

# Does the USSR Have a 'Grand Strategy'? Reinterpreting the Invasion of Afghanistan\*

DAVID GIBBS

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This essay examines the question of Soviet intervention in the Third World. It begins by discussing recent theories of Soviet strategy, including those which hold that the USSR has a grand strategy of expansion in the Third World, as well as the less alarmist views of George F. Kennan. The influence that these debates have had on American foreign policy, and their significance for the recent revival of the Cold War, is discussed. The essay then attempts to test these theories, using the Soviet Union's December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan as a case study. The essay describes, at length, Afghanistan's internal politics and foreign relations from the eighteenth century until the present. The historical discussion, which emphasizes the post-World War II period, relies primarily on US government documents. The essay concludes, based on the information presented, that the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan reluctantly, and that it did not invade primarily in order to expand its influence. It also concludes that the USSR has not gained major strategic advantages from its occupation of Afghanistan. Finally, the essay reconsiders the theories of Soviet strategy, and notes that the facts of the Afghan case generally contradict the 'grand strategy' theorists, while they support the views of Kennan.

## 1. Introduction

During the 1970s, the USSR clearly increased its influence in the Third World. The Soviets strengthened their political and military ties to many underdeveloped countries, and they intervened directly in civil wars in Angola, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan. One school of thought, which we will term the 'Grand Strategy School', interprets these Soviet actions as follows: First, the USSR is following a policy of unrestrained, global expansion, and its actions in the Third World are part of that policy. Second, the Soviets were able to expand their power because the United States, demoralized by its defeat in Vietnam, did not seriously oppose this expansion. Third, the increased Soviet influence in the Third World seriously threatens the security of the United States and its allies. The Grand Strategy School claims, in essence, that 'The Soviet Union has not altered its long-held goal of a world dominated from a single center — Moscow.

It continues . . . to expand its political and military influence throughout the world . . .'<sup>1</sup>

George F. Kennan (1982; see also Herz 1978) has advanced a very different interpretation of Soviet foreign policy. Kennan views the Soviet leadership as intensely conservative, cautious, and disinclined to engage in risky or adventurist foreign policies in the Third World. Soviet strategy has been 'basically defensive', he argues (in Herz 1978, p. 8). Above all, the USSR has sought to prevent the emergence of hostile regimes on its borders. Kennan acknowledges that the Soviets have intervened in many Third World conflicts, but they have been no more interventionist than the Chinese and less so than the Americans. The USSR's interventions do not indicate a strategy of global expansion, and its gains in the Third World present no serious threat to Western security.

These debates about Soviet intervention have apparently influenced US foreign policy. The US government, eschewing previous detente policies, has recently increased military expenditures, adopted a more confrontational attitude towards the Soviet Union, and shown greater willingness to

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intervene in the internal politics of other countries. American officials now believe that the USSR is inherently expansionist, and this belief is an important reason for their Cold War policies. It is also widely believed that Soviet subversion has caused most of the recent instability in the Third World. In 1982, for example, President Ronald Reagan stated, 'Let's not delude ourselves. The Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on. If they weren't engaged in this game of dominoes, there wouldn't be any hotspots in the world' (quoted in Halliday 1983, p. 15). Recent American foreign policy has been based, at least in part, on the assumption that the Grand Strategy view is correct, and that Kennan's view is incorrect.

This essay will test these theories of Soviet strategy, using the invasion of Afghanistan as a case study. Afghanistan is a useful case study since it was the most significant of all recent Soviet actions in the Third World. The Afghan case constitutes the only recent Soviet invasion of a country that was not a member of the Warsaw Pact, as well as the most important Soviet military action since World War II. The invasion ended superpower detente. Clearly, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was a turning point in the history of the Cold War. Moreover, the Afghan case is very frequently cited — more than any other recent Soviet action — in support of the Grand Strategy view.

We will examine Russian and Soviet policies towards Afghanistan from the eighteenth century to the present, focusing on the period after World War II and, especially, the 1978–79 Saur ('April') Revolution. The discussion will rely primarily on US government documents, including the US Embassy cables captured during the Iranian Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Based on this data, we will reevaluate the above interpretations of Soviet strategy in the Third World.

## 2. Background to Superpower Rivalry

Afghanistan has historically been the arena for imperialist rivalries between Great Britain and Russia. This rivalry began in the eighteenth century when Russia expanded its influence in Central Asia; the British,

believing that Russia would threaten their India colony, sought to preclude Russian expansion. Each power attempted to outmaneuver the other and to gain strategic advantage in Central Asia. The competition between Britain and Russia, termed the 'Great Game', became one of the most important diplomatic issues during the nineteenth century. Afghanistan was situated directly between the British and Russian empires. Inevitably, Afghanistan became immersed in the great power rivalry.

The British staged two highly destructive invasions of Afghanistan, the first in 1839 and the second in 1879. The Afghans defeated the British during the first invasion, but the second ended in the Treaty of Gandamak, which was essentially a compromise agreement. According to the treaty, Afghanistan remained a sovereign state, and the Afghan monarchy obtained an annual stipend from the British. The British government, however, obtained control of Afghanistan's foreign policy, and Britain's Indian empire eventually annexed a large area of eastern Afghanistan (Poullada 1973, pp. 217–221; Halliday 1978, pp. 9–10). The Russians also staged several attacks and, in 1885, they occupied a section of northern Afghanistan. Abdur Rahman, the Amir of Afghanistan, stated that his country was 'like a goat between two lions or a grain of wheat between two strong millstones' (Poullada 1973, pp. 221–222).

In the twentieth century, Anglo-Russian competition abated as the strategic interests of both countries began to change. The Russians became distressed about Japanese power in the Far East, especially after the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. Great Britain and Russia both regarded Germany as a serious military threat. Faced with this changed international environment, Russia and Great Britain decided to settle their differences in Central Asia and to ally with each other. In 1907, Britain and Russia signed the St. Petersburg Convention, which recognized Afghanistan as a British sphere of influence. This agreement greatly reduced international interest in Afghanistan (Poullada 1973, pp. 222–223; Lafore 1965, pp. 136–137).

Following World War I, Afghanistan once again played a significant role in international politics (Poullada 1973, pp. 227–231; Halliday 1978, pp. 10–12). This prominence resulted partly from internal political factors, specifically the emergence of Amanullah, in 1919, as the new king of Afghanistan. King Amanullah was determined to modernize the Afghan political and economic system, and also to promote Afghan nationalism. The new monarch, moreover, intended to force Great Britain to repeal the humiliating Treaty of Gandamak. In 1919, Amanullah's forces attacked the British in western India. The British, although weakened by World War I and preoccupied with agitation in India, counterattacked and drove back the Afghan force. However, Britain did grant Afghanistan the right to conduct its own foreign relations.

The Soviet Union supported the Afghans during their disputes with the British, and the Soviet government established close ties with King Amanullah. The Soviets promised economic and military aid to Afghanistan, as well as the return of some border regions that the Russians had seized in 1885. A Soviet-Afghan treaty was signed in 1921. The reason for this Soviet largesse is clear: the new Bolshevik regime, threatened by counter-revolution and foreign intervention, desperately needed allies. Moreover, the British strongly supported the counter-revolutionary movement in Russia; the Bolsheviks and Amanullah had a mutual antipathy for the British. The early Soviet regime thus emerged as the major international ally for King Amanullah.

By the middle 1920s, however, the Soviets had defeated the counter-revolutionary forces, and they reestablished relations with Great Britain. The Soviet interest in Afghanistan, accordingly, waned. The USSR reneged on its previous agreement and failed to return border territory to Afghanistan. The suppression of Moslem nationalism, within the USSR, embarrassed Amanullah and further strained Soviet-Afghan relations. In the late 1920s, King Amanullah encountered strong internal opposition to his modernization program. In 1929, Amanullah was overthrown, and he

fled the country. The Soviet Union had made only a feeble (and ultimately vain) effort to support the King against the tribal uprisings. According to Leon B. Poullada (1973, p. 231), Soviet support,

... was too little and came too late to save Amanullah. At the end, Amanullah apparently felt betrayed by the Soviets. He is reported to have said ... that the Soviets had 'instigated him into enmity with the British and then not lifted a finger to help him.'

It is thus evident that the Soviets were losing interest in Afghanistan during the late 1920s.

The USSR largely ignored Afghanistan after Amanullah's overthrow. During the 1930s, Nazi Germany, Italy, and Japan established extensive trade relations with the Afghans, and the Axis nations became the main foreign influence in the country.<sup>3</sup> The Afghans welcomed this support, since the Axis powers were both anti-British and anti-Russian. Afghanistan adopted a generally pro-Axis policy at the beginning of World War II, although the country remained officially neutral. Under Allied pressure, however, Afghanistan expelled Axis officials in 1941. During the war, Soviet interest in Afghanistan appears to have been minor.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Afghanistan and the Cold War

The post-World War II period marked a complete transformation in international relations. British power declined rapidly in Central Asia, especially after the decolonization of India, and in the rest of the world as well. The main international issue in the post-war world was, of course, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the early years of the Cold War, neither superpower regarded Afghanistan as a major issue.

During the late 1940s, the Soviet Union followed a 'carrot and stick' approach to Afghanistan. On the one hand, the USSR and Afghanistan, in 1946, officially settled some disputed border territory. Also, in 1947, the two countries signed a bilateral trade agreement (Bradsher 1985, p. 16; United States Department of State [hereafter USDOS] 1948, p. 27). On the other hand, the Soviets tried to intimidate the

Afghans. During the late 1940s, Soviet agents reportedly disseminated pro-communist propaganda in Afghanistan and, in 1949, a Soviet journal hinted that the USSR might even annex northern Afghanistan (Bradsher 1985, p. 16; USDOS 1951, p. 1960). Also, the Soviets discouraged Western countries from providing technical assistance to the Afghans. In 1947, when there were rumors that the United States would help construct airports in northern Afghanistan, the Soviet ambassador to Kabul protested that such aid would threaten the USSR. The ambassador,

... expressed concern that USSR was being encircled . . . [and] that after experience of recent war [World War II] USSR could not view with unconcern development of any alien interests in those areas of countries bordering on Russia . . . (USDOS 1947, p. 910).<sup>5</sup>

None of these actions had major repercussions. Overall, 'The Soviet Union has shown no considerable interest in Afghanistan', according to a 1950 United States National Intelligence Estimate (1950, p. 20).

The United States showed even less concern with Afghanistan than the Soviet Union. Historically, the United States had few interests in Afghanistan. The State Department did not even bother to establish a legation in Kabul until 1942, when Afghanistan was regarded as a useful route for Lend Lease aid to China and the Soviet Union (Poullada 1981, pp. 180–181). Following the Second World War, the Afghans actively sought American economic and military aid. The Afghan government even implied that it would align itself with the West if the United States were to provide substantial support (USDOS 1949, p. 46). Nevertheless, the United States provided only a small amount of economic aid, in connection with an agricultural development project, while discouraging any possibility of military aid.<sup>6</sup> A United States Joint Chiefs of Staff study (1950, p. 335) noted that 'Afghanistan is of little or no strategic importance to the United States.'

This lack of concern with Afghanistan seems surprising, since the Cold War was at its height during this period, and both the

Americans and the Soviets sought allies all over the world. Moreover, Afghanistan, bordering the Soviet Union, was strategically situated. Why, then, did the superpowers ignore Afghanistan? There appear to be two reasons: First, Afghanistan had an extremely underdeveloped infrastructure, with some of the most rugged terrain in the world. These features greatly reduced the country's strategic value (United States Joint Chiefs of Staff 1957, p. 2566). Second, Afghanistan had poor relations with neighboring Iran and Pakistan,<sup>7</sup> and the United States was reluctant to become involved in these parochial rivalries (Poullada 1981, pp. 185–190). Clearly, the United States regarded Pakistan and Iran as far more important than Afghanistan. And since the United States ignored Afghanistan, the Soviet Union apparently did the same. This superpower indifference continued through the early 1950s.

Soviet policy towards Afghanistan changed qualitatively in the year 1954. Beginning in that year, the two countries developed extensive ties. The Soviet Union provided substantial economic aid, arranged trade agreements, and supported Afghanistan in its rivalry with Pakistan. The USSR soon provided military supplies, training, and technical assistance (United States National Intelligence Estimate 1954, p. 1482; Bradsher 1985, pp. 25, 28). The Soviet Union became Afghanistan's largest trading partner, and its largest supplier of military and economic aid. The reason for this upsurge in Soviet activity is clear: In 1954, the United States signed a Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with Pakistan and supported a Turkish-Pakistani military alliance (USDOS 1954a, p. 1474). The Soviets aided Afghanistan as a response to the increased American presence in the Near East. According to a United States National Intelligence Estimate (1954, p. 1491), 'this increased Soviet attention to Afghanistan is part of a general effort to counter recent Western (particularly US) gains in the Middle East-South Asia area [emphasis added]'.<sup>8</sup> Afghanistan thus became a Soviet sphere of influence in 1954.

The United States acquiesced in the prospect of Soviet dominance in Afghanistan.

CIA Director Allen Dulles believed that 'The Soviets were inclined to look on Afghanistan much as the United States did on Guatemala'.<sup>9</sup> The Department of State expressed some concern, but it conceded that 'There is, however, no evidence that the Soviets have used, or intend to use, these technicians [in Afghanistan] in a subversive capacity' (USDOS 1956, p. 7). The US considerably expanded economic aid during the late 1950s,<sup>10</sup> but it made no attempt to match the Soviet aid program.

A memorandum from the United States National Security Council (1954c, pp. 1152–1153) seems to sum up American policy towards Afghanistan during this period. First, this memorandum implied that the US should favor Pakistan over Afghanistan. Second, the US should 'refrain from encouraging' Afghanistan to seek US military aid. Third, the US should discourage Afghan participation in any regional military alliances, although Afghan membership might be possible 'at a later date'. Fourth, if the Soviets were to invade Afghanistan, the US government would oppose the invasion at the UN or through other diplomatic means. The document implied that the US would not take military action to protect Afghanistan.

American policy towards Afghanistan did not change significantly during the 1960s. An American economic aid mission, in 1962, stated that the US government would not participate in a 'bidding game' with the Soviets (USDOS 1962, p. 2). American intelligence continued to find no evidence of Soviet subversion (United States Government 1962, p. 3), and, according to a published study (Goldman 1967, pp. 122–123), 'Soviet aid to Afghanistan has been immensely successful . . . Even American officials are hard pressed to find major flaws'. The United States came to regard Afghanistan as a 'Third World Finland'—dependent on the Soviets, constrained in its foreign policy, but completely autonomous in its internal affairs. The US was apparently content with this arrangement.

For its part, the Soviet Union had no interest in altering the status quo in Afghanistan. The *Area Handbook for Afghanistan* (1973, p. 250) described the Soviet attitude:

The content of Soviet information programs directed at the country has changed from a highly critical approach to a positive one. Afghan rulers are no longer described as a self-interested elite who keep the majority of the population in a state of poverty and ignorance. Instead, they are catered to, and the theme of Soviet-Afghan friendship is repeatedly emphasized.

Apparently, the Soviets were satisfied with the political situation in Afghanistan.

#### 4. *Destabilizing Factors in Soviet-Afghan Relations*

By the 1960s, Afghanistan's place in world politics had stabilized. Afghanistan was completely dependent on the Soviet Union, but the Soviets did not undermine Afghan sovereignty. The United States accepted this arrangement. This status quo was gradually undermined, however, due to factors that were largely beyond the control of either superpower.

The first destabilizing factor resulted from internal changes within Afghanistan. Until 1964, Afghanistan had been ruled mainly by a council (Loya Jirgah), which was controlled by tribal and religious elites, and by a monarchy. In 1964, King Zahir promulgated a new constitution which legalized political parties and established a new legislative council (Wolesi Jirgah), which was to contain some freely-elected members. As a result of these constitutional changes, a new party was established: In January 1965, a group of students and intellectuals founded the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). This party, led by Mohammad Taraki, gained several seats in the Wolesi Jirgah during the 1965 election (Gibbs 1986, pp. 46–49).

Almost from the moment of its founding, the PDPA was plagued by factional disputes. By 1967, the PDPA had split into the Khalq ('People') faction led by Taraki, and the Parcham ('Flag') faction led by Babrak Karmal. The split apparently resulted from a series of personal and doctrinal disputes. The Parcham was generally regarded as the more conservative of the two, favoring an evolutionary, multiclass political strategy.<sup>11</sup> It was widely believed that the Parcham supported the monarchy (Parcham was thus

called 'the Royal Communist Party' — Dupree 1979, p. 38). Both factions drew their members primarily from the urban intelligentsia (Dastarac & Levant 1980, p. 3). Afghan communists failed, however, to obtain any significant peasant backing, and their combined membership probably never exceeded 4,000 (Cynkin 1982, p. 270). The weaknesses of the communist movement were obvious: it was numerically tiny, internally divided, and lacking in popular support. Parcham and Khalq did, however, develop close ties with the officer corps of the military (Gibbs 1986, p. 46), and these ties were to prove crucial.

During the early 1970s, Afghanistan had a severe famine, during which up to 500,000 people died of starvation (Gibbs 1986, p. 40). King Zahir's government handled the famine with complete incompetence, and the monarchy began to lose prestige. In 1973, the military overthrew King Zahir and placed the King's former prime minister, Mohammad Daoud, in power.<sup>12</sup> Daoud abolished the monarchy and established himself as president of the new Republic of Afghanistan. The Parcham opportunistically supported this coup, and several of the officers who participated in the plot had ties to Parcham. Because of these ties, Parcham members gained positions in the new Daoud regime (Halliday 1978, pp. 28–29; Lifshultz 1986, p. 752). Evidently, the communists were capable of working within the existing social framework. However, they remained committed, at least in principle, to revolutionary change, and their links to the military provided them with a potential power base. The communist movement thus constituted an unpredictable, and potentially destabilizing, force in Afghan politics.

