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- Jagat S. Mehta
Solution in Afghanistan
- Cees van Dijk
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SOLUTION IN AFGHANISTAN*
From Swedenisation to Finlandisation

Jagat S. Mehta

The ongoing crisis in Afghanistan is the result of misadventures and misjudgments compounded by internal mishandling and international misperceptions. The revolution of April '78 was not anticipated before it occurred; nor that a regime of militant socialist ideology would have to be superseded by a Soviet invasion itself. Far from being in accordance with some grand design, its course was determined by unforeseen twists and consequences. The bloodletting goes on interminably, inconclusively and possibly dangerously. The paradox is that there are strands of broad similarities amongst contending and interested powers that a solution would be to revert to the status quo ante. The problem is how to go forward to the beginning. How to assuage outraged nationalism and obtain the disengagement of a great power which through mishaps and mistaken impetuosity had gratuitously alienated a never unfriendly neighbour?

It is now generally accepted that the Saur Revolution of April 1978, by which the communist-inclined coalition of Khalq-Parcham overthrew Daud and proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan came as a surprise, albeit a welcome one, to the U.S.S.R. Twenty months later when the Soviet Union intervened massively in what had become a fraternal member of the Socialist commonwealth, the West saw it as directed against its strategic interests. President Carter saw it as the gravest threat to international peace since World War II.

It was assumed to be in pursuit of the historical Russian ambition to reach the warm-water ports, to control the oil artery of the Gulf and steel Khomeini's Iran after American diplomats had been taken hostages. President Carter propounded the doctrine to defend the Gulf and initiated

* Summary of Jagat S. Mehta's "Afghanistan: A Neutral Solution" from FOREIGN POLICY 47 (Summer 1982). Printed with permission from FOREIGN POLICY 47 (Summer 1982). Copyright 1982 by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

various measures to compel Soviet withdrawal. But within less than a year all but the Rapid Deployment Force were retracted and Afghanistan slipped out of the focus of active international diplomacy.

Moscow's pronouncements have been even more riddled with changes and contradictions. Before he was overthrown, there was every indication of satisfaction and commitment to Daud, who was, after all, for twenty-five years the architect of a closer Soviet-Afghan relationship. After the Democratic Republic was proclaimed the Soviet Union had a position of privileged insights into the country. In shifts of its position, in turn, it applauded Tarakki as President and the Khalq-Parcham coalition, acquiesced in the exclusion and banishing of Babrak Karmal and the Parchamites, supported Amin when he wrested all powers from Tarakki and finally denounced him also as a C.I.A. agent and brought back Karmal and installed him as head of the government. All these changes in the official stance within two years can scarcely be explained by Soviet control, manipulation or overriding direction. The Soviet justification for its intervention as necessitated to pre-empt Imperialist intrigue or even threatened invasion in Afghanistan has carried little international credibility.

The fact is that the analysis in the West or the Soviet rationale were not plausible. They both ignored or discounted the local dynamics and the Afghan factors in these developments.

This is both surprising and tragic as what has transpired is almost the replay of the Great Game which was played in Afghanistan a hundred years ago. The lessons bequeathed by history were clearly overlooked. The struggle was then for the same strategic highlands astride the historic invasion route between Europe and Asia. The contenders then were Czarist Russia expanding to the South and the British Empire wanting to protect the outer parameter of its dominion in India. The Afghan tribes, backward as they were, did not even then prove docile spectators to the contest between foreign giants for their native homeland. They played off one power against the other and inflicted humiliations and defeat on both. It was even then a saga of courage and cunning. The tactics were the same and included assassinations, ambushes, denial of supplies, use of captured arms, double-dealing and deception. In the end the forward imperialists of both, Russia and Great Britain, abandoned their ambitions and decided to leave Afghanistan alone to its tribal polity. Modern Afghanistan was born in

this defiant struggle against conquest and it has never lost that will to independence.

