Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan and its Impact on Indo-Afghan Relations

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Abstract: Russia’s relations with Afghanistan have long historical roots. During the so-called “Great Game” at the end of the 19th century, the Russian and British empires were competing over influence in Afghanistan. Russia’s earliest military involvement in Afghanistan also dates from this period. In modern times former Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan in 1979 to establish a communist regime in Afghanistan. The decade long Soviet intervention has produced a new brand of force in Afghanistan named by United States as ‘freedom fighter or mujahedeen’ to bleed Soviet Union. In this backdrop, this paper demystify that the present cause of instability in Afghanistan is the product of Soviet Union and United States. Foreign powers are responsible for instability in Afghanistan, which subsequently produced world most lethal Al-Qaeda and Taliban. This paper concludes that, India was one of the few countries that recognized the communist regime in Afghanistan backed by Soviet Union and the decade long Soviet intervention has left a tangible effect in the Indo-Afghan relations.

I. Introduction

Russia’s relations with Afghanistan have long historical roots. During the so-called “Great Game” at the end of the 19th century, the Russian and British empires were competing over influence in Afghanistan. Britain interpreted Russia’s expansion into Central Asia as a threat to the British control of India, the crown of the British Empire. Russia’s earliest military involvement in Afghanistan also dates from this period. During the so-called “Panjdeh incident” in 1885, Russia seized a part of Afghan territory by the Kushk river with force, resulting in a diplomatic crisis between Russia and Great Britain. Neither Russia nor Great Britain were interested in occupying the full territory of Afghanistan. Rather, as Russia had suggested in 1844, the two empires agreed that Afghanistan could function as a “buffer-state”, preventing full-scale conflict between the two great powers. Conflict between two great powers – later between the Soviet Union and the United States was nevertheless what fuelled the Soviet-Afghan war (1979–1989), still remembered as a national trauma in Russia.

During the Soviet intervention, India’s response was shaped more by the need to continue good relationship with Soviet Union than to understand the problems and concerns of a neighbour with which it shared historical and cultural ties. This is because; New Delhi has already signed a friendship treaty with Soviet Union. During the decade-long intervention in Afghanistan on the part of Soviet Union, no serious attempt was made by foreign policy makers in India to explain its policy or even to establish contact with the Mujahedeen groups. It was believed that Afghanistan would be pacified by Soviet military forces. India’s initial response to the Soviet military and massive intervention in Afghanistan reflected domestic political confusion arising out of the transition from the first non-Congress regime to the re-emergence of Mrs. Gandhi in 1980. The then Prime Minister Charan Singh strongly opposed the Soviet intervention and therefore India’s permanent representative at the United Nations was asked to regret the intervention and seek its withdrawal from Afghanistan. On Indira Gandhi’s assumption of power in January 1980, this stance was significantly revised. India became the first country to welcome the Soviet intervention and the establishment of Communist regime. Without being critical of the Soviet Union publicly, she supported the Afghan revolutionary leadership and urged them to appreciate the need for Soviet withdrawal over a period of time. However, such a measured policy was construed by western media and various analysts as pro-Soviet. Being a leader of the Non-Aligned movement, India was expected by the Non-Aligned countries to oppose any intervention in another non-aligned country, but it does not happened.
II. Soviet Intervention and India’s Role

Relationship between Soviet Union and India had developed to a point of closeness and cooperation by the end of 1970s that few other major countries of the Third World had achieved. For India, the USSR served as a crucial bulwark against Pakistan and as a counterweight to both China and the US. The USSR could hardly have had a better Third World ally than India to work with against expansionist designs of Chinese or American influence or to represent claims of Soviet global power. Thus, Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 came up as a challenge for India to maintain a vital strategic relationship with the USSR while not affecting its credentials as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement. It was an objectionable situation and decision for India’s historic foreign policy principles.

Though New Delhi opposed outside interference in the internal affairs of one country by another, it was equally alarmed by the danger of arms race in the region. Despite US attempts to persuade the Indians that any new arms for Pakistan was only meant to contain the Soviet intervention along Pakistan’s borders, India saw the move as a threat. Because, Pakistan can use them against India and Pakistan did it two decades later. India expressed its displeasure on military intervention to Soviet Union in clear terms through bilateral discussions. Mrs. Gandhi refused to accept any of the explanations forwarded by the Soviet side to justify their intervention and instead asked them to create conditions for early withdrawal. She herself told this to the Soviet leader Brezhnev in Moscow in December 1980 and in September 1982. On the other hand, during the same regime, Indian Ambassador B. C. Mishra remained silent at the United Nations when the issue came before the Security Council at the request of the US and 51 other states, including some from the nonaligned group. India’s silence sent a wave of shock and resentment particularly among the Western observers who had expected India’s support against the Soviet action. That India was not completely supporting Moscow, however, became apparent in the vote on the resolution when India joined 17 other countries in abstaining while the resolution passed was overwhelmingly, 104 to 18. To a considerable extent, the US side was aware of India’s strong reservation on Soviet intervention and continuing presence in Afghanistan. President Jimmy Carter publicly acknowledged and declared that India’s position on the Afghanistan issue was positive and that India was not ratifying the intervention.

The Soviet intervention and presence in Afghanistan had provided a legitimacy for the US and Pakistani interference in Afghanistan which created difficulties in securing Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. It had reinforced military alliance between the US and Pakistan resulting into a massive supply of economic and military support to Pakistan as a frontline state. The hi-tech military weapons supplied to Pakistan, like the F-16 and AWACS, resulted in tilting the regional military balance to Pakistan’s advantage. Even China had joined the anti-Soviet front in Afghanistan, resulting into a reinforced Sino-US-Pak alliance. Another important threat to regional security in general and a security threat to India in particular was the emergence and rise of Islamic militant groups propped up by the alliance in its anti-Soviet operations backed by United States and Pakistan. It is a well-known fact that the rise of Islamic militancy in Pakistan subsequently vitiated peace in India, particularly in the state of Jammu and Kashmir since 1989. Soviet Union tried to shape India’s insight regarding the role of anti-Soviet front in a desired direction. The Soviets were quick to point out to the new Indian government headed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi the direct threat the US and China presented to India.

The most important inducement that Soviet Union had to offer India was to raise the USSR’s crude oil supplies by one million tons per year in the subsequent years. For India, which had been scrambling for new sources of oil since the conflict had erupted between Iran and Iraq, who together provided almost 70 per cent of India’s oil imports, this was an agreement of tremendous importance. Thus, India’s support to Soviet Union was also shaped by its energy interest in Soviet Union. However, the disintegration of the USSR subsequently put India’s energy driven policy in jeopardy leading to engagement with a number of politically volatile states. The withdrawal of Soviet Union from Afghanistan and subsequently disintegration on Soviet Union changed the entire regional balance of power and policies. India’s ambiguous response to Afghan issue pushed her in different directions which did not allow India to play a meaningful role in the settlement of the issue. It was seen identifying with the Soviet Union and pro-soviet Kabul regime though it made its displeasure clear regarding the Soviet intervention in the bilateral discussions. In the multilateral body like the UN, it either abstained or maintained silence. This distanced it from the dominant international anti-Soviet front that was more interested in pushing the Soviets out rather than ensuring a stable and politically independent Afghanistan. India, on the other hand, was interested in a neutral and stable Afghanistan. Pakistan, the principal member of the anti-Soviet front was extremely active in keeping India out of any important process of negotiations involving Afghanistan. India’s role was further curtailed by the fact that it did not share a direct border with Afghanistan. The formula that was generally worked out to select the countries to participate in the process of negotiations included great powers and the close neighbours. India did not fit in either of the categories in the negotiations carried out under the UN auspices. However, it kept in touch with the negotiations through the Afghan regime in Kabul and the Soviet Union. It is an open truth that the real parties in the Afghan conflict were the two super powers-Soviet Union and United States.
III. Withdrawal of Soviet Union and Emergence of Afghanistan as Failed State

The UN sponsored talks on Afghanistan initiated in late 1986 eventually led to Geneva accords. Geneva Accords were the series of accords signed between Afghanistan and Pakistan to keep aloof from the interference of internal affairs of each other. These accords were also signed by the two super powers with the Afghan regime and Pakistan in 1988. Under these accords, the Soviet military forces were to complete their withdrawal from Afghanistan by February 1989. India kept in touch with the Kabul regime and the USSR on the question of Soviet withdrawal.

After the Soviet troops had left Afghanistan with several mujahedeen commanders competing to reach the centre-stage of Afghan politics, India, according to J. N. Dixit followed a three-pronged policy course: one, to maintain contact with the leaders of all groups including Sibghatullah Mojadadi, Burhanuddin Rabbani, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Rashid Dostam so that eventually it could deal with whosoever came to power; Second to continue to provide assistance in the economic and public health spheres to the extent feasible; and the third, to explore possibilities, in collaboration with states like Russia and Iran, in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan. Afghan President Najibullah visited India in December 1987 and again in May 1988, to keep Indian leaders informed about important developments. India began to prepare itself to deal with the post-Soviet developments with the beginning of negotiations on the Geneva accords. It established contacts with the leaders, not only of the Kabul regime, but also with all possible other Afghan groups, including anti-Soviet Mujahedeen guerrilla leaders. The erstwhile Minister of State for External Affairs, Natwar Singh even went to Paris to talk to the former Afghan King Zahir Shah, assuming that he could have a role to play in uniting various factions in the interest of a stable and neutral Afghanistan. In their regular contacts with the Kabul regime, Indian leaders pleaded for the accommodation of some of the guerrilla leaders in the new power sharing arrangement. But the problems that subsequently emerged not only lacked consensus on the issue of sharing power with the guerrilla leaders but also the issue of balanced ethnic representation and the stakes of external forces.

India worked with the Najibullah government to see if a political consensus among all the representative Afghan groups could be evolved to ensure a peaceful and stable transition from the Soviet period. India refused to back any of the warring factions. But due to its ambiguous stance during the Soviet intervention, its role was increasingly seen as pro-Najibullah regime. India’s interest in a stable and politically neutral Afghanistan was always at stake as Pakistan consistently supported mujahedeen group led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. India was denied such a role because of its perceived pro-Soviet role during the Soviet intervention. Even after the Soviet withdrawal, India continued its support for the Najibullah government which was characterised by the visit of the latter to New Delhi in August 1990 and signing an agreement on Prevention of trafficking in narcotic drugs. The gradually intensifying conflict in Afghanistan made it difficult for India to maintain its image as a friendly neighbour in the eyes of new forces in Afghanistan. Since 1992, the conflict around Kabul and other major Afghan cities intensified forcing India to frequently close down its diplomatic mission and aid disbursing agencies. The humanitarian assistance and relief supplies that India provided to Afghanistan had to be routed through the UN Coordinating Agencies. India found it difficult and politically risky to provide any military assistance to the Kabul regime which came under increased pressure with the rise of the Taliban. India’s foreign policy received a setback with the Taliban capturing Kabul on 27 September 1996. This marked the dominance of Pakistan in Afghanistan and the rising influence of Islamic extremist forces. India had failed to provide adequate support to the anti-Taliban forces and was not in a position to rescue the former Afghan President Najibullah from being murdered by the Taliban. India was asked by the Taliban to revive its Afghan policy and abstain from interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. Given the quick change in the government in India, it continued to recognise the Rabbani government and deal with it despite the fact that the Taliban were making significant advances in extending their sway in Afghanistan. India, at the same time, tried to establish direct contacts with the Commanders of the Northern Alliance, Ahmed Shah Masood, the Lion of Panjshir valley on the Panjshir valley side and Rashid Dostum on the Mazar-e-Sharif side. India provided the Northern Alliance with humanitarian assistance.

India and Pakistan, both wanted to exercise influence in Afghanistan. It is argued that just when Indo-Pak relations held promise of improvement, both sacrificed the imperative of permanent good relations with the people of Afghanistan. The Taliban in 1990s were promoted and strengthened by Pakistan as an instrument to protect and promote its interests in Central Asia.

The Soviet Union’s support to the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan’s (PDPA) socialist agenda resulted in a decade long war between the Soviet forces and the pro-PDPA forces, on the one hand, and the US backed Mujahedeen factions, on the other. Both the human and material costs of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan are broadly read as some of the main causes for the fall of the Soviet Union. Many Afghans have held the Soviet Union responsible for the poverty and despair that followed the war of the 1980s. However, many of the same persons currently working in the Afghan National Security Forces were trained by the Soviet military to support the PDPA forces, and have maintained good relations with their former instructors. Whereas the United States’ influence in Afghanistan diminished following the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, Russia asserted its
influence through providing weapons and training to the Northern Alliance in order to prevent the Taliban from spreading north.2

In 2009, Russians somberly marked two anniversaries: that of the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and of their withdrawal in 1989. The ten-year-long war, which resulted in 14,300 Soviet soldiers’ deaths, remains one of the most traumatic experiences in recent Russian history. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, it was at the height of its power. The United States, its rival, looked like a “pitiful and helpless giant” after seeing its ally, the shah of Iran, toppled and its embassy in Tehran occupied, with U.S. diplomats held hostage. When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, their empire was entering its terminal phase. After 1989, Russians preferred not to think about Afghanistan or, indeed, the Muslim world; this became known as the “Afghan syndrome.”3 When the Soviet Union finally collapsed in 1991, the new Central Asian states were deliberately left out of the post-Soviet commonwealth. However, the Muslim world soon caught up with Moscow. In the 1990s Chechnya, Tajikistan, Dagestan, and Ingushetia became battlefields where Russian soldiers took on Muslim fighters who looked much like the mujahideen the Soviets had met in Afghanistan.

What the Russians discovered in the mountains of the Hindu Kush was, above all, the power of militant Islam. They also saw the limits of reforming a traditional society and the impossibility of imposed modernization. They came to appreciate the intricacies of tribal society. They had to discount the power of military force relative to the power of the purse, and the power of the purse relative to the power of religious beliefs and tribal customs. They understood that all relationships with their Afghan counterparts were essentially reversible: An enemy would suddenly turn into an ally, and allies would easily betray them. They saw that the enemies and the allies of the moment deeply resented foreigners, even as they sought to exploit them to their own advantage. Finally, they regretted that they had not studied the British experience of a century before as they were preparing to engage themselves in the same area. After 9/11, Moscow was ready to render substantial assistance to the United States toward defeating the Taliban. In the five years that the Islamist radicals had held Kabul, and eventually close to 95 percent of Afghanistan, under their control, Russians feared a Talib-support radicalization of the former Soviet South, from Central Asia to the North Caucasus and in other Muslim republics of the Russian Federation. However, Russia was very cautious about becoming involved again in Afghanistan beyond materially supporting its anti-Taliban allies in the country’s North and sharing valuable intelligence with the United States.

In November 2016, India completed the delivery of a batch of four Mi-25 Russian combat helicopters to Afghanistan. Earlier in March 2016, India and Iran signed a bilateral agreement with Iran to develop Chabhar port in Iran that would provide Afghanistan an alternate access to the sea, bypassing Pakistan. Such instances of collaboration involving Russia, Iran and India have given rise to a belief that these three powers have convergent interests regarding peace and stability in Afghanistan. It is in light of this history of cooperation that Russia’s statements regarding the ISIS in Afghanistan have caused a stir in India. The Russian president’s special representative to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, said that that the Islamic States of Iraq and Syria not the Taliban is a bigger threat in the region.4 Similarly, Iran continues to make overtures towards sections in the Taliban. Afghanistan’s former intelligence chief, Rahmatullah Nabil, in November blamed Tehran of supporting the Taliban in order to counter the ISIS threat.

In sharp contrast, India still regards the Taliban and its sponsors as bigger threats to Afghanistan. Earlier in 2016, the Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson said regarding Taliban that, “They have to respect the internationally agreed red lines, give up terrorism and violence, sever all ties with al Qaeda, agree to follow democratic norms and not do anything which will erode the gains of the last fifteen years. Ultimately it is for the government of Afghanistan to decide whom to talk to and how to talk.”5

So, the question before India is: with the ISIS brought into the Afghan equation, have the interests of Russia, Iran and India now diverged in Afghanistan? And, if yes, what are the implications of this development for India’s strategy? India is though a principal investor in Afghanistan, if Taliban or ISIS emerges in Afghanistan it will create trouble not only for India and Afghanistan but for Pakistan as well.

IV. India’s Current Position

In December 2014, when Vladimir Putin visited New Delhi for annual summit talks with Modi, he was unofficially accompanied by acting president of Crimea, Sergei Aksyono, causing a great deal of controversy and blistering statements from Washington D.C. Responding to the furor, a foreign ministry official said India and Russia agreed on the need to “diffuse Cold War-like tensions” while public commentators maintained that one could not ‘reproach your friends in public’. Yet again, these aspects of Indian foreign policy seem to be in constant replay since they were first articulated in the 1950s. At that time, Krishna Menon and Nehru corresponded on various occasions, and particularly with regard to leaders friendly towards India -Gamal Abdel Nasser, Nikolai Bulganin, and Chou En-Lai – to say that Nehru would express his disapproval privately, and that it would carry more weight and do less damage than if India were to speak publicly in its capacity as a member of the UN. Almost as if he were heeding their caution, Modi’s statements on China’s actions in the east
and south China Seas and Russia’s actions in Crimea have expressed faith in these countries, and have been reminders to both states that they were expected to act in consonance with international law, failing which they would find themselves in isolation.

Although the ruling political dispensation in India has changed over the years, when it comes to Russia, Indian foreign policy has remained rather constant. This enduring feature is most evident when the question of intervention comes up. Thus, even though India officially follows a policy of non-intervention, this has not brought her in active dispute with Russia. Indeed, the most obvious exception to the Indian policy found in Bangladesh 1971, was supported by Russia, and India rewarded Russian support with a treaty of friendship and cooperation between both countries. The relations between India and Russia are built on this extraordinary ability to reproduce a sense of harmony. Analysts often attribute this bonhomie to a range of economic incentives, including widening cooperation on space programmes, atomic energy and military technology. Certainly, these are components of a successful relationship, but cannot and do not constitute the bedrock of political thinking.

The founding political ideas of these two states were previously considered distraught, but have now acquired certain adjacency, blunted by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the beginning Indian economic liberalisation, both arriving in 1991. Both states have had to satisfy domestic audiences that they will not be made pariahs. For India, this was a particularly compelling move in the aftermath of both rounds of nuclear testing in 1974 and again in 1998. New Delhi has understood Russian interventionism in this light, that of the outcomes and sanctions it brings from the international community. Although there have been murmurs of disapproval whenever Russia has intervened, occupied, or annexed neighbouring territory, India has, for the most part, addressed it in broad sweep, focusing instead on one of the many other less thorny issues in its employ. In years to come, with other mutual concerns such as terrorism, secessionism, and emerging economies dominating their relations, a muted Indian response on Russian interventionism is par for the course.

V. Conclusion

During the Soviet Intervention, India supported the communist regime without opposing the role of mujahedeen. After the withdrawal of Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989, India tried to maintain links with various frictions of mujahedeen’s and to appear as a neutral nation. When Taliban came into power, India supported the opposition force to the Taliban - i.e Northern Alliance.

Since 2001, Afghanistan has allowed New Delhi an opportunity to underscore its role as a regional power. India has growing stakes in peace and stability in Afghanistan, and the 2011 India-Afghan strategic partnership agreement underlines India’s commitment to ensure that a positive momentum in Delhi-Kabul ties is maintained. This monograph examines the changing trajectory of Indian policy toward Afghanistan since 2001 and argues that New Delhi has been responding to a strategic environment shaped by other actors in the region. As the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces prepare to leave Afghanistan in 2014, India stands at a crossroads as it remains keen to preserve its interests in Afghanistan.

Notes and References

2 Ibid.
5 Ibid.