The second destabilizing factor was a series of new policies adopted by Daoud. Beginning in 1974, Daoud began to reduce Afghanistan's ties to the Soviet Union. Daoud sent a large contingent of Afghan military officers for training in India and Egypt instead of the Soviet Union. Within Afghanistan, the number of Soviet military advisors declined considerably (Harrison 1979; Halliday 1978, p. 29). The Afghan government also settled disagreements with

Pakistan; friendly relations were established between the two countries. Domestically, Daoud broke his alliance with Parcham, and he purged leftists from the officer corps of the military. In 1977, Daoud appointed a well-known anti-communist, Abdul Qadir Nuristani, as Interior Minister (Harrison 1979).

There is little doubt that the Shah of Iran encouraged Daoud's anti-communist policies. In 1974, the Shah established a far-reaching economic agreement with Afghanistan. Iran intended, eventually, to supplant the Soviet Union as Afghanistan's main supplier of aid. Daoud — presumably eager to obtain additional aid and to increase his country's independence of the USSR — was susceptible to this Iranian influence. During the 1974–78 period, Iran participated in several construction, industrial, and agricultural aid projects,<sup>13</sup> while Daoud agreed to follow a more pro-Western policy. Selig Harrison (1979) described the political situation in 1977:

In Tehran, high Foreign Ministry officials spoke confidently of the leverage that Savak [Iranian intelligence] was exercising on the Da[o]ud regime. Iranian aid, these officials said, had been conditioned on a continuing crackdown against both Parcham and Khalq, accompanied by an Afghan peace agreement with Pakistan . . . In Kabul, President Da[o]ud explained to me that Iran's new economic potential had altered the geopolitical equation in the region. . .

The Afghan government was thus persuaded to reverse its long-standing dependence on the Soviet Union. American officials encouraged the Iranian-Afghan relationship (Harrison 1980–81, p. 165), although, given the Shah's own regional ambitions, the US support was probably not decisive. Therefore, the first move, in the series of events leading to the 1978 communist coup, was made, not by the USSR, but by the Shah of Iran.

The Soviet Union, not surprisingly, was concerned with Daoud's new independent policies. Daoud paid a state visit to the USSR in 1977, and the Soviet leaders reportedly criticized Afghanistan's new policies. The Soviet government and the Communist Party of India encouraged the Afghan communists to settle their differences. In 1977, the Par-

cham and Khalq merged, and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan was officially reunited (Bradsher 1985, pp. 65, 70). This reunification clearly strengthened the left and presented a challenge to the government. In response, Daoud resolved that he would liquidate the Party. Daoud's Interior Minister, Nuristani, stated privately that he would 'finish off' the leftists (Harrison 1979). The government thus forced a political crisis, which reached a climax in April 1978 and ultimately led to Daoud's overthrow.

On April 17, 1978, Mir Akbar Khaiber, a journalist and a prominent Parcham member, was assassinated. The identity of the assassin has never been firmly established, but it was widely believed that Nuristani had ordered the killing. Khaiber's funeral ended with an anti-government demonstration by about 15,000 people. Several days after this demonstration, Daoud purged leftists from the bureaucracy and arrested the PDPA's top leadership. PDPA sympathizers in the military staged a coup d'état and, on April 27, 1978, they overthrew the Daoud regime. The military placed the PDPA in power, with Taraki as head of state (Halliday 1978, pp. 31–32; Harrison 1979). There is no real evidence of Soviet involvement in the takeover, although such involvement cannot be ruled out. It is clear, however, that the Soviets did not plan the coup. The coup was devised at the last moment in response to Daoud's crackdown. Henry S. Bradsher (1985, p. 74) wrote that the PDPA was 'totally unprepared for the power that unexpectedly, even accidentally, fell into its hands.'

### 5. *The Saur Revolution*

Following the April coup the PDPA found itself in power, but it was totally unprepared to rule. The Party lacked a popular base, an economic program, administrative experience, or even internal unity. Halliday (1980, p. 22) described the PDPA's predicament as follows:

[The PDPA] faced a cruel dilemma: either to move forward cautiously, not implementing its major reform programme until it had consolidated its position, and thereby running the risk of appearing to be uninterested in the mass of poor peasants and

landless labourers in the countryside; or to implement these reforms rapidly . . . and thereby running the risk of becoming embroiled in social conflicts in the countryside where its own cadre force was almost non-existent.

The PDPA took the latter course and began implementing wide-ranging reforms only several months after it had come to power. The revolutionary government, in July 1978, introduced a decree cancelling several categories of peasant debt. In November the government authorized the expropriation of large landholdings and their redistribution among landless peasants. Women were granted additional rights, and a national education program was initiated, which was intended to increase the literacy level to 50% of the population by 1982 (Gibbs 1986, pp. 51–52).

There is no doubt that these reforms could have been beneficial. Land concentration and rural debt had long been serious problems in Afghanistan, and the need for reform was recognized by members of the international aid community (Bhatty & Berouti 1980, p. 344). However, Afghan society was exceptionally conservative and resistant to such changes. A United States Government analysis (1980, pp. 2–3) described this conservatism as follows:

Any change in the traditional way of life is considered wrong, and modern ideas — whether Communist or Western — are seen as a threat . . . [The tribes] resist the Afghan Marxists and the Soviets more to preserve the old ways than to fight Communism. Some of the reforms that have incensed the tribes — education of women for example — are neither Communist nor anti-Islamic, but they conflict with the tribesmen's perception of what is right . . . In the tribal villages it is in the interests of the most influential men — local landowners, religious leaders, or both — to reject reforms, especially Communist ones, that threaten both their property and their political power.

In addition to social rigidity, there were several other reasons for the popular opposition to the PDPA's reforms. Some studies (Roy 1982; Amin 1984) stressed the antagonism between fundamentalist Islam (which held significant influence in Afghanistan) and Marxism. Moreover, the Marxists implemented the reforms chaotically and without sensitivity for local mores. The

PDPA had little specific information on rural conditions, and it lacked personnel with experience in agricultural problems. The PDPA cadre were regarded as arrogant, incompetent, and corrupt. The government's leftist rhetoric and pro-Soviet orientation alienated the populace (Gibbs 1986, pp. 51–52).

It is generally acknowledged that the architect of the PDPA program was Hafizullah Amin, who was associated with the Khalq faction of the PDPA and held several posts in the revolutionary government. Taraki, the head of state, increasingly became a figurehead leader. Amin was firmly committed to the reforms, even after it became clear that they were provoking opposition in the countryside, and he promoted an explicitly pro-communist image for the regime, using Marxist symbols and rhetoric. Amin was probably responsible for a series of purges that decimated the Party's ranks. Apparently he believed, as a matter of principle, in the idea of a narrowly-based party. A Pakistani journalist, who had interviewed Amin in March 1979, remarked that Amin 'was proud of the fact that they were not sharing power with anybody, that they had such a small base' (Ahmed 1980, p. 16). In July 1978, the PDPA purged the Parcham faction. Several Parcham leaders, including Babrak Karmal, were assigned ambassadorships as a form of diplomatic exile.<sup>14</sup> The regime imprisoned several nationalist military officers, including Major-General Abdul Qader, who had played a crucial role in the April coup (Dupree 1979, pp. 41–42). The PDPA's base of support, never large, was becoming even smaller.

In the rural areas, popular opposition began in small pockets in 1978, and it rapidly spread throughout the country. At first, villagers resisted the reforms and, occasionally, murdered PDPA cadres (Chaliand 1982, p. 38). This resistance soon became a full-scale rebellion and, by 1979, the insurrection included six Islamic guerilla groups based in Peshawar, Pakistan, across the border from Afghanistan (Amin 1984, pp. 380–381; USDOS August 23, 1979, p. 45; October 11, 1979, p. 142; October 20, 1979, p. 148). These groups received limited aid from Saudi

Arabia and Pakistan. In addition, there were about 200 locally-led rebellions throughout the country. Overall, the insurgents were poorly organized, and there was also little coordination among the various groups. Nevertheless, the insurrection had broad popular support.

The PDPA responded to the rebellion with considerable savagery. The military strafed rural villages and burned crops in rebel areas, but these actions probably increased popular support for the insurgency. As the regime's base narrowed, the Afghan army became unreliable. There were reports of massive troop mutinies, with revolts by entire garrisons in Herat in March 1979, in Jalalabad in April, and in Kabul itself in August. Key air and armored units in the Kabul area continued to support the government, but, by 1979, the PDPA regime was severely threatened (USDOS August 6, 1979, pp. 231–232).

#### 6. *The Soviet Union and the Saur Revolution*

The Afghan crisis presented the Soviet Union with a dilemma. The Soviets had supported the PDPA since it was founded in 1965 (Bradsher 1985, p. 39). In 1978, they publicly committed their prestige to the Saur Revolution, and provided indispensable assistance to the communist regime. Despite this support, the PDPA resisted Soviet control, and its policies conflicted with Soviet interests. As we shall see, the Soviets repeatedly attempted to dominate the PDPA, but they were unable to do so until the invasion in December 1979. The Saur Revolution thus became a major liability for the USSR.

The Soviets sent military aid to the revolutionary government soon after the seizure of power, and this aid increased as the PDPA lost popular support, as the insurgency grew, and as the Party itself became more divided. By May 1979, there were 1,000 Soviet military advisors in Afghanistan. By October 1979, there were at least 4,000 Soviet military personnel in the country, and they supported Afghan units down to the battalion level. There were additional reports that these advisors were assuming 'operational' roles in the counter-insurgency campaign, and that



Soviet pilots were flying combat missions (USDOS May 8, 1979, p. 90; September 6, 1979, p. 52; October 3, 1979, p. 112). The US Embassy (USDOS May 9, 1979, p. 91) noted that the Soviet presence 'has not yet reached the exaggerated levels so often reported in the world's press', but there was no question that the PDPA depended on Soviet aid. Without this aid, the revolutionary government would almost certainly have collapsed.

The Soviets did not provide this support with great enthusiasm, however, and their opinion of the revolutionary government was not very high. The Soviets had long regarded Afghanistan as hopelessly backward and inappropriate for the socialist model of development. A Soviet official (cited in Dupree 1979, p. 50) summed up this view: '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 [emphasis in original]'. After the PDPA came to power in 1978, Eastern bloc officials criticized the reform program, and they urged the Party to moderate its policies. The East German Ambassador 'had warned the Khalqis . . . to go slow' with the land reform, but the Afghans apparently disregarded the advice.<sup>15</sup> A Soviet diplomat opined that, under the PDPA, 'The newspapers are terrible, and the cultural life is barren' (USDOS June 25, 1979a, p. 128). A Vietnamese diplomat also expressed disapproval of the PDPA policies (USDOS August 8, 1979, p. 12). A US Embassy report (USDOS May 11, 1979, p. 96) noted that 'there are indications that the Soviets regret their close association with the Taraki regime'.

Throughout the 1978–79 period, the Soviets, with the assistance of other communist countries, attempted to moderate the Saur Revolution. These efforts — extensively described in US Embassy cables — were directed by Vassily Safronchuk, a Soviet diplomat, and by Herman Schwiesau, the East German Ambassador to Afghanistan. Safronchuk (USDOS June 25, 1979a, p. 128), regarded as a reliable source by the US Embassy, described the Soviet activities as follows:

What is true is that we have been urging the . . . [PDPA] leadership to broaden its base . . . [but the PDPA] will neither allow any opposition, [n]or do they wish to share power. Their idea about broadening the political base is solely to organize student, youth, women and workers organizations, but those are all part of the same political party. This is not broadening the political base . . . They are stubborn people.

The Soviets also indicated a strong dislike for Amin, who was the main promoter of the purges and the radical policies.<sup>16</sup> The USSR attempted to reduce Amin's power and to promote less ideological leadership. There were reports that the Soviets supported such figures as Abdul Samad Hamad, a former cabinet official under the monarchy, Mohammad Aslam Watanjar, a military officer, and Nur Ahmad Etemadi, a former prime minister (USDOS July 18, 1979a, p. 178; July 18, 1979b, p. 181; October 30, 1979, p. 128). The US Embassy (USDOS July 25, 1979, p. 202) offered the following assessment of the political situation:

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.

It is thus clear that the Soviets sought a political solution to the Afghan crisis.

Safronchuk's activities did produce some short-term successes: the PDPA announced that the land reform was 'successfully completed' — which indicated, presumably, that the government was abandoning its unpopular agrarian policies. Moreover, the government released Parcham members from prison, attempted to improve its relations with Pakistan, and eased some restrictions on private trade (USDOS July 18, 1979c, pp. 171–172). These gains proved to be short-lived, and the PDPA soon reasserted its independence. In a July 1979 speech, Amin stated publicly that the regime would not share power with the classes that had been overthrown during the Saur Revolution. This speech was believed to be an affront towards the Soviets.<sup>17</sup> The Soviets were so

discouraged that, by August 1979, they largely abandoned the idea of a political solution for Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> By this time the insurgency was well established, and it is doubtful that any pro-Soviet regime, no matter how pragmatic, could have gained broad support.

After it became clear that their political scheming had failed, the Soviets increased their military commitment in Afghanistan. In August, a Soviet diplomat hinted that the Soviets might send regular combat units into Afghanistan (USDOS August 18, 1979, p. 34). Also in August, a high level military delegation, led by the commander of Soviet ground forces, arrived in Afghanistan, officially to advise the Afghan military (USDOS September 2, 1979, p. 51). It seems likely that the Soviets were seriously considering large-scale intervention, at least as a contingency. Eastern bloc officials apparently knew that such an intervention would be extremely difficult. The East German ambassador predicted that, if the Soviets were to intervene, 'the "entire Afghan nation" would turn against the Soviets, just as the Afghans turned against the "British invaders"' in the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Soviet diplomat Safronchuk seemed to hold similar views (USDOS June 25, 1979b, p. 130). By August 1979, however, the Soviets were prepared to intervene despite the potential costs.

The political situation deteriorated further in September 1979, when Amin unexpectedly staged a coup, overthrew Taraki, and established himself as head of state. Several important figures, including Taraki, were killed during or shortly after the coup. The causes of this coup are unclear, but it was definitely not Soviet backed. The US Embassy (USDOS October 2, 1979, p. 110) reported that Soviet women and children (families of Soviet advisors) were seen in public places during the coup, indicating that the takeover surprised Soviet authorities. Also, Taraki's overthrow embarrassed the Soviets. Several days before his overthrow, Taraki had paid a state visit to Moscow, where he received extensive honors and press coverage (USDOS October 19, 1979, p. 120). Finally, the coup constituted a major

setback for the USSR's policy in Afghanistan. The Soviets had sought to reduce Amin's power and to broaden the PDPA's popular base; with the September coup Amin consolidated his power while, according to the US Embassy, the PDPA's political base was 'even more narrowed — sharpened to a pencil point, as it were'. A Soviet diplomat reportedly 'made it clear that he thought that the Khalqis had failed' (USDOS September 17, 1979, p. 75).

Amin made a number of conciliatory gestures, including the release of some political prisoners (Dastarac & Levant 1980, p. 8). One month after the coup, however, Amin began to use hardline Leninist slogans, which further polarized Afghanistan and incensed the Soviets (USDOS October 25, 1979, pp. 121–122). The USSR continued to aid the new Amin regime, since it had no immediate alternative, but it is clear that the Soviets were dissatisfied with the course of events. The Soviet press reduced its coverage of Afghanistan during this period (Halliday 1980, p. 36), presumably because of its embarrassment with Amin's takeover. In late October, there were reports of renewed 'strains between Amin and the Soviets' (USDOS October 25, 1979, p. 121).

Finally, in late December 1979, the USSR staged its invasion, sending in tens of thousands of troops. The Soviet invaders immediately removed Amin from power<sup>20</sup> and established Babrak Karmal as head of state. The new Afghan government became little more than a puppet regime. Since the invasion, the Soviet military has done most of the fighting against the insurgents. The invasion clearly made the PDPA subservient to Moscow and ended the Party's independence.

### 7. Conclusion

Upon first consideration, the Grand Strategy School seems to explain the Afghan invasion quite well. The invasion did expand Soviet influence into a country that had previously been neutral. Moreover, the Soviet Union has had longstanding interests in Afghanistan which go back to the time of Lenin.

Indeed, even before the Russian Revolution, the Czarist regime had sought to dominate Afghanistan. Because of these facts, it is now widely believed (Luttwak 1983, p. 58; Pipes 1984, pp. 104, 108; Poullada 1981, p. 178) that the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan was the culmination of a decades-old Soviet plan.

On closer inspection, however, this interpretation seems dubious. The history of Soviet-Afghan relations does not show that the USSR followed a consistent policy towards Afghanistan or that there was any plan to invade the country. In fact, Soviet policy changed over time, and it had little overall consistency. The early Bolsheviks cultivated friendly relations with Afghanistan during the 1920s, but they lost interest in the country by the end of the decade. The Soviet Union showed little concern with Afghanistan from 1929 until 1954. In 1954, the USSR and Afghanistan formed close economic, political, and military ties. However, these ties resulted, not from Soviet adventurism, but from American initiatives in the region. Even after 1954, the Soviets generally respected Afghanistan's non-aligned status. It was primarily the policies of Iran that destabilized Afghanistan, and inadvertently led to the communist takeover in 1978.

The Grand Strategy School also asserts (Pipes 1981, p. 187; Tyroler 1984, p. 172) that the USSR has gained major strategic advantages from its occupation of Afghanistan. This also seems doubtful. It is true that the Soviet forces are now somewhat closer to the Indian Ocean, as well as to the shipping lanes in the Straits of Hormuz, than they had been before the invasion. However, it does not appear that the Soviets are planning any further aggression in the region. According to an American military officer (Collins 1986, p. 152):

Soviet operations up to the end of 1984 also provide little proof that the Soviets are planning to invade Iran or Pakistan. The size of the Soviet force in Afghanistan is far too small and the relatively balanced geographic distribution does not suggest preparation for any such thrust.

There is no evidence that the Soviets have deployed strategic bombers or missiles in Afghanistan. A recent article in *Jane's*

*Defence Weekly* (Jacobs 1985, p. 1232) noted that:

. . . there has clearly not been the buildup required to make the . . . [Afghan air bases into anything] other than . . . forward operating area[s] for Frontal Aviation tactical fighter-bomber operations in support of in-country ground operations.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the costs of occupying Afghanistan would seem to outweigh any potential benefits. The Afghan war has tied down over 100,000 of the USSR's best troops and has also been very costly in diplomatic terms. Eastern bloc officials, as we have seen, were aware of these costs before the invasion. Overall, there are few indications that the invasion of Afghanistan has been a strategic success for the Soviet Union.

On the contrary, the occupation resulted from repeated Soviet failures. The USSR had long supported a neutral, 'Finlandized' Afghanistan, but a series of events during the 1970s — the emergence of Iranian influence, Daoud's anti-communist repression, the PDPA takeover — all undermined this policy. After the 1978 coup, the Soviets desperately sought to restrain extremist elements within the PDPA government and to contain the insurgency.<sup>22</sup> This policy also failed. The PDPA largely resisted the Soviet pressures, and the anti-communist rebellion continued to gain strength. The Soviet Union invaded in 1979 only after its earlier, more moderate, policies had failed.

Specifically, the invasion occurred for three reasons: First, the Soviets invaded to prevent the Moslem insurgents from winning power. It was quite clear that the Afghan army was incapable of containing the rebellion, and, had the Soviet Union not invaded, the insurgents would have eventually won power. Certainly, the USSR did not want a virulently anti-communist regime on its border. An East German official (USDOS July 18, 1979b, p. 182) put the matter this way: 'Afghanistan borders the Soviet Union and just as . . . [the United States has] a special interest in anything happening in Canada and Mexico, the Soviet Union has a special interest in Afghanistan'. Second, the Soviets were probably afraid that they would lose face internationally if they allowed the

defeat of the PDPA, which was, after all, a communist party. Third, the Soviet invasion was intended to remove radical elements (particularly Amin) from the government, since these were clearly aggravating the rebellion.

This analysis of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is necessarily incomplete. The US government documents contain many gaps, especially during the time of the Saur Revolution. There is little official information on the economic ties between Iran and Afghanistan during the 1974–78 period. Few Top Secret or CIA documents are available, and we will probably never see the Soviet documents. Several important questions must remain unanswered: To what extent did the United States encourage Iran's policies towards Afghanistan? When did the Soviets firmly decide to invade Afghanistan? What was the nature of debate, on the Afghan question, within the Soviet government? The information that we have, however, does not suggest that the Soviets occupied Afghanistan in order to improve their geo-strategic position.

This discussion indicates that the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan with limited, and essentially defensive, objectives. There is little evidence to support the Grand Strategy approach. Kennan's view, that Soviet policy has been restrained and defensively-oriented, is more consistent with the facts of the Afghan case. It is thus possible that American foreign policy is based on an incorrect assessment of Soviet strategy.

#### NOTES

1. The quote is from a 1976 Statement by the Committee on the Present Danger (Tyroler 1984, p. 170). For other examples of the Grand Strategy School, see Podhoretz (1980), Starr (1985), Pipes (1981; 1984), Poullada (1981), and Luttwak (1983). Fred Halliday (1983, Chapter 4) provides a good critical discussion of this perspective.
2. The so-called *Den of Spies* collection, published in Tehran in 54 volumes, is available at the Near East reading room in the Library of Congress. Other US government documents were obtained from the *Declassified Documents microfiche* collection, published by Research Publications Inc., and from *Foreign Relations of the United States*, published by the US Department of State.
3. In addition, France established influence in Afghanistan during the 1930s (Poullada 1981, p. 180).
4. It is true that, in 1940, the Soviet Union insisted that Germany recognize the Near East, south of Batum and Baku, as a Soviet sphere of influence (Moore 1950, p. 365). However, there is no evidence that this reflected a specific Soviet interest in Afghanistan. More likely, the Soviets wanted influence in the Persian Gulf region.
5. A similar incident resulted in a minor diplomatic squabble in 1952. In that year, the Soviet Union protested the presence of a French/United Nations aid mission in northern Afghanistan. The American Embassy in Kabul (USDOS 1952a, p. 1447) viewed this development with alarm, but the State Department dismissed the issue as unimportant. An Assistant Secretary of State (USDOS 1952b, p. 1460) wrote that 'The Department has no evidence to support the extreme position of our Charge [d'Affaire in Kabul]'.
6. The US Export-Import Bank helped finance an Afghan agricultural development project being undertaken by Morrison-Knudson, an American company. This government support, however, probably resulted more from Morrison-Knudson's political clout than because of any official interest in Afghanistan (Poullada 1981, pp. 181–182). There is no indication, in any source, that the US provided military aid to Afghanistan during the early post-World War II period.
7. Afghanistan's disagreements with Iran concerned the use of the Helmand River waters, which bordered the two countries. The dispute with Pakistan was considerably more serious. Pakistan was formed, in part, from a region of Afghanistan that the British had seized during their 1879 invasion. The seized region was inhabited primarily by Pushtuns, who were also the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan. Soon after Pakistan became independent in 1947, Afghanistan demanded that the Pakistani government allow the Pushtun regions to form a separate state called 'Pushtunistan'. This dispute was one of Afghanistan's main foreign policy concerns in the post-World War II era (United States Central Intelligence Agency 1973, p. 42; USDOS 1978, p. 49).
8. Similar views were expressed in several other documents (United States National Security Council 1954a, p. 1138; USDOS 1954b, p. 1421; 1956, p. 1). One Foreign Service Officer (USDOS 1954c, p. 1477), however, stated: 'It is also possible that . . . [the Soviets are aiding Afghanistan] not so much as a reaction to free world action, but as a part of their global strategy'. This last document clearly reflected a minority view, since its analysis is not supported by the other documents, including the 1954 United States National Intelligence Estimate, which represented a consensus view of several agencies.
9. The above quotation is directly from the document, which paraphrased Dulles (United States National Security Council 1954b, p. 1149).

10. US aid increased from \$2.1 million in 1955 to \$18.0 million in 1956 (*Middle East Economic Digest* 1977a).
11. Note that there were several other factions within the PDPA, but these were of little importance (Hashim 1983, pp. 168–170; Dupree 1979, pp. 37–38).
12. There were some rumors of Soviet involvement in the 1973 coup, but this seems unlikely. According to a report by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (1973, p. 42): ‘The Soviet position in Kabul may have been enhanced . . . [by the coup], but only marginally . . . There is no evidence, however, that the Soviets instigated or were actively involved in the coup’.
13. By the end of 1977, Iran had curtailed some of its aid to Afghanistan. However, much Iranian aid was provided, and Harrison’s account (1979) established that this aid was politically decisive (*Keesings Contemporary Archives* 1975, p. 27435; *Middle East Economic Digest* 1976, 1977b, 1977c, 1977d, 1977e).
14. Harrison (1980–81, p. 171) offered a slightly different interpretation of these events. According to Harrison, Karmal requested that he be sent overseas, since he feared assassination by Amin if he remained in Afghanistan.
15. Note that this quote was directly from the cable, which paraphrased the ambassador (USDOS July 19, 1979, p. 187).
16. This was clearly the dominant view within the US Embassy. However, one cable (USDOS October 30, 1979, p. 126) noted, in parentheses, that,

There are some officers in this embassy who believe that past talk of strains between Amin and the Soviets have [sic] been a ‘shell game’ — and that the tough strongman [Amin] has been Moscow’s man since the beginning of the Khalqi era.

- This view is almost certainly incorrect. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, one of their first actions was to overthrow Amin.
17. A similar, though less forceful, speech was made by Taraki (USDOS July 22, 1979, pp. 193–194).
  18. This cable mentioned that, even after August 1979, the Soviets might have been promoting Taraki at the expense of Amin. However, the USSR appeared to have ‘concluded (about August) that there was no viable alternative to the Taraki/Amin regime’ (USDOS October 19, 1979, p. 120).
  19. This quote is directly from the cable, which paraphrased the ambassador (USDOS July 18, 1979b, p. 183).
  20. Amin was killed during the first days of the Soviet invasion, although it is not clear who actually killed him. Ahmed (1980, p. 16) indicated that hostile Afghan army units executed Amin, and that the Soviets opposed the execution. Lifshultz (1986, p. 753) claimed, more plausibly, that Amin was killed during a battle with Soviet troops.
  21. Neither *Jane’s All the World’s Aircraft 1986–87* (1986, pp. 257, 263–269) nor *The Military Balance*

1986–1987 (1986, p. 44) provide any evidence that the Soviets have deployed strategic bombers, such as Tupolevs, Fencers, or Bisons, in Afghanistan. According to some sources (*Foreign Report* 1984; Collins 1986, p. 125), the Soviets have deployed some long-range reconnaissance planes; but there are no reports of long-range bombers or missiles. For further details on Soviet aircraft deployment in Afghanistan, see Harrison (1984, p. 38). Bodansky (1985, p. 240) claimed that there was a ‘massive buildup effort of strategic infrastructure’ by the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, but there is no evidence of this.

It should be noted that Afghan intelligence is reportedly backing terrorist attacks inside Pakistan, while the Soviets have begun systematic bombing of Afghan refugee camps across the Pakistani border. Do these incidents suggest that the USSR is seeking to destabilize Pakistan and impose a pro-Soviet government, or are the Soviets pressuring Pakistan to cut off arms to the Afghan Mujahiddin? The latter explanation is probably the correct one. This Soviet subversion began recently, mainly since early 1987, and it seems to reflect Soviet frustration with their stalemated anti-guerilla campaign and their inability to interdict the Mujahiddin arms supply. Moreover, there is no evidence that the Soviets are supporting independence movements in the Baluchistan region of Pakistan. This is especially important since Baluchistan is strategically situated along the Indian Ocean. Factual information on Soviet activity in Pakistan was obtained from Andrews (1987) and Collins (1986, pp. 151–152).

22. Historically, there have been other instances where the USSR opposed radical action. Regarding the Soviet role during the Spanish Civil War, George Orwell (1980, pp. 53–55) provided the following account:

The general swing to the Right [on the Loyalist side of the war] dates from about October/November 1936, when the USSR began to supply arms . . . There is very little doubt that . . . [Soviet] terms were, in substance, ‘prevent revolution or you get no weapons’ . . . The process of collectivization was checked, the local committees were got rid of, the workers’ patrols were abolished . . .

In France, during 1945 to 1946, the French Communist Party, which was closely tied to the Soviet Union, discouraged labor strikes (Kolko & Kolko 1972, p. 157). In Vietnam, the VietCong began their insurgency without apparent Soviet support. In fact, the Soviets, in 1957, proposed that North and South Vietnam each enter the United Nations as separate countries (*The Pentagon Papers* 1971, p. 75). Thus, the Soviets initially acquiesced in the permanent division of Vietnam, while the VietCong sought its reunification under communist rule.

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