Since 1890, through two world wars under the Emirs (and later Kings) and eventually, after 1973, as a republic, the rulers in Afghanistan remained faithful to the same broad framework of a national foreign policy. In its strategic location, Afghanistan recognized that to preserve its independence the country must remain neutral in great power conflicts but with careful regard not to provoke the security sensitivity of the powerful neighbour to the north. Even though governed by a conservative monarchy, Afghanistan was quick to recognize the Communist government established in Russia. As early as 1921 it concluded a treaty of Neutrality and Non-Aggression with the U.S.S.R. and started buying arms and aircraft from the Soviet Union even in the twenties. For its part the Soviet Union respected, at least made no serious effort in those sixty years to undermine, the social system and Islamic culture of the country. While remaining sensitive to Soviet interests, Afghanistan developed a pattern of economic relations with countries of different blocs. Considering Afghanistan's location, not even the United States questioned the rationale of Afghan foreign policy. With this rationale, until 1979, the only serious problem which Afghanistan faced in the post-war years was with Pakistan on the Pakthoonistan issue.

Not through extrapolating from globalist strategic analysis but by following carefully the chronology of developments in Kabul can one find a plausible clue to the twists and unexpected turns of the Afghan developments. The Khalq-Parcham group seized power in April 1978 following the murder of a popular leader, Mir Abkar Khan, by quick improvisations at a time of deteriorating economic and political conditions. The unexpected success of the Saur revolution was abetted by the ineptitude and growing conservatism of the Daud Regime. The initial cohesion of the Khalq-Parcham coalition disintegrated not on principles but personal rivalries in the exercise of power. Following, as he thought, the Leninist example, Amin emerged as the driving force of the new regime. He sought to transform a deeply religious society into a modern secular socialist state by a series of fiat and decrees. This rush to enforce alien ideas resulted in widespread disenchantment and resistance. The repressive measures, which followed, only further alienated the people and turned them militantly hostile both to the regime and the Soviet Union.

All through 1978 and the first half of 1979 the Soviet Union had responded to support Amin and his policies, including in the ruthless suppression of the insurgency. But by the summer of 1979, the Soviet Union became alert to the reality that a pro-Soviet ideologue, by the impetuous imposition of socialism, was turning a traditionally friendly country to a hostile neighbour. When the attempts at moderating these unpopular policies failed, it led to the Soviet Union's planning with Tarakki (when he was transiting through Moscow) to politically if not physically remove Amin from power. This intention, however, got betrayed and in the palace shoot-out of September 15 Tarakki himself got killed and Amin escaped.

The abortive palace coup d'etat was the critical mishap which internationalised the Afghan developments. It turned Amin the loyal ideologue into an anti-Soviet nationalist. In the Kremlin's embarrassment and nervous anxiety at the failure of the conspiracy with Tarakki, it saw no alternative but to plan a massive intervention which could simultaneously remove Amin, neutralize the Afghan army and tackle the intensifying insurgency. The Kremlin probably feared that Amin, in his disillusionment with the USSR, would turn into a Tito; indeed given time Amin could become a Sadat, repudiate the Treaty of Friendship and agreements, which Amin himself had negotiated, and demand the total withdrawal of Soviet presence and advisers from the country.

Amin for his part, angry at his repudiation and suspecting Soviet malevolence, tried hurriedly to broaden his internal political base and win back the support of the Mullahs and the nationalists. He tried also to enlarge his external links by making up with Pakistan and probably contemplated sending friendly signals to the West. All these plans were summarily overtaken by the Soviet intervention.

The events culminating in the Soviet invasion were clearly not in accordance with a grand design. Militarily and politically it was ill-conceived but it was evidently a defensive reaction to the local circumstances and dynamics. The USSR never expected that its forces would meet such resistance from the Afghan people. Much less did it anticipate that it would provoke such a storm of criticism and condemnation in the Third World and even in the international communist parties. Ironically, had the September 1979 coup to instal Tarakki, a more moderate ideologue, succeeded, there might not have been a Soviet intervention three months later. In retrospect at least, the USSR probably recognises that a

genuinely non-aligned Afghanistan pursuing nonradical policies was a better guardian of Soviet interests.

Two features emerge from the analysis of the chronology of the Afghan developments. (a) When supporting the imposition of Socialism and safeguarding of Soviet security and both could not be ridden in tandem, the security consideration proved dominant in Soviet decision-making. (b) The Afghan nationalism drawing sustenance from the traditional personality of the country remains as determined to reject foreign presence and alien "godless" ideas as in the nineteenth century. The heart of the problem was how to assuage simultaneously both Soviet apprehensions of its security and Afghan nationalism.

Though Afghanistan continues to figure ritually in the catalogue of international problems and speeches in international fora, there is now little evidence of an urgent quest for a political solution which could obtain Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. As stated earlier, the paradox is that there is a broad consensus in all sides that Afghanistan should, if it could revert to "its traditional role as a nationally free non-aligned country" and that provisions should be made that it does not turn hostile to the USSR.

The examples of Finland and Austria have been recalled as an end-goal of Soviet withdrawal and as a means of reaching it. The parallels are useful but not entirely opposite. In both these countries there were established national democratic traditions. In the present situation, no one can speak for the Afghan people. Moreover in the present glacial international environment any proposals emanating from the East or West or involving the U.N. in the peace process would be doomed by the mutual suspicions of the great powers. What is relevant in the examples of Finland and Austria is that in both cases there were cushions -- of neutral Sweden and East European socialist countries, respectively -- as protective buffers for the Soviet Union's own security.

The Afghan problem remains serious, and it is evident there is no military solution to it. However, even though the premises of a threat to the Gulf and oil flows proved erroneous, the militaristic reactions -- the quest for a strategic consensus and operational bases for the Rapid Development Force and arming of Pakistan continues to be pressed or facilitated. It has been rejected by the Gulf council and made even political relations more difficult. It has started an arms race in the subcontinent. Meanwhile

Afghanistan continues to suffer from human misery and an economic collapse. To compound its other internal problems, Pakistan faces the burden of 3 million refugees, the possibility of intensified dissidence in Baluchistan, and dangers of hot pursuit across a notoriously permeable frontier. The lava of instability can spread in all directions from the continuing ferment in Afghanistan.

In the light of the foregoing analyses, a serious attempt at finding a political solution should be made to arrest this dangerous drifts. It could be initiated on the basis of the following sequential steps.

(1) A regional conference of countries closely affected by Afghanistan -- Pakistan, India, Iran, the Gulf states should be called in one of the capitals. All of them are non-aligned and have, in any case, rejected foreign bases and military presence on their soil. The conference could readily agree to the Swedenisation of the region (in the sense of voluntarily reaffirming neutrality and detachment from military blocs) as an earnest of the desire for regional stability and eventual Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. At the initial stage, since no demands are to be pressed on the government of Afghanistan, it therefore need not be invited to the conference.

(2) After demonstration of the will and actual achievement of "Swedenisation," a larger conference of non-aligned states, preferably of Muslim nations from the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Africa should be invited to join the regional group to choose a Five-Nation Observer Group for a peace-keeping role in Afghanistan.

(3) This Observer Group -- all non-aligned but including countries from within and outside the region -- should approach the Afghan government for establishing itself for a peace-keeping role in Kabul. The group's first task would be to defuse the insurgency, seek to restore internal confidence, facilitate the return of refugees and create conditions for the assembly of a Loya Jirga in Kabul. The Jirga of Afghans should be enabled to draw up a new constitution as was done in 1963-64. The group could help in the constitution-making if requested to do so.

(4) A nation-wide election should follow on the basis of the new constitution. The non-aligned group would be expected to help in holding and supervising the elections by making available observers and electoral officers to ensure that they are free and fair. The role of the Observer Group

would in some ways be similar to that of the Commonwealth observers during the pre-independence elections in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe.

(5) Power could be transferred thereafter to a government constituted on the basis of these elections.

(6) The new government would finally negotiate with the USSR a formal treaty of Neutrality (on the lines of the Soviet-Finnish treaty) and the withdrawal of the residuary Soviet forces in the country.

This outline of a political solution is only to provide a framework which can be refined through diplomatic consultations. In the present impasse of suspicions and the military and political quagmire, the difficulties would be legion and can scarcely be exaggerated. The envisaged process would require the acceptance and benign detachment of the great powers. It may also be necessary to provide, through the Observer Group, international help and funding for humanitarian and urgent economic rehabilitation in the country. The essence of the proposal -- to create an outer belt of non-hostility as a precondition for the Finlandisation of Afghanistan -- would ensure no damage or danger to the security of the superpowers or the region. But it is predicated on the basis that only non-aligned regional powers can assuage both Afghan nationalism and Soviet anxieties for its future security.

The spur to the effort to arrest the present drift could be challenged or rejected by those who may see the present situation as "not intolerable," indeed on balance affording some gratuitous advantages to the West. It is now quietly acknowledged that Afghanistan was not necessarily the first halt in a southward march. The Russians can neither be militarily thrown out nor can they extricate themselves with any dignity or lasting gain. Therefore with a little covert support in arms and finance to the Afghan Mujahideens, the argument runs, Afghanistan can be made into a "Russian Vietnam." So why not let the Soviet Union remain entrapped and made to bleed militarily, economically and kept on the diplomatic defensive? Indeed the argument is carried further. The Soviet involvement can provide a ready-made justification for other interventions in the backyards of other great powers.

Such argumentation may appeal to global strategists. Ironically, this would amount to a strange, no doubt unintended parallelism of interest between the USA and the USSR in fending off a political solution which sought a Soviet with-

drawal from Afghanistan. The flaw in such an approach is the presumption that the Afghan problem, through the will and capacity of one or both superpowers, can be quarantined inside Afghanistan and not damage their interests or diplomacy in the region. But it would be an illusion to think that it can be so contained and would not spill over to affect Pakistan and the Gulf and destabilise the region in an unpredictable way.

The Afghanistan problem has indeed linkages and lessons for the connected wider region stretching from South Asia to the Middle East. The whole area is in incipient dangers from international ferment and regional tensions. The economic interests of the West and the security fears of the Soviet Union are more likely to be safeguarded by regional stability than by the intrusive involvement or a competition between the great powers. Even though the countries of the region may continue to turn to one or the other superpowers for their particular needs -- be it for arms or economic connections -- none is inclined to become part of the strategic consensus or accept a position of a political or military surrogate. Nationalism in the region is wary of openly embracing either superpower. The surge of transnational religious fundamentalism is at odds with the process of modernisation and social change. Outside powers can only exacerbate the internal tensions but not help an orderly evolution of these societies. But overbearing militarism may invite sharp rejections as in Iran or protracted resistance as in Afghanistan. The Arab-Israeli problem still defies solution and complicates the prospect of dependable bilateral or regional political relations with the entire Arab world including with post-Sadat Egypt. In this wider context, a willingness to encourage a regional initiative for the neutralisation of Afghanistan may facilitate projecting a new image of detached, benign, responsive friendliness before new turmoil finds expression in xenophobic hostility against the nearest superpower -- and further damages their position and interests.

To revert to the Afghan problem, it has become abundantly clear -- as it was after the last century Great Game -- that a country in Afghanistan's situation must be a buffer and a people with this courage and faith must be left alone to evolve in their own way. It was in nobody's interest that Afghanistan should be used merely as a convenient argument. A Swedenised South and Southwest Asia, followed by a Finlandised Afghanistan may provide a way out from the frustrations of superpower globalism and give hope for stability

to a region which is of importance for them but also for the whole world.