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Soviet foreign policymaking and the Afghanistan war: from 'second Mongolia' to 'bleeding wound'

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Abstract. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, lasting from 1979 to 1989, was one of the major chapters in the Cold War. Analysis of how Soviet policy was made has, hitherto, focused on the decision to intervene, in December 1979. Equally important, however, as an episode in the final stages of the Cold War, and as an example of Soviet policy formulation, was the decision to withdraw. Basing itself on declassified Soviet documents, and on a range of interviews with former Soviet and Afghan officials, this article charts the protracted history of the Soviet decision and sets it in context: as with the decision to invade, the withdrawal reflected assessment of multiple dimensions of policymaking, not only the interests and calculation of Soviet leaders, but also relations within the Afghan communist leadership on the one hand, and strategic negotiation with the West on the other.

Introduction

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan of 1979–89 occupies an important place in the history of the last phase of the Cold War, and in the account of the collapse of the USSR itself. One place to begin an assessment of this Soviet role in Afghanistan could well be with an obvious contrast of official Soviet positions. On 24 December 1989 the Supreme Soviet heard a report from its Committee for International Affairs proclaim a 'moral and political condemnation' of the Soviet decision to send combat forces into that country.[1] Yet a decade before, following earlier informal leadership discussions and a formal decision on 12 December by the Soviet Politburo, the USSR had on 24 December 1979 set in motion the events that led to the occupation of Afghanistan. Between these two December dates there lay not only a decade of

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1 'USSR: Report on 24th December on intervention in Afghanistan', *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* SU/0648/i, 29 December 1989.

war in Afghanistan itself, but also the momentous shifts within the Soviet leadership and in its foreign policy, processes within which policy towards Afghanistan played a significant, but far from determinant, part.

It is to some extent possible to reconstruct and analyse this process of revision. Beyond the information available at the time, there has been a continuous flow of publication since the Soviet withdrawal which has added to the public record.[2] This includes primary documentation,[3] and memoirs.[4] This has enabled the development of considerable academic analysis of changing Soviet positions, both leading up to the intervention of December 1979,[5] and in the subsequent decade.[6] Yet the passage of time, and the increasing availability of materials on that intervention, have not, on their own, enabled the role of that war in Soviet decline to be more firmly established, nor has it resolved issues relating to Soviet decision-making. For this there

[2] Of particular interest for the general story see D. Gai and V. Snegirev *Vtorzheniye* (Moscow: IKPA, 1991); Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan. The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995); Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

[3] Numerous official documents relating to the war have appeared in Russian, e.g. 'Sekretnye dokumenty iz osobykh papok: Afganistan', *Voprosy Istorii*, no.3, 1993; 'Dokumenty Sovietskogo Rukovodstva o Polozhenii v Afganistane, 1979–80', *Novaya i Noveishaya Istoriya*, 3/96. The largest collection is reproduced in Pierre Allan and others (eds.), *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente zum Afghanistankrieg (1978–1991)* (Zurich: Hochchulverlag, 1995).

[4] Memoirs include, from the Soviet side, S. M. Akhromeyev and G. M. Kornienko, *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodiye Otnosheniye, 1992) and subsequent versions of Kornienko's views in *Novaya i Noveishaya Istoriya* 3/93, and in his *Kholodnaya Voina* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya, 1994) Chapter 8; A. S. Chernyaev, *Shest' Let s Gorbachevym* (Moscow: Progress, 1993); L.V. Shebarshin, *Ruka Moskvi*, (Moscow: Tsentr-100, 1992); N.S. Leonov, *Likholet'ye*, (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya, 1994); B.V. Gromov, *Ogranichennyi Kontingent* (Moscow: Progress, 1994); Georgi Arbatov, *The System—an insider's life in Soviet politics* (New York: Random House, 1992); Eduard Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Vassily Safronchuk, 'Afganistan pri Babrake Karmale i Najibulle', *Asiya i Afrika Segodnya* nos. 6,8, 10 1996, nos 1 and 5 1997. Shevardnadze was Soviet Foreign Minister, and Kornienko first deputy foreign minister throughout the latter part of the l980s. Marshal Akhromeyev was chief of the general staff, Chernyaev an adviser to Gorbachev. Shebarshin and Leonov were both KGB officials, and Arbatov was a senior adviser on relations with the US, while Gromov was commander of Soviet forces in the period up to the final withdrawal. Safronchuk was a senior diplomat concerned with Afghanistan from 1979 to 1988. US memoirs include Secretary of State George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1993) and CIA Director Robert Gates *From the Shadows* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). None of the leading Afghan participants has published their accounts, and all four of the key PDPA leaders are now dead. One exception is the Babrak Karmal interview 'Only my friends can kill me now', *Soviet Weekly*, November 21, 1991. I have also been able to interview Sultan Ali Kishtmand, prime minister for most of the l980s and Ahmad Sarwar, former Afghan ambassador to London and New Delhi and brother-in-law of the late President Najibullah: I am particularly grateful to the latter for his information on the views of Najibullah himself. A vivid account of the inner life of the PDPA in its earlier years in power is given by Raja Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan* (London: Verso, 1988).

