet Union's activities during the 1950s and the 1960s suggest that traditional "realist" concerns about the security of its frontiers were primary objectives. Afghan officials repeatedly noted the nonthreatening character of Soviet aid programs. A 1958 State Department document paraphrased one Afghan official as follows:

It is "beyond imagination" that Communism could make any inroads in view of Afghan traditions, religion, and the very nature of the Afghan regime....[The Afghan official] wanted to assure his American friends that the Soviet technicians in Afghanistan have in no instance engaged in improper activities, nor would the Afghan government tolerate any such activity by them.<sup>13</sup>

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10. Nixon 1978; and Ford 1979. Afghanistan does not appear in the index of either memoir.

11. U.S. National Security Council 1954a, 1149. The quotation is directly from the document, which paraphrases Dulles.

12. See Goldman 1967, 122–23. See also U.S. Government [agency name not indicated] 1962.

13. Quoted in U.S. Department of State 1958, 228.

In 1962, the Afghan prime minister remarked that the conduct of Soviet aid workers was “above reproach.”<sup>14</sup>

U.S. officials periodically stated concerns about Soviet-Afghan ties. One U.S. Embassy document from 1955 expressed reservations about “closer economic relations between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union,” adding: “The US has observed [that] Soviet penetration elsewhere [in the world]...in some instances has led to a loss of independence.”<sup>15</sup> Afghanistan too, it was implied, might risk a future loss of independence due to its reliance on the Soviet Union. However, these concerns had a pro forma quality and were not strongly expressed. During the 1950s and early 1960s, U.S. officials refused to match Soviet aid to Afghanistan. In 1961, the U.S. Embassy proposed augmenting U.S. economic aid, but also cautioned: “It is neither contemplated nor proposed that the US should enter into a direct competition with the USSR on a dollar for dollar basis.”<sup>16</sup> In 1962, the U.S. ambassador told Afghan officials that the “US does not desire [to] enter [a] bidding game against [the] Soviets.”<sup>17</sup> Some U.S. officials shared the Afghan view of Soviet activities, namely, that the relationship was largely benign: “US intelligence has discovered no case of Soviet political subversion,” one 1962 document stated.<sup>18</sup> Five years later, Marshall Goldman concluded that “Soviet aid to Afghanistan has been immensely successful.... Even American officials are hard-pressed to find major flaws.”<sup>19</sup>

The lack of U.S. interest in Afghanistan is nicely illustrated by a 1954 National Security Council (NSC) document that considered the hypothetical possibility that the Soviets might militarily attack Afghanistan. In the event of such an attack, the document recommended these U.S. responses:

(a) Attempt through diplomatic measures to arrest the action and to obtain prompt withdrawal of Soviet forces.

(b) If unsuccessful, decide in the light of circumstances existing at the time what further action to take through the U.N. or otherwise.<sup>20</sup>

Significantly, U.S. military action is not mentioned.

Political instability within Afghanistan during 1973 elicited little interest from U.S. officials. At that time, Prime Minister Mohammed Daud led a coup d'état and overthrew the monarchy. Daud established himself as president of a newly proclaimed “republic” (in reality, the system was a dictatorship). According to available documents, U.S. officials did not believe the coup would lead to major changes in Afghanistan’s international position. A CIA analysis published shortly after the coup, for example, judged that “The Soviet position in Kabul may have been enhanced because of Daud’s assumption of power, but only marginally. It is rumored that the Soviets had some forewarning of his plan to

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14. Paraphrased in U.S. Department of State 1962, 217.

15. U.S. Department of State 1955, 171.

16. U.S. Department of State 1961.

17. U.S. Department of State 1962, 216.

18. U.S. Government [agency name not indicated] 1962.

19. Goldman 1967, 122–23.

20. U.S. National Security Council 1954b, 1153.



Abandoned Soviet fighter plane, Afghanistan. "As Soviet troops withdrew in 1989, Afghanistan's lack of strategic importance was reaffirmed." (Source: HQ Air Reserve Personnel Center, Denver, Colo. 2005)

overthrow the king... There is no evidence however that the Soviets either instigated or were actively involved in the coup."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the NSC noted "no evidence of Soviet complicity in the coup."<sup>22</sup> Once again, Afghanistan was considered a geostrategic backwater and even a coup failed to arouse much concern in U.S. policy-making circles. A 1973 *Wall Street Journal* article noted:

Petro-pundits tend somehow to equate Soviet influence in land-locked Afghanistan with Soviet control of the Persian Gulf... But from up close, Afghanistan tends to look less like a fulcrum or a domino or a stepping stone than like a vast expanse of desert waste... A visitor perhaps may be excused for wondering why the Russians, or anyone else for that matter, would particularly want Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup>

### The Rise of Afghan Communism

In 1965, in response to a democratization program initiated by the monarchy, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), the Afghan communist party, was created. In an election that year, the PDPA competed for seats in a newly created legislature, the Wolesi Jirga. The party won several seats, though it failed to register as a national presence of major importance. The PDPA was, however, a nonethnic political force, one of the few in a country where politics had an overwhelmingly regional and ethnic orientation. The party also became an advocate of equal rights for women — several of its top leaders were women

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21. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 1973. Writing after the Soviet invasion, Henry Kissinger expressed suspicion about possible Soviet motives in the 1973 coup, but provides no evidence. See Kissinger 1982, 675.

22. U.S. National Security Council 1973.

23. Kann 1973.

— and this too was an innovation in the patriarchal context of Afghanistan. The PDPA's base of support was mostly "intellectuals," a category that meant almost anyone with a secondary education. Teachers and petty government officials in cities and larger towns constituted much of its membership. Elements of the military officer corps, a large segment of whom were Soviet trained, also supported the PDPA.

The PDPA suffered from serious weaknesses. First, the party had little influence among the peasant class, which constituted the large majority of Afghanistan's population. Though the PDPA often criticized the unequal land system and advocated land reform, the peasants regarded PDPA members with suspicion and hostility. The "godless" character of Marxist ideology had little appeal among the deeply religious population, while the party's advocacy of female equality was also widely unpopular in the rural areas. Chronic factionalism was another problem. The PDPA was divided into two organized factions: the Parcham ("Banner") faction, led by Babrak Karmal, and the Khalq ("masses") faction, led by Mohammed Nur Taraki and Hafizullah Amin.

In 1973 the U.S. Embassy estimated that membership in the Parcham faction did not exceed "a few hundred, of which probably less than fifty constitute the hard core leadership," while the Khalq faction had "several hundred members." The embassy report also noted that "we...have reports" of Soviet material support to the Parcham faction. Despite this alleged Soviet support, the report concluded: "The left probably has more nuisance value than anything else.... Their real threat to the present regime... is probably minimal."<sup>24</sup> Thus, there appeared to be little likelihood that the Afghan communists could seize power.

Following Daud's coup, the Iranian government became an increasingly important influence on the politics of Afghanistan. During the mid-1970s, the Shah of Iran was seeking to use his country's oil wealth to establish Iran as a regional power. Beginning in 1973–74, the Shah made a key policy decision — supported by U.S. officials — to move Afghanistan out of the Soviet orbit and into the Iranian orbit.

The Shah's effort was two-pronged: First, a joint Iranian, U.S., and Pakistani project fomented opposition that resulted in a series of anti-Daud revolts and coup attempts by Islamic extremist groups.<sup>25</sup> Western support for these revolts was intended to intimidate Daud, to force him to distance his regime from the Soviets. Second, in the manner of a carrot-and-stick strategy, the Shah met with Daud and offered a deal: Iran would outbid the Soviets and provide major sums of aid, on the condition that Afghanistan would move away from the Soviets and reorient itself toward the western side in the cold war. Daud accepted Iran's offer, presumably because of the augmented levels of aid the Iranians promised. To fulfill his end of the new arrangement, Daud began to send Afghan military officers for training in Egypt and other pro-western countries, rather than in the

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24. U.S. Department of State 1973.

25. Cordovez and Harrison 1995, 16.

Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Daud adopted an anticommunist policy and repressed the PDPA (a point we will return to later).

The 1974 realignment fostered by the Shah caused the Soviets to increase their activity in Afghanistan. In 1977, working with the (pro-Moscow) Communist Party of India, the Soviets encouraged the PDPA to settle its factional disputes and to formally reunite. The reunification proposal was clearly a defensive response, against the increasingly anticommunist activities of the Daud regime. Even at this late date, Soviet officials remained openly skeptical of the PDPA leadership, especially those affiliated with the Khalq faction, whom they regarded as rash and politically immature. And Soviet officials dismissed any suggestion of a prospective socialist or communist Afghanistan, a country they viewed as hopelessly backward. One Soviet official noted, "If there is one country in the developing world where we would like *not* to try scientific socialism at this point in time, it is Afghanistan"<sup>27</sup> (emphasis in original).

The Daud government's pro-western tilt after 1974 brought about major changes in Afghan domestic politics. Consistent with his anticommunist policy, Daud now sought to crush the PDPA, and he appointed an openly anticommunist interior minister, Abdul Nuristani. During 1977–78, a series of repressive measures, directed by Nuristani, resulted in the arrest of the top communist leadership. These arrests triggered a response from pro-PDPA officers in the military, led by a politically savvy Air Force officer, Lt. Col. Abdul Qader. The Air Force-led coup that followed involved several days of street fighting in Kabul among factions of the military and security forces. In the end, Daud was killed, and the PDPA assumed power as the new government of Afghanistan in April 1978.

There may have been some Soviet complicity in this coup. U.S. officials who were there at the time claim to have seen Soviet advisory personnel with Afghan military units during the course of the takeover. Soviet involvement in the coup appears to have been undertaken by local advisors on the ground, who were acting without clear direction from headquarters. Former KGB officer Alexander Morozov stated, in an interview conducted after the end of the cold war, that the Soviets did not even become aware of the Afghan coup plans until shortly before the coup had begun. After discovering the plans, Soviet officials in Kabul received "confused messages...from the Foreign Ministry and KGB headquarters" about how they were supposed to respond. Selig Harrison, who interviewed many of the principal figures, concluded: "The overall impression left by the available evidence is one of an improvised, ad hoc Soviet response to an unexpected situation."<sup>28</sup> The April 1978 takeover was mainly a homegrown, Afghan affair. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Soviet officials responded cautiously, and declined to endorse the PDPA as a communist government. Only

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26. *Far Eastern Economic Review* 1974; and Harrison 1979.

27. Quoted in Dupree 1979, 50.

28. Selig Harrison in Cordovez and Harrison 1995, 27. Quote from Morozov is directly from Cordovez and Harrison, who paraphrase the views of Morozov.

after an interval of several weeks did the Soviet press begin to write of an Afghan revolution and the possibility of a socialist state.<sup>29</sup>

In any case, the PDPA found itself in power, quite unexpectedly, with little preparation and no real plan of action. Despite its 1977 reunification, the party remained seriously divided between the Parcham and Khalq factions. And it was the more extremist Khalq faction that was dominant at the time. The two principal figures in the new government were both Khalqis: the president and party leader was Taraki; the real power, however, was Amin, nominally foreign minister. Amin by all accounts was the more energetic of the two leaders, and his influence gradually eclipsed the older and alcoholic Taraki. Under Amin's direction, the government announced that its takeover was not merely a coup d'état but a revolutionary act: the "Saur [April] Revolution." An effort to transform the politics and even the social structure of Afghanistan was undertaken — with disastrous results.<sup>30</sup>

The PDPA reforms included a large-scale land reform program, which aimed to break up large holdings. The government announced that it would seize land holdings if they exceeded a fixed size limit (with a maximum limit of sixty hectares per holding); the seized lands were to be distributed to poor peasants. The traditional "bride price," according to which Afghan girls were effectively sold into marriage by their families, was officially abolished. A literacy program, aimed especially at young girls, was launched; university students and other PDPA cadre were dispatched to the countryside to implement the program.<sup>31</sup> In practice, however, the PDPA program was marred by insensitivity and heavy-handedness, as Fred Halliday explains:

The reforms were administered in such a way as often to alienate the rural population they were designed to win over....The land reform was not based on any cadastral survey of the Afghan countryside, or even on a minimal preliminary investigation of land ownership....Far too often, a group of PDPA members and army personnel would arrive in a village and start commanding the peasants without proper awareness of local sensibilities and conditions....Added to this were problems of rural honor and tribal loyalty against which the determined urban-based [PDPA] cadres soon collided.<sup>32</sup>

PDPA miscalculations gave rise to localized rebellions against the central government during the summer of 1978. Gradually, diverse guerrilla groups coalesced into a broad, anticommunist movement with widespread popular support.<sup>33</sup> Their leaders ranged from figures such as Gulbaddin Hekmatyar, who

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29. Willerton 1986.

30. Regarding the internal dynamics of the Saur Revolution, see Halliday 1978; Rais 1994; and Giustozzi 2000.

31. In retrospect, such reforms were clearly needed and, indeed, were long overdue. Shortly before the communist takeover, a research team from the International Labor Organization had advocated land reform. See Bhatti and Berouti 1980. See also Gibbs 1986.

32. Halliday 1980, 24.



Soviet-Afghan Friendship Poster. Quote in column on the left is by Babrak Karmal: “The Soviet Union has always shown Afghanistan help and cooperation in the moments most important for our people—in the matter of achieving national independence and autonomy.” (Posters available at <http://iziburger.unas.cz/>)

sought a purified Islamic state — far stricter than any previous state in Afghanistan — to more traditional leaders who favored a return to the social status quo ante, prior to the communist takeover. Western officials generally referred to the guerrillas as the mujahiddin, “holy warriors”; but there was never any real organizational unity among the diverse groups. To be sure, many Afghans would later tire of the mujahiddin guerrillas, especially the more extremist elements among them, but at this early date, most analysts agree that the majority of Afghans favored the guerrillas.

The PDPA made matters worse by a series of ill-advised purges of its own ranks, orchestrated for the most part by the dominant Khalq faction and especially by the clique surrounding Amin. The Parchamites were gradually marginalized within the government. Parcham leader Karmal was sent abroad as ambassador to Czechoslovakia, a form of diplomatic exile; while abroad, he was expelled from the party altogether and accused of treasonous actions. Amin orchestrated a mass purge of all ranks of the party, aimed at eliminating the Parchamites. Virtually all studies of this period emphasize that torture, imprisonment, and execution were widely practiced against the Parchamites and against any other elements that opposed Amin and his faction. Such repressive measures weakened the party and undermined what little legitimacy it had. By the end of 1978, the PDPA faced internal factional turmoil as well as a growing civil war.

### The USSR Reacts to Afghan Crisis

Soviet reactions to the PDPA takeover in April 1978 are important to analyze with care and with rigor. Fortunately we now have a large archive of documentary sources from which to draw, made available through the CWIHP and NSA

33. I analyzed the source of this popular support at length in Gibbs 1986.



ment and training, as well as advisors to improve Afghan tactics in the field. By early 1979, according to internal Soviet documents, some five hundred and fifty Soviet advisors served in Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup> Despite this military support for the PDPA, Soviet officials remained wary of their Afghan allies, as we shall see shortly.

During March 1979, tensions heightened. In that month, a major rebellion broke out in the western city of Herat, and a sizable portion of an Afghan army division defected to the mujahiddin, along with much of their heavy equipment. Moscow and Kabul both worried that the PDPA could lose control altogether. The Afghan communists requested the immediate dispatch of Soviet combat forces to assist in putting down the rebellion (an implicit admission by the PDPA that its own troops were now becoming unreliable). The Politburo met on 17 and 18 March in an atmosphere of crisis, with Brezhnev presiding.

In the 17 March meeting, key Soviet decision-makers weighed requests for combat troops. Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko argued: "We must proceed from a fundamental proposition: ...under no circumstances may we lose Afghanistan. For sixty years now we have lived with Afghanistan in peace and friendship. And if we lose Afghanistan now and it turns against the Soviet Union, this will result in a sharp setback to our foreign policy." Similarly, Premier Alexei Kosygin stated: "We must put up a struggle for Afghanistan."<sup>37</sup> The mood in the Politburo seemed favorably disposed to intervention in support of the PDPA. No mention was made, however, about any strategic "advantages" that might flow from a Soviet combat presence in Afghanistan. Nor was access to warm water ports or to the Persian Gulf mentioned. The concerns raised at the 17 March meeting were defensively oriented, i.e., preserving a preexisting sphere of influence, rather than seeking bases for future expansion.

On March 18, after Politburo members had had time to reflect on the situation, the consensus moved sharply against direct intervention, with the recognition that such intervention could prove costly. This time it was KGB chief Yuri Andropov who set the tone:

We must consider very, very seriously the question of whose cause we will be supporting if we deploy our forces into Afghanistan. It's completely clear to us that Afghanistan is not ready at this time to resolve all of the issues it faces through socialism. The economy is backward, the Islamic religion predominates, and nearly all of the rural population is illiterate. We know Lenin's teaching about a revolutionary situation. Whatever situation we are talking about in Afghanistan, it is not that type of situation. Therefore, I believe that we can suppress a [mujahiddin] revolution in Afghanistan only with the aid of our bayonets, and that is for us entirely inadmissible. We cannot take such a risk...[Speaking again later in the day] the people do not support the government of Taraki. Would our troops really help them here? In such a situation, tanks and armored cars cannot save anything.

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36. Ibid., 17 March 1979.

37. Ibid.

Andropov was followed by Gromyko, who evidently had also changed his mind from the previous day:

I completely support Comrade Andropov's proposal to rule out such a measure as the deployment of our troops into Afghanistan. The [Afghan] army there is unreliable. Thus, our army when it arrives in Afghanistan, will be the aggressor. Against whom will it fight? Against the Afghan people first of all, and it will have to shoot them...the situation in Afghanistan is not ripe for a revolution. And all that we have done in recent years with such effort in terms of détente, arms control, and much more — all that would be thrown back...One must ask, and what would we gain? Afghanistan with its present government, with a backward economy, with inconsequential weight in international affairs. On the other side, we must keep in mind that from a legal point of view too we would not be justified in sending troops.<sup>38</sup>

Nothing in the CWIHP or NSA collections suggests that Soviet leaders saw any offensive strategic value in Afghanistan. Gromyko noted (without contradiction from the other members present) that the Soviets had little to gain from Afghanistan, with its “inconsequential weight in international affairs.” In any case, the Soviet leadership rejected direct intervention at this time. The immediate crisis in Herat subsided, as the Afghan army was able to reestablish a semblance of control — without Soviet combat forces. The mujahiddin rebellion continued, however, and it threatened the viability of the PDPA.

Through the spring and summer of 1979, Afghan officials repeatedly requested Soviet combat personnel to assist in fighting the mujahiddin; the Soviets rejected these requests. On 20 March, Taraki flew to Moscow for face-to-face consultations and to make another plea for Soviet forces. Kosygin refused Taraki's request, telling him frankly that if the Soviets *were* to intervene, “our troops would have to fight not only with foreign aggressors, but also with a certain number of your [Afghan] people. And people do not forgive such things. Besides, as soon as our troops cross the border, China, and all other aggressors will be vindicated.” At another point in the transcript, we see this exchange:

Taraki: [W]on't you allow us, after all, to use pilots and tank operators from other socialist countries?

Kosygin: ...I cannot understand why the question of pilots and tank operators keeps coming up.... And I believe that it is unlikely that [other] socialist countries will agree to this. The question of sending people who would sit in your tanks and shoot at your people — this is a very pointed political question.<sup>39</sup>

In April, a Soviet general reported that Amin “requested that we send to Kabul some fifteen to twenty combat helicopters with ammunition *and Soviet crews*” (emphasis added). The Soviet chief of staff, General N. V. Ogarkov, replied to the request as follows: “Instructions: This should not be done.”<sup>40</sup> In

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38. Ibid., 18 March 1979.

39. Ibid., 20 March 1979a.

May, the Politburo rejected an Afghan request (from Taraki) for Soviet paratroopers and aircraft crews.<sup>41</sup>

Afghan efforts to obtain Soviet troop support became more intense during the summer of 1979. A 20 July report by Soviet Central Committee member Boris Ponomarev noted this exchange:

Taraki once again returned to the issue of the strengthening of military support from the side of the Soviet Union, saying in that regard that in the event of the outbreak of an emergency situation the landing of a [Soviet] parachute division could play a decisive role in crushing the manifestation of counter-revolutionary forces.

In response, our position was put forth once again, emphasizing that the Soviet Union cannot take such measures.<sup>42</sup>

On 21 July, Soviet ambassador to Afghanistan Puzanov reported: "Amin transmitted a request to send to Afghanistan 8–10 helicopters with Soviet crews.... [Ambassador Puzanov] told H. Amin that as the Soviet leaders have said repeatedly...the Soviet side cannot embark on the participation of Soviet personnel in combat operations."<sup>43</sup>

In late August, a Soviet general commented on his trip to Afghanistan: "Amin once again raised the issue of the introduction of our forces into Kabul....I responded to Amin that the introduction of our troops might lead to the complication of the military-political situation and the strengthening of American assistance to the rebels."<sup>44</sup>

There is nothing in these exchanges to suggest any Soviet eagerness to send troops to Afghanistan or to establish an occupation force.

Soviet efforts continued to focus on political changes within the PDPA, with the objective of finding a political solution to the civil war. On 20 March 1979, Brezhnev instructed Taraki as follows: "It is very important to widen the base which supports the leadership of the party [the PDPA] and the country. First of all, of great importance here is the unity of the party, mutual trust, and ideological political solidarity throughout its ranks from top to bottom." Brezhnev also urged Taraki to broaden the government's overall political base, which had become quite narrow during this period: "It is worth thinking about creating a single national front under the aegis of the [PDPA]....Such a front could include already existing socio-political organizations and be supported by groups of worker, peasants, petty and middle bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia and students, youth, and progressive women."<sup>45</sup> The documentary record also reflects a growing Soviet concern about the excessive repression used by the PDPA. A report to the Central Committee from late June 1979 observes that "collegial leadership [in the PDPA] is lacking, all power in fact is concentrated in the hands of N.M.

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40. Both messages in *ibid.*, 14 April 1979.

41. *Ibid.*, 24 May 1979.

42. *Ibid.*, 20 July 1979.

43. *Ibid.*, 21 July 1979.

44. *Ibid.*, 25 August 1979.

45. *Ibid.*, 20 March 1979b.

Taraki and H. Amin, who none too rarely make mistakes and commit violations of legality.”<sup>46</sup>

Declassified U.S. documents on Afghanistan provide additional evidence that the Soviets were seeking a political solution during this period.<sup>47</sup> U.S. Embassy cables from this period show that Soviet policy sought to weaken the position of Amin, who was regarded as a disruptive force. The Soviets supported political figures — including Abdul Samad Hamad, a former cabinet official from the Monarchy, and Mohammad Watanjar, a military officer — who were outside Amin’s political network. They also sought to augment Taraki’s influence, at Amin’s expense.<sup>48</sup> KGB officer Vassily Safronchuk directed these anti-Amin efforts. According

to one U.S. Embassy cable from July 1979:

We have little doubt that Moscow would genuinely like to discover a political means to guarantee the future of a functioning and reasonably secure Marxist regime in Kabul. The hour is late for such an effort, however, and it could well be that Safronchuk is on a “mission impossible” representing little more than a last-ditch try at convincing the Khalqis to “do something” to put their domestic house in order.<sup>49</sup>



Mujahiddin horsemen, Afghanistan, January 1980. “Through the spring and summer of 1979, Afghan officials repeatedly requested Soviet combat personnel to assist in fighting the mujahiddin; the Soviets rejected these requests.” (AP photo)

46. *Ibid.*, 28 June 1979.

47. A cache of U.S. government documents was captured by Iranian students during the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979. A large portion of these documents — later published in full — pertained to U.S. relations with Afghanistan. This Iranian collection is analyzed at length in Gibbs 1987.

48. *Ibid.*, 373.

49. Quoted in *ibid.* Regarding the Soviet hostility toward Amin during this period, see *ibid.*, 372–74.

Overall, U.S. Embassy reports are consistent with the Soviet documents in the CWIHP and NSA collections in that they all point toward growing Soviet dissatisfaction with the PDPA's leadership.

Attempts to restrain Amin and promote his adversaries ultimately failed. In September 1979, the most extreme elements of the PDPA, associated with Amin, staged a coup and seized full power. Taraki was arrested and later executed. After the coup, the tone in Soviet documents became more anxious. One post-coup report noted despairingly that "all the levers of real power by now are essentially in Amin's hands," and added: "Amin has ignored the repeated appeals of our comrades warning him that such a step [the effort to depose Taraki] might have dire consequences both for the party and for the country."<sup>50</sup> Embarrassed by the situation, Soviet press agencies were advised to adopt an arms-length stance when discussing Amin and his government: "It would be advisable to limit coverage in coming days."<sup>51</sup> The possibility of future Soviet action against Amin was hinted at during a 20 September Politburo meeting, when Brezhnev noted: "Amin will continue to follow at least outwardly the recommendations we gave earlier...*But [our] job will be difficult and delicate*"<sup>52</sup> (emphasis added). In October, a Politburo document read: "Upon the availability of facts bearing witness to the beginning of a turn by H. Amin in an anti-Soviet direction, introduce supplemental proposals about measures from our side"<sup>53</sup> — suggesting once again that the Soviets were considering actions against Amin.

### The Afghan Conflict in Context

Let us pause momentarily to consider the larger international context in which these Afghan events were playing out. The last months of 1979 were marked by a power shift within U.S. foreign policy-making. The ascendancy of National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski within the Carter administration, and the eclipse of more moderate figures (such as Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and UN Ambassador Andrew Young) led to a hardening of the U.S. position regarding superpower relations in general. Washington's détente policies, first initiated by Henry Kissinger, were in decline.

The year 1979 was a time of intensified superpower tension. In the specific case of Afghanistan, the Carter administration began intervening directly in the conflict. On 3 July 1979, President Jimmy Carter signed a directive authorizing the Central Intelligence Agency to "provide...support to the Afghan insurgents, either in the form of cash or non-military supplies."<sup>54</sup> With this directive, the CIA began secretly aiding the mujahiddin guerrillas, several months *before* the Soviet invasion. Though the size of the aid program was small, only several hundred thousand dollars, the program focused on a border area of long-standing

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50. USSR Government, 15 September 1979.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid., 20 September 1979.

53. Ibid., 29 October 1979.

54. U.S. Office of the President 1979. See also, Gates 1996, 146–47.

interest to the Soviets. In a 1998 interview, Brzezinski acknowledged this aid program, arguing that it was undertaken with the understanding that it “was going to induce a Soviet military intervention.” Brzezinski declared that he welcomed the opportunity to lure the Soviets “into the Afghan trap” and to give “the USSR its Vietnam War.”<sup>55</sup> Brzezinski’s statements may of course be after-the-fact boasting, designed to advance his own reputation.<sup>56</sup> However, the main point — that U.S. aid to the mujahiddin was furnished several months before the Soviet invasion — is beyond question.

The Soviet media reacted to the U.S. aid program and complained repeatedly about western meddling in Afghanistan. At the time of the Soviet invasion, in December 1979, for example, *Pravda* stated that the USSR was acting against “American-financed ‘counter-revolutionary’ groups.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, *Izvestia* claimed that the CIA “is directly involved in training Afghan rebels in camps in Pakistan and maintaining contacts with counter-revolutionaries and reactionaries in Afghanistan itself.”<sup>58</sup>

The Soviets voiced concern that the United States was trying to curry favor within the PDPA. During the fall of 1979, key Politburo figures became convinced that Amin was shifting his allegiance away from the USSR and toward the United States. U.S. officials, they believed, were encouraging such a shift. In fact, there is no evidence in the CWIHP and NSA collections that the United States actively contemplated an alliance with Amin; but it is clear that the Soviets *believed* such an alliance was possible. A 29 October report to the Central Committee observed:

Recently there have been noted signs...that the new leadership of Afghanistan [i.e., Amin] intends to conduct a more “balanced policy” in relation to the Western powers. It is known in particular that representatives of the USA, on the basis of their contacts with the Afghans are coming to a conclusion about the possibility of a change in the political line of Afghanistan in a direction which is pleasing to Washington.<sup>59</sup>

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55. See Brzezinski’s interview in Brzezinski 1998. The original interview is in French; an English translation was published in Gibbs 2000, 241–42. The full text of the English translation also appears in digital form at [www.gened.arizona.edu/dgibbs/brzezinski\\_interview.htm](http://www.gened.arizona.edu/dgibbs/brzezinski_interview.htm).

56. Steve Coll argues this point. He claims that he has studied documents written by Brzezinski shortly after the Soviet invasion took place. These documents “show no hint” that Brzezinski welcomed the Soviet invasion, Coll declares. Accordingly he doubts the veracity of Brzezinski’s recent boasts that he welcomed the Soviet invasion and wanted to increase its chances. The matter is further complicated, however, when one views Brzezinski’s memoirs, written during the 1980s, in which Brzezinski *does* in fact express some retrospective satisfaction at the Soviet invasion. One hopes that future memoirs by other officials, combined with document declassification, will shed light on the issue of the motivation of U.S. officials in supplying aid to the mujahiddin. See Coll 2004, 581; and Brzezinski 1983, 429.

57. *Economist* 1980. Note that this quote is directly from the *Economist*, which paraphrases *Pravda*. See also Petrov 1980.

58. *Izvestia*, quoted in Klose 1980.

A memorandum from early December 1979 by KGB chief Andropov raised a similar concern:

[A]larming information started to arrive about Amin's secret activities, forewarning of a possible political shift to the west. [These reports include the following:] Contact with an American agent about issues which are kept secret from us. Promises to tribal leaders to shift away from [the] USSR and to adopt a "policy of neutrality." Closed meetings in which attacks are made against Soviet policy and the activities of our specialists. The practical removal of our headquarters from Kabul, etc. The diplomatic circles in Kabul are widely talking of Amin's differences with Moscow and his possible anti-Soviet steps.<sup>60</sup>

The invasion was launched shortly after the drafting of this document.

We do not have the minutes of the Politburo meeting at which the decision to invade was taken. However, we do have insider accounts of the decision-making process regarding the invasion, from the memoirs of former Soviet general Alexander Lyakhovsky, published in 1995, and those of former deputy foreign minister Georgy Kornienko, published in 1994.<sup>61</sup> Both accounts emphasize that toward the end of 1979, Soviet fears of growing U.S. influence in the region, as a potential threat to the USSR's southern frontier, were considerable. These accounts show that this fear weighed heavily in the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan.

According to Kornienko's account, the main advocate of intervention was Andropov. Earlier, Andropov had opposed any dispatch of Soviet combat forces to Afghanistan, consistent with the Politburo's consensus, as expressed during the Herat crisis in March 1979. By October, however, Andropov had set aside his objections and had become the key advocate of direct Soviet intervention, according to Kornienko. In advocating an invasion during discussions with other Politburo members, Andropov emphasized "the danger for the USSR of Amin's continuation in power"; Andropov claimed that Amin was "an American agent."<sup>62</sup> General Lyakhovsky's memoir also emphasizes the importance of Andropov's support for an invasion. According to Lyakhovsky, Andropov predicted that the United States would use Afghanistan as a base for Pershing missiles, which could "threaten vital Soviet interests." Overall, Andropov claimed, the United States was seeking to create "a 'new Great Ottoman Empire,' which would have included the southern republics of the USSR."<sup>63</sup>

On 12 December, a small group of key Politburo figures — Defense Minister Boris Ustinov, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, party ideology chief Mikhail

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59. USSR Government, 29 October 1979.

60. Ibid., December 1979.

61. Lyakhovsky 1995.

62. Kornienko 1994. This account also mentions Ustinov as a key figure in advocating for intervention, along with Andropov. It also claims that the KGB "exaggerated" the threat from Amin during the inter-party debates. The quotation in the text is directly from Kornienko, which paraphrases the opinions of Andropov and Ustinov.

Suslov, as well as Andropov and Brezhnev — formally authorized the invasion.<sup>64</sup> The invasion followed during 24–27 December 1979; in the course of the action Amin was murdered. Parcham leader Karmal was flown back from exile and placed in power, essentially as a puppet of Soviet forces. Now under augmented Soviet direction, the PDPA formally settled factional feuds between the Parchams and Khalqs (with the Parcham faction now dominant).

The basically defensive nature of Soviet intentions finds support in documentation from the period immediately following the invasion. In April 1980, shortly after the invasion, a Politburo document noted with satisfaction:

[The Soviet military intervention] prevented the emergence of a new hotbed of military threat on the southern borders of the Soviet Union. It put an end to Amin's adventuristic policy line, which led to the goals and objectives of the April [1978] revolution being discredited, to abandoning cooperation with the Soviet Union, and to establishing close ties with the West.... Gradually the understanding emerges that there could not be any resolution of the Afghan question without accepting the fact that Afghanistan, being the Soviet Union's immediate neighbor, is a part of the zone of Soviet special interests.<sup>65</sup>

Once again, there is nothing in the CWHIP or NSA collections to suggest that the Soviets were seeking to use Afghanistan as a staging area for offensive activities in the Middle East or Asia. Nowhere in these Soviet documents or memoir accounts is there any indication that the Soviets were seeking influence in the Persian Gulf.

### An Offensive Threat?

At the time of the Soviet invasion, and for a long period afterward, analysts considered the invasion to be a major strategic advance by the Soviet Union, as well as a setback to the United States and its western allies. A fairly typical view was presented in 1988 by Rosanne Klass of Freedom House. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Klass made the following points:

On April 27, 1978, after two centuries of Russian efforts to gain a foothold, the Soviet Union seized virtual control of Afghanistan through a bloody military coup carried out by its agents in the Afghan air force and tank corps under the guidance of the Soviet Embassy. As a result, the Afghan communist party, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, was installed in power.... On December 24–27, 1979, faced with the possible overthrow of communist control the Soviet army invaded.... The Soviet Union then dug-in for a long-term war of subjugation along lines developed in its century-long conquest of Central Asia.<sup>66</sup>

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63. Lyakhovskiy 1995. Lyakhovskiy, too, notes that Ustinov worked with Andropov in advocating an invasion. The quotations are directly from Lyakhovskiy, which paraphrases the opinions of Andropov and Ustinov.

64. The invasion decision is described in Kornienko 1994.

65. USSR Government, 10 April 1980.

66. Klass 1988, 925–26.

The basic point is straightforward: The 1979 intervention was thought to be the culmination of a long-standing plan, whereby the Soviets sought to use their conquest of Afghanistan as a way to dominate the Near East region and (by implication) to threaten western interests in that region. Such views find little support in the documentary record. The record suggests that Klass's views are incorrect, and that that the Soviet Union did not invade Afghanistan with any larger, offensive objectives.

But motives aside, did the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in fact constitute a threat to western security? Did the presence of so many Soviet forces in Afghanistan, approximately five hundred kilometers from the Persian Gulf, pose an objective security threat to western interests? Evidence for this position is weak. We have seen that U.S. officials had long discounted the relevance of Afghanistan as a factor in the security of the Persian Gulf, or the Near East region more generally. And, based on the documentary record that has so far emerged from USSR archives, Soviet leaders did not foresee any strategic advantages from an occupation of Afghanistan (except defensively, to protect their southern frontiers from western encroachment). Indeed, Soviet officials believed that an occupation would present a strategic setback for their objectives, since such action would be internationally condemned and would thus undermine the USSR's prestige. Politburo members also understood that, in the event of invasion, Soviet troops would need to defend an unpopular PDPA government against a major insurgency, and Soviet officials did not welcome this prospect. The record suggests that the decision to invade was taken only as a last resort, when political means to restrain Amin and thus resolve the crisis had failed.

At least some U.S. officials adopted a similar view, i.e., that the invasion would prove a *liability* not an advantage for Soviet strategy. Indeed, we have seen Brzezinski's claim that he welcomed the invasion and sought to encourage it. And, as Soviet troops withdrew in 1989, Afghanistan's lack of strategic importance was reaffirmed. A *New York Times* article from February 1989 offered the following observations: "The bottom line is that Afghanistan is not Iran,' said a [Bush] Administration official. 'It has no oil reserves and isn't located on the Persian Gulf. *It's not a particular strategic prize*'"<sup>67</sup> (emphasis added).

## Conclusion

In the historiography of the cold war, the dominant view has been that of Kennan's 1947 "X" article in *Foreign Affairs*, namely, that the Soviet Union sought global expansion. Soviet expansionist tendencies, it was thought, were based on the fundamental features of the Russian national character, reinforced by the ideology of Marxism-Leninism.<sup>68</sup> Kennan himself would later adopt more moderate, even dovish, views with respect to the cold war (including as we have seen, on the specific issue of Afghanistan).<sup>69</sup> But it is his 1947 essay that remains the most influential of his writings. A more recent updating of this perspective

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67. Quoted from Sciolino 1989.

68. Kennan 1947.

may be found in John L. Gaddis's enormously influential post-mortem study, *We Now Know*.<sup>70</sup> Gaddis argues that archival disclosures have largely confirmed Kennan's original ideas with respect to the innately expansionist qualities of Soviet foreign policy. And Michael Cox (writing in 2003) notes that during the cold war, "the Soviet threat was real enough. That much is obvious from any reading of the new [Soviet] primary sources."<sup>71</sup>

Analysts like Gaddis portray the cold war in asymmetrical terms, with a relentless Soviet aggressiveness against a restrained, defensively oriented United States. For the Afghanistan case, at least, the Gaddis view of the cold war is not confirmed. The CWIHP and NSA documents show that the Soviets were content to live with a neutralized Afghanistan and had little interest in turning the country communist. What undermined this arrangement was not Soviet subversion, but the Shah's effort to turn Afghanistan toward the West in 1974. Nothing in the documents indicates that Soviet agents planned the April 1978 coup. And contrary to the views of Klass, the Soviet Union was reluctant to invade. Its aim was to restrain what Soviet leaders regarded as an irresponsible PDPA leadership, which risked destabilizing the USSR's southern frontier.

The idea that the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan posed a threat to the security of the Persian Gulf is a myth. To be sure, the December 1979 invasion was a heavy-handed act of aggression against the people of Afghanistan, but the documentary record is clear that it was not a threat to western security or a more generalized act of regional aggression.

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69. See, for example, Kennan 1982.

70. Gaddis 1997. For contrary views, see Buzzanco 1999; Lester 1998; Cumings 1995, 121–22; and Leffler 1996.

71. Cox 2003, 10.

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