[5] On the period 1978–79 see in particular: Raymond Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1994); Odd Arne Westad, `Prelude to Invasion: the Soviet Union and the Afghan Communists, 1978–1979', *The International History Review* 16:1, February 1994; and Westad 'Concerning the Situation in "A": new Russian evidence on the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan', *Cold War International History Bulletin*, 8–9, Woodrow Wilson Center, winter 1996/7; J.-C. Romer, 'Les mécanismes de prise de décision en URSS: le cas afghan 1978–1979', *Relations Internationales*, 85, spring 1996; Alexei Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East* (Reading, MA: Ithaca Press, 1993).

[6] Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War* (London: Frank Cass, 1994); Sarah Mendelson, 'Internal Battles and External Wars. Politics, Learning, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan', *World Politics*, April 1993 and her *Changing Course, Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Michael Dobbs, 'With Kabul Falling, Soviet Slide Began', *International Herald Tribune*, 17 November 1992; Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan 1978–1992* (London: C. Hurst, 1999).

are four broader reasons. First, for all the flood of information, there remain large gaps in the evidence, and questions about the validity of what evidence there is.[7] Secondly, there is the problem of locating the decisions themselves: as students of foreign policy analysis know only too well, the apparently secure object of enquiry, the 'decision', may turn out to be a will-of-the-wisp. In the case of Soviet policy towards Afghanistan this is also to a considerable extent true. Decisions were taken, but they were often a result of anterior, informal, processes. Moreover, in regard both to the decision to go in, and to withdraw, what initially appears to be a single decision turns out to be a set of interrelated policy determinations. Thirdly, assessment of the Afghanistan war depends to a considerable extent on the vantage-point of those making it: the story looks different when seen from Moscow, Washington or Kabul. There is, finally, the problem of identifying factors determining Soviet policy after 1979: Afghanistan was a major Soviet concern, but, given other issues in the relationship with the West and China, never the sole determinant of policy towards that country. The initial challenge is, in part, to knit the different narratives together, and not least to bring the every-fragmented but pertinent Afghan side of the story into account. The purpose of this article is, in the first place, to chart the course of this policy shift—to reconstruct, on the basis of a now quite wide range of materials, the course of this strategic reversal. A great deal has already been published on the period up to December 1979: after a brief review of this initial stage, this article will, therefore, focus on the revision of policy thereafter.

Policymaking on Afghanistan: preludes to intervention

The course of action authorised by the Politburo on 12 December 1979 included both an overt element, the despatch of a 'limited military contingent' supposedly at the request of the government of the PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan), *and* a covert element, the removal of the Afghan leader Hafizullah Amin and his replacement by Babrak Karmal. The evidence suggests that the decision to send troops into Afghanistan was taken at an informal gathering in Brezhnev's office in late November or early December 1979 attended by five leaders, Party General Secretary Brezhnev, Minister of Defence Ustinov, KGB chief Andropov, Foreign Minister Gromyko, and chief party ideologue Suslov; it was not even a decision of the whole Politburo, let alone of the full CPSU Central Committee.[8]

[7] There is, in the first place, still very little from *within* the Afghan regime itself: for the initial record see Anwar and Giustozzi, and Fred Halliday and Zahir Tanin 'The Communist Regime in Afghanistan, 1978–1992: Institutions and Conflicts', *Europe–Asia Studies*, 50:8 (1998). There also remain large gaps in the Soviet narrative: the materials up to December 1979 are patchy and, according to some sources (Sherbashin, p. 201) much of the documentation was destroyed on Andropov's orders. Materials on Politbureau discussions in the documents of Allan (ed.) for the years after 1979 are also incomplete: thus if we have records of the meeting of November 1986 we do not have those of any of the meetings of 1987–88 or of the meetings of the Politbureau commission on Afghanistan set up in December 1986. Needless to say there are also, on the Russian side, large questions about the reliability of what key actors now say about what they thought and said at the time.

[8] Dan Oberdorfer, *The Turn* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), pp. 236–7, citing the 1989 Supreme Soviet investigation and an unnamed eyewitness account; for the Supreme Soviet statement see *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 29 December 1989. See also Chernyaev, *Shest' Let*, p. 38.

What requires explanation is the shift from indirect support in 1978, to direct support, coupled with the overthrow of the PDPA leadership then in place, in late l979. After the advent of the PDPA to power in April 1978 Moscow had not intended to send combat forces into Afghanistan and had refused up to thirteen Afghan requests for such direct Soviet support. However, a number of changes in the Afghan situation and in the world as a whole had led, in the latter part of 1979, to a change of policy. Here three considerations were the most important.

On the one hand, the international situation had deteriorated: the final decision of 12 December came within hours of the confirmation by NATO of its decision to deploy cruise and Perhing II missiles. Washington was improving its relations with China and, despite US–Iranian tensions at the time, there were many in Moscow who feared that the inherent anti-communism of the mullahs would win out over their anti-Western rhetoric. There was also the Afghan situation itself: too often omitted in evaluations of Soviet policy, which stress only the strategic dimensions of Moscow's forward policy, this nonetheless acted as the main stimulus, if not complete explanation, for changes in the Soviet approach to Afghanistan. The overall situation of the regime *was* deteriorating, the regime and the party had split into rival Khalqi and Parcham factions, there *was* a genuine possibility of an anti-communist and pro-Western regime coming to power.[9] Soviet military missions in the spring and summer had reported extensively on the growing crisis in the country, although without recommending the despatch of Soviet forces.[10] At least part of the story of why the Soviet Union went in, as of why it later retreated, has to do with Moscow's evaluation of the situation within that country.

We have, moreover, to look at factors relating to the opinions, ideological and personal, of the key actors. Evidence suggests that ideological factors included the thinking of the more orthodox Soviet leaders about the construction of socialism and the direction of world politics. The PDPA was, although classified as a 'socialist-oriented' party, in effect an orthodox pro-Soviet communist party: its overthrow would constitute a blow to the credibility of the Soviet bloc as a whole. Whether prior to or subsequent to 12 December 1979 there was also support from the more ideological members of the CPSU leadership, Mikhail Suslov and the chief of the International Department of the CPSU Boris Ponomorev: for the latter, Afghanistan represented the possibility of a 'second Mongolia', a new experiment in the transition from reformist rebellion to socialist society, assisted, naturally, by Soviet economic and military support.[11] Given that relations with the West had

[9] This fear was accentuated by speculation, apparently rife within the Soviet leadership, that the Afghan leader Amin himself was a CIA agent. Amin had spent time in the US as a student, as head of an Afghan students group that was later reported to have received CIA funds. In the weeks prior to his fall it was alleged that he was planning to establish contacts with Pakistan and the US and hand the country over to them. According to one Soviet official, then stationed in the Soviet embassy in Kabul, an editorial in the *Kabul Times*, celebrating the Afghan defeat of a British military force, was taken as a warning to the Russians. A similar tone had been struck by Amin in a speech to tribal representatives ('Force of people in class struggle is conscious force', *Kabul Times*, 17 September 1979). None of this adds up to a convincing case that Amin was, in any sense, collaborating with the US.

[10] General Aleksei Yepishev, head of the Military Political Administration in April, General Ivan Pavlovsky, vice-minister of defence, Commander of Ground forces, in August–October.

[11] The original consolidation of the Mongolian people's Republic in 1921 had been carried out by Bolshevik forces. The Soviet army was permanently stationed in Mongolia thereafter, fighting the Japanese in the late 1930s and acting, later, as a guarantor against China.

already begun to deteriorate, and that the Soviet experience with more 'national' forms of Third World socialism had gone wrong, the appearance of this ultra-orthodox communist party would have been all the more welcome to the more orthodox elements in the CPSU leadership.[12]

Brezhnev, moreover, seems to have been swayed in his views by the murder of PDPA leader Taraki in early October 1979: Brezhnev had met him last in September 1979, when Taraki was returning to Kabul from the Non-Aligned Summit in Havana and, by all accounts, liked him. Brezhnev was, therefore, moved to support the removal of Amin in part because of his outrage at Taraki's murder. According to one account, Brezhnev gave his assent by muttering the words *neporyadichnii chelovek*, 'indecent person', after the informal discussion in his office with the other top leaders.[13]

The revision of policy

The course of policymaking after 1979 involves, in part, the analysis of how these earlier considerations were reversed. Evaluation of policy after December 1979 is complicated by the fact that it is not entirely clear what the goals of the l979 intervention were. On the political side, Khalqi leader Amin was removed and Babrak Karmal and his Parcham faction installed. But this policy of redirecting the party did not proceed as far as might have been anticipated. On the one hand, proclamations of a 'new course', a more moderate approach to Afghan society, were not matched in practice:[14] while social reforms were halted, the PDPA showed no interest in building political bridges to its opponents. In the view of a senior Soviet official in Kabul at the time, this was the greatest mistake of the Babrak Karmal regime.[15] On the other hand, the removal of the top Khalqis from power was not followed by a complete reorganisation of the party or the armed forces: Khalqi influence remained strong, right up to 1990, especially in the armed forces and the Ministry of the Interior, and continued both to divide the party and contribute to the inability of the PDPA to broaden its base. On the military side, the goal appears to have been not to destroy the opposition but to reduce its activities substantially, make the main cities and highways safe and seal the frontier with Pakistan. Improbable as it may seem in retrospect, the Soviet leadership appears to have

[12] By this time a considerable range of debate had opened up within the Soviet political and academic community on relations with Third World countries—see Jerry Hough, *The Struggle for the Third World* (Washington: Brookings Institute, 1985), and Margot Light (ed.), *Troubled Friendships. Moscow's Third World Ventures* (London: British Academic Press/Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1993). But while some had come to doubt the possibilities of any transition to socialism in the Third World others had drawn the conclusion, from such debacles as Ghana, Egypt and Indonesia, that only a tougher, more militarised, Third World socialism would work: see e.g. David and Marina Ottaway, *Afrocommunism* (London: Holmes and Meier, 1991).

[13] Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, p. 237.

[14] In his discussions with Gromyko in January l980 Foreign Minister Dost made much of the broadening of the regime which Babrak Karmal would introduce (Allan (ed.), *Geheimdokumente*, p. 205). This was also a theme evident to the author during a visit to Kabul in October 1980: again echoes of Kadar's Hungarian policy after 1956 could be detected.

[15] Safronchuk, 'Afganistan pri Babrake . . .', *Asiya i Afrika Segodnya* 8 (1996), p. 32.

operated with a time scale of some months or at most a year or two for all this to be achieved.[16] The central belief of the Soviet leadership was that these goals could be met by the 'limited' Soviet contingent.[17]

A major issue in subsequent Soviet rethinking therefore became whether the goal of stabilising the PDPA could be achieved more favourably with or without the Soviet forces. This rethinking was, however, stimulated above all by the evident cost, at all levels, of the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. If it was the latter issue which was to lead, in time, to the changes in policy, these changes were accompanied by re-evaluations, of greater or lesser plausibility, of the prospects of the Afghan regime itself. However, the actual abandonment of the Afghan regime to its fate came much later than the decision to withdraw. Here the comparisons with the formation of US policy on Vietnam are striking. Key 'decisions' can be identified, moments at which the leadership decided to pursue a particular course of action: but a focus on, or search for, such decisions may be misleading. In both the introduction and withdrawal of Soviet forces into Afghanistan the 'decisions' were part of a broader, incremental, process; they involved the gradual, staged, erosion of beliefs about how other, strategic, priorities could be achieved whilst avoiding the line of action finally taken. Indeed, from late 1979 until the fall of the regime in April 1992 at least eight distinct issues requiring decision can be identified: (1) to send forces into Afghanistan; (2) to seek a diplomatic solution, through the UN; (3) to go for a military defeat of the opposition; (4) to withdraw, in principle; (5) to withdraw within a time-table of nine months, starting in May 1988; (6) to withdraw without ensuring a termination of US and Pakistani aid to the opposition; (7) to resist Afghan requests, after the withdrawal, for limited re-engagement; (8) to terminate all military and economic aid to the Kabul regime. It was to take twelve years, from the decision in November-December 1979 to send in the 'limited contingent' to the US–Soviet declaration of September 1991 under which aid was cut to both sides, for the full cycle of Soviet disengagement to run its course.

Initial doubts: 1980–85

If the original decision to enter Afghanistan in force had provoked considerable doubt within the Soviet leadership, civilian and military, this unease was to grow as the months progressed. It would appear that by the latter part of 1980 two things had become clear to the Soviet leadership: first, that there could not, as was originally intended, be a quick military victory and, secondly, that the international cost, above all in relations with the US, was much higher than originally anticipated. In marked contrast to the Hungarian and Czech interventions, that into Afghanistan was followed by extensive economic pressure from the West and, again in contrast to

[16] Supreme Soviet report of 24 December, 1989, *BBC SWB*, 29 December 1989. Shebarshin, *Ruka Moskvy*, p. 204, speaks of KGB advice to the effect that the Soviet forces would stay in Afghanistan for a short period and confine themselves to defensive duties. Allan, *Geheimdokumente*, p. 305 supports this. Sultan Ali Kisthmand asked Babrak Karmal, at their first meeting after the Soviet intervention, how long he thought the Soviet forces would remain in Afghanistan. The answer: six months (interview with the author, London, 30 July 1998).

[17] Thus it was officially known as *ogranichennyi kontingent sovetskikh voisk*—OKSV—the 'Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces'.

these two earlier cases, compounded other processes of deterioration in relations between the two blocs, above all in the field of arms control. According to Safronchuk, Gromyko had come to accept the need for a diplomatic engagement with the UN in June 1980[18]. This did not, in itself, mean that Moscow was prepared to compromise, but it was part of the recognition that force alone could not resolve the issue. Kornyienko, Gromyko's deputy, states that 'By 1981 it was clear, if not to all, then to the majority of those in the Soviet leadership capable of realistic thinking that it was not possible to solve the Afghanistan position by military means'.[19] There was, moreover, a third dimension to this doubt, relating to the *political* situation in Afghanistan: leaving aside the military difficulties, Babrak Karmal had not been able substantially to broaden the base of the regime; the 'new course' was not working: he was no Kadar. A vicious circle had therefore been established, Soviet military assistance serving to alienate the population from a regime that was itself too weak to stand on its own feet: this was exactly what Kosygin, in his March 1979 discussions with Taraki, had feared would happen.

If subsequent accounts indicate that doubts were spreading within the leadership after a year or so, there were two more evident signs of this, visible at the time. The first was the agreement of the USSR to negotiations, conducted by the UN Secretary General, on Afghanistan. Gromyko had at first scorned international, and UN, concern with the 'Afghan question'.[20] It was, he argued, purely an internal matter: there was no connection between the change of government in Kabul and the Soviet intervention. But he had, apparently, come round to the idea of some international negotiations by the middle of 1980, limited to 'the situation *around* Afghanistan' (my italics), i.e. excluding discussion of the Kabul regime itself. Tentative discussions through the UN began and, after many months of delay provoked in part by Kabul's concern at the status of a negotiator, and by Pakistan's refusal to engage in direct negotiations with Kabul, the appointment of a special representative of the Secretary General enabled the first rounds of indirect negotiation to commence in April 1982.[21] This diplomatic initiative was followed by a review of Afghanistan policy conducted after the death of Brezhnev in November 1982, under the aegis of the new General Secretary Andropov. Andropov did not envisage a unilateral withdrawal: he told UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar in March 1983 that the Soviet presence in Afghanistan was not in fact in the USSR's interests, listing four reasons why this was the case.[22] According to Kornyienko however, Andropov, after visiting Afghanistan in late 1981 and early 1982, realised that there could be no military solution and hoped to put pressure on the Afghan regime to broaden its base, thus enabling a Soviet withdrawal to occur without the regime falling.[23] But this acceptance of UN talks did not touch on the two most sensitive issues as far as the US and Pakistan were concerned: the issue of a

[18] Safronchuk 'Afganistan pri Babrake . . .', *Asiya i Afrika Segodnya* 10/96, p. 68.

[19] Kornienko in Akhromeyev and Kornienko *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata*, p. 47. Garthoff (*Detente and Confrontation*, p. 1092) reports some exploratory messages from Moscow about a diplomatic solution in the early part of 1980: these latter seem, however, to have been focused above all on ways of getting an alleviation of US sanctions.

[20] Allan (ed.), *Geheimdokumente*, pp. 218–220.

[21] Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 81.

[22] Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 124, Akhromeyev and Kornienko, *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata*, p. 48.

[23] Kornienko in Akhromeyev and Kornienko, *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata*, p. 48.

timetable for Soviet withdrawal, and the composition of the Kabul regime itself. It was only in late l987 that Moscow agreed to discuss the former, and only in 1988, after the signing of the Geneva accords on the international dimensions of the Afghan crisis, that it became possible for discussions, via the UN, to begin on a congruent internal settlement.[24]

The extent of this rethinking of policy in the period up to 1985 must, however, be questioned on other grounds, these relating *inter alia* to the often posed question of what might have happened had Andropov lived. Prior to the December 1979 decision, Andropov may have had his doubts about a purely military solution, but he was, after all, one of the small group who took the decision to intervene in the first place. As his record in Hungary showed, he was not someone to balk at the kind of dual use of Soviet forces, both supporting a regime *and* removing the incumbent leader, seen in Afghanistan.[25] One KGB source, who accompanied Andropov on his April 1982 visit to Kabul, states that the conclusion his chief came to then was that an all-out effort to secure a military victory should be made, in the course of that year.[26]

Moreover, while conscious of the costs of the Afghan intervention, as enumerated to Perez de Cuellar in March 1983, he, and the subsequent leadership, remained prisoners of certain illusions that were to become increasingly evident as time went by. On the one hand, they believed that a policy of broadening the Afghan regime's basis of support, a 'new course' in another form, could still succeed. At the same time, they believed that it would be possible to reach an agreement with the supporters of the opposition, Pakistan and the US, on a cessation of aid to the opposition in return for a withdrawal of Soviet forces: such, after all, was the logic of the UN peace process. The role of these two illusions, in both facilitating a rethink of Soviet policy and then inhibiting the speedy implementation of a withdrawal, was to become evident when Gorbachev came to power, in March 1985.

All of this was to come to nothing in the short run, however, as by the late summer of 1983 circumstances had changed: neither the US nor Pakistan were interested in a compromise solution, Andropov was ailing, and unable or unwilling to push through a revision of policy on Afghanistan, and the international situation dramatically worsened, first with the shooting down by the Soviet air force of the Korean airliner on 1 September 1983 and then with the alarm that gripped the Soviet leadership later in that year after the breakdown in arms control negotiations with the US, and fears concerning a possible US 'first strike' missile attack. The last months of Andropov and the period of Chernenko's leadership (February 1984–March 1985) saw no political or diplomatic movement on Afghanistan, but rather an intensification of military activities in the country itself. The line remained one of seeking a 'military' victory. This can be explained by what remained the decisive factor in the making of Soviet policy on Afghanistan, namely the balance of forces within the top leadership itself:[27] it was to take time for a leader fit and decisive enough to come to power willing to envisage a radically new policy, and it was to

[24] Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 368. See Safronchuk, *passim*, for accounts of these talks from the Soviet end, and of difficulties with the Kabul government.

[25] According to some accounts, Andropov came to favour an intervention in late 1979 after the murder of Taraki. See also Arbatov, pp. 199–200 and Mendelson, *Explaining Change*, pp. 162–6.

[26] Shebarshin, *Ruka Moskvy*, pp. 182–4.

[27] Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 94.

take even longer, until April 1988 to be precise, for this new leader to be able to put his policy through and win the final support of the Politburo as a whole. Alexander Yakovlev, an influential Gorbachev adviser, was to say that it took four years for the internal divisions within the Soviet leadership on an Afghan withdrawal to be resolved:[28] whilst this isolates Soviet policy-making as the main or sole variable, it does, rightly, draw attention to the degree of factionalism, compounded by strategic illusions, within the Soviet leadership.

Gorbachev and the Soviet withdrawal 1985–89

The broad outline of Gorbachev's policy on Afghanistan would suggest that he acted clearly and decisively to remove Soviet combat forces from Afghanistan, realising the miscalculations of the Brezhnev leadership and seeking to limit the damage to Soviet interests at home and internationally. We do not know what he thought, or indeed knew, about the Afghan war prior to coming to office in March 1985: presumably, as a full member of the Politburo, he would have had access both to secret Soviet evaluations and to the Western press. Within two months of coming into office, however, he had made clear to confidantes, and to the Politburo, his view that the USSR should prepare to withdraw his troops.[29] By late l985 he had confronted an astounded Babrak Karmal with the news that the USSR would be withdrawing its troops and urged on the Afghan leader a policy of broadening the social and political base of the regime. 'Give up all ideas of socialism' he is reported to have told Karmal.[30] At a meeting of the Politburo on 17 November 1985 Gorbachev said that he had told Karmal on the previous day that Soviet forces would be out 'by the summer of 1986'. A clear signal of the shift was given at the 27th CPSU Congress in February 1986 when Gorbachev referred to the Afghan war as 'a bleeding wound'.

It took, however, more than two and a half years from that meeting with Karmal for the Soviet withdrawal to begin. Only a token pullout occurred in the latter part of 1986 and the efforts of the Soviet leadership in that and the subsequent year went into engineering another major change in the Afghan political leadership. Babrak Karmal was now judged to be unable to carry through the changes needed in the regime, and was replaced as PDPA leader in May 1986 by Najib, the head of the Afghan equivalent of the KGB and a protégé of Deputy KGB director Kryuchkov.[31] The replacement of Babrak Karmal did not, however, produce any significant changes in Afghanistan, and the regime remained committed, with the support of at least some of the Soviet military and security forces, to a defeat of the resistance. The period 1985–6 saw intensified military activity: this must have been based on

[28] Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, p. 19.
[29] Chernyaev *Shest' Let*, pp. 38–39.
[30] Ibid., p. 58.
[31] A number of candidates are believed to have been considered, amongst them Sultan Ali Kishtmand, prime minister, Suleiman Laiq, Minister of Tribal affairs, and Shah Mohammad Dost, foreign minister. But Najib, in addition to his having control of the security services, was also a Pashtun, with links to some of the main tribes opposing the regime. According to Kishtmand, he turned the offer down both because he was not a Pashtun, and because his competence lay in the economic field. The new leader's first, and only, name was Najibullah, and he was generaly known as 'Najib'. The latter term is generally used here.

plans drawn up under Chernenko, and which Gorbachev, in his initial precarious position, was probably unable to reverse. But it may also be that he was willing to give the military solution one last chance. Thus at an extended meeting of the Politburo, the first recorded on Afghanistan for a year, held in November 1986, Gorbachev expressed his impatience: 'In October of last year at a meeting of the Politburo we established the line for the resolution of the Afghanistan question. The goal that we set ourselves was to accelerate the withdrawal of our troops from Afghanistan and at the same time to ensure a friendly Afghanistan. It was laid down that this would be realised through a combination of military and political means. But there has been no progress in any of these directions. The strengthening of the military positions of the Afghan government have not taken place'.[32] Other speakers spoke in a similar vein. At this meeting it was nonetheless agreed that the Soviet forces would be out within two years. If there was a key decision, then this was it.[33] Najib, who had never visited the Soviet capital, and on whom Gorbachev and others obviously placed great hopes, would be summoned to Moscow for discussions.[34] The official meeting between the Soviet and Afghan delegations took place in the Kremlin on 12 December.[35]

The changes in tone in Moscow, and in personnel in Kabul, did not achieve the results intended. In the first place, there was opposition both from within the Afghan leadership and in Moscow to this policy. On the Afghan side, Najib, although installed by Moscow, resisted pressure to share power with other political forces: Gorbachev, at least, would have preferred the presidency of the Afghan republic to be in the hands of a representative of another political force, or for Najib to be elected with the support of several parties. This was impressed on Najib when he visited Moscow for the second time in July 1987.[36] In the end, Najib remained president, and elected by the PDPA alone.[37] In addition, although 'national reconciliation' was proclaimed, doubts soon began to be expressed about how energetically Najib was really pursuing it: the main change he instituted from 1986 was a policy of local truces with tribal and guerrilla leaders, a process that to some extent enabled him to enhance his power, and led to a proliferation of parallel security organisations and militias under his personal control.[38] Najib was using Soviet aid to consolidate his own position and to play for time, manoeuvring and dragging his feet very much as his predecessors Taraki, Amin and Babrak had done before.

On the Soviet side there were also differences of opinion, on this as on other matters. While he appears to have won general support for the idea that the 1979 invasion was a mistake, Gorbachev had not so consolidated his overall position within the party that he could simply push through an immediate withdrawal—even

[32] Allan (ed.), *Gekeimdokumente*, p. 448.

[33] Ibid., p. 450.

[34] Ibid., pp. 436–450ff. gives the text of the meeting of the Politburo of 13 November 1986. On Najib's visit see Akhromeyev and Kornienko, *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata*, p. 149.

[35] Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, p. 240. One Soviet diplomat who was present at the meeting between Gorbachev and Najib reported that the Soviet leader spoke in blunt terms to his Afghan interlocutor, and that the latter gave the impression of accepting this, without actually doing so: 'He was a good actor', the diplomat said. For public statements at the time see *Le Monde*, 14–15 December 1986.

[36] 'M. Najibullah réaffirme à Moscou la prééminence du PC afghan dans l'hypothèse d'un partage du pouvoir', *Le Monde*, 23 July 1987; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 250.

[37] Akhromeyev and Kornienko, pp. 149–150.

[38] The work of Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society*, has extensively documented this process. See also Fred Halliday and Zahir Tanin, 'The Communist Regime in Afghanistan: 1978–1992'.

had he wanted to. His initial instinct, in mid-1985, had been to intensify Soviet military activity as a necessary prelude to withdrawal. Much of the responsibility for running the Afghan regime had fallen to the KGB under Deputy Director Kryuchkov: he was a regular visitor to Kabul and Najib was regarded as his protégé.[39] In this he was joined, in the period 1986–87, by the initially unlikely ally of the Soviet foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze. While seen in the West as a pliant and undogmatic person, if not indeed an amiable one, Shevarndnadze was, it appears, enough of a Soviet veteran to experience loyalty to the 'comrades' in Kabul: this was, it seems, the one issue on which he disagreed with Gorbachev.[40] He insisted that the political conditions had to be right.[41] He believed Moscow should back Najib, at the expense of political broadening and was later to express regret at the policy which Moscow had to pursue.[42] Others agreed that withdrawal was needed but stressed that it could only happen when the political circumstances were right—i.e. when a broader based regime had been created. Gorbachev himself seems to have swayed between these two factors, preoccupied by other concerns. To these obstacles internal to the Soviet bloc system was added a third: while calling for a Soviet withdrawal, neither Pakistan nor the US were making it easy for Moscow to do so. In 1984 the Reagan administration secretly altered its policy on Afghanistan, to one of aiding the guerrillas to fight, to the pursuit of victory over the Soviet Union. There was an escalation in military supplies in the latter part of 1986, when the first Stinger ground-to-air missiles were deployed, and one faction at least in Washington, known as the 'bleeders', favoured keeping the Soviet forces in Afghanistan as long as possible in order to impose the highest price possible on the USSR. The negotiations under UN auspices, revived with Gorbachev's accession to office, and the now ongoing US–Soviet discussions on 'regional issues', did not, therefore, lead to a speedy agreement on Soviet withdrawal. For its part, Moscow refused to give a date, or a timetable, for withdrawal until it felt that the conditions, within Afghanistan and internationally, were met.

For twelve months after the Politburo meeting of 13 November 1986 and the removal of Babrak Karmal virtually nothing happened.[43] Another year was

[39] Shebarshin, *Ruka Moskvy*, pp. 206–13. Karmal also reports that it was Kryuchkov who came to see him and tell him to resign. 'Now, comrade Karmal, you should be very careful. Your enemies may kill you'. 'No' I replied. 'Only my friends can kill me now'. *Soviet Weekly*, 21 November 1991.

[40] According to Sergei Tarasenko, an adviser to Shevardnadze, the latter pleaded with Gorbachev not to accept the US altering of conditions and threatened at one point to resign (information from Arne Westad).

[41] Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 269; Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs*, pp. 68–70; Chernyaev, *Shest' Let*, pp. 269–73; Carolyn Ekedahl and Melvin Goodman, *The Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1997). pp. 186–7. Yuri Gankosvky was later to accuse Shevardnadze of delaying the Soviet withdrawal 'In Afghan Question Shevardnadze Played Into Americans' Hands', *Pravda* cited in Russian Press Digest, RUSSICA Information Inc., 24 July 1993.

[42] According to a Soviet diplomat present at the time, Shevardnadze addressed the staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow, a few days before his resignation on 20 December 1990, and expressed his sadness at having had to sign the Geneva accords.

[43] Following the November 1986 Politburo decision on Afghanistan a party commission was set up to formulate policy. The commission included: Shevardnadze, Defence Minister Yazov, KGB chief Kryuchkov, Ambassador Dobrynin, now head of the CPSU International Department, Deputy Prime Minister Nikolai Talyzin, and the Chairman of the State Committee for Economic Relations Konstantin Matushev (Ekedahl and Goodman, *The Wars*, p. 308, n. 8). The secretary to the commission was the Persian-speaking diplomat, and minister councillor at the Kabul embassy from 1984 to 1986, Nikolai Kozyrev.

therefore lost. In Moscow Gorbachev was able to consolidate his overall position by expanding the Politburo in June 1987 and had two further meetings with Najib (July, November 1987). In Kabul, Najib had replaced Karmal as president and proclaimed his policy of 'national reconciliation'. But there was no political breakthrough in the country; the three-way factional dispute continued in Moscow; the negotiations with the West got nowhere either. The Politburo met several times in 1987–8 to discuss Afghanistan. It was in the last months of 1987 that the deadlock was broken. Something appears to have moved after Najib met Gorbachev in Moscow in July. In September 1987 Shevardnadze told Schultz that the USSR had taken the decision to withdraw all forces, by the end of 1988.[44] The decisive moment came in the context of Gorbachev's visit to Washington in December.[45] For the first time Gorbachev told the US that Moscow was willing to pull out, and on 8 February 1988 he addressed the Soviet people, the first such statement on Afghanistan since Brezhnev's justification of the intervention in January 1980. A date was now fixed both for the start of the Soviet withdrawal, 15 May, and for its conclusion, 15 February 1989. As a result the Geneva accords were signed under UN auspices in April, and the Soviet forces began to withdraw a month later. Their redeployment was conducted in two broad phases, in the first phase, up to the end of the summer, withdrawing from the southern areas of the country, then, from October 1988 to February 1989 leaving the major cities and the northern region.

The period that it took Gorbachev to get Soviet forces out of Afghanistan reflected the combination of at least four different kinds of difficulty and obstruction: the Soviet Union resisted departing, and specifying a timetable for doing so, in the hope that it could secure a friendly regime in Kabul; the US and Pakistan delayed because they thought they could oust the Kabul regime. The Soviet leadership was itself divided about how best to support the Kabul government and on the trade-offs between withdrawal from Afghanistan, or the lack of it, and negotiations with the West on nuclear missiles; and for its part, the PDPA leadership, seemingly happy to collaborate with Moscow, played their own delaying game, in liaison with some groups within the Soviet leadership itself. In the end, it appears that it was Gorbachev himself who, building on the Politburo discussion of November 1986, took further decisions, first on fixing a date (i.e. some time before February 1988) and then on agreeing to go ahead without an agreement from the US to cease arms supplies (i.e. some time before April 1988): as much as with the decision to go in, in 1979, those of 1987–88 were taken on an informal basis, and then ratified by, and imposed on, a divided leadership.[46] Significantly, while there was general acquiescence, the actual date for withdrawal was not cleared with the rest of the Soviet leadership: Gorbachev wrote it in himself, and then announced it in his February 1988 speech.[47] Asked in 1991 who made the final decision, Alexander Yakovlev was categorical: 'Mikhail Sergeyevich—of course he had the final say. Enough hesitation, he said, the troops must be withdrawn—that's all there is to it. They must be withdrawn'.[48]

[44] Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, pp. 234–6.
[45] Kornienko in Akhromeyev and Kornienko, *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata*, pp. 160–1.
[46] Alexander Yakovlev, interview on Central Television, *BBC SWB*, 31 December 1991; Kornienko, *Glazami*, p. 161.
[47] Akhromeyev and Kornienko, *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata*, p. 161.
[48] BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts*, 31 December 1991.

Dilemmas of withdrawal 1989–92

The Soviet decision, formalised in the February 1988 timetable announcement, was not however the end of the debate on the Afghanistan question. From the November 1986 Politburo meeting onwards there had been formal agreement on withdrawal, but this left much uncertain, and this uncertainty was to last not just through l987 but beyond the February 1988 announcement. In the first place, it had long been the assumption of Soviet policy that withdrawal would be coupled with the guaranteeing of a neutral status for Afghanistan, that, in other words, an anti-Soviet regime would not come to power. What this meant in practice was that the *mujahidin* guerrillas did not accede to power, or that, if they did, it was in alliance with the PDPA: hence the policy of national reconciliation.[49] An important means of ensuring this was the cut-off in US aid. It had always been assumed by Moscow that once Soviet forces pulled out US aid would cease: this was enshrined in the draft of the UN accords that had been '95% ready' since 1983. But as the prospect of Soviet withdrawal neared, US policy changed: following the Washington summit of December 1987, Secretary of State George Shultz wrote to Shevardnadze indicating that the US would continue arms supplies as long as the USSR armed the Kabul regime.[50] When Shevardnadze visited Washington in March 1988, he pleaded with Shultz to stop arms supplies to the *mujahidin* but in vain.[51] There was no US agreement on a 'neutral, friendly' Afghanistan and, so Washington hoped, the *mujahidin* would come to power. This represented a shock for the Soviet leadership and a slap in the face for Gorbachev's whole policy: but by that time there was nothing the Soviet leader could do about it, even had he wanted to.

According to Dobrynin, Gorbachev felt 'betrayed' by the US decision to continue arms supplies to the *mujahidin*: he had reached agreement with Reagan on this in the December 1987 summit, and this was the basis on which he had negotiated with Najib and made his 8 February announcement to the Soviet people.[52] Yet like so many other setbacks he seems to have taken it on the chin: he is not on record, at the time or in material subsequently released, as having overtly criticised the US decision. In the end, he was powerless to do anything—he could not go back on the withdrawal decision. Moreover, the Soviet leader was preoccupied at that time with getting an agreement with the US on removing INFs from Europe, and was not, it would seem, prepared to sacrifice this for the sake of Afghanistan.[53] As in the context of the December 1979 decision to send troops in, so now policy on Afghanistan was shaped by Soviet concerns about the arms race, and INF deployment in particular. There was no constituency within the Soviet leadership, or system, for a continued Soviet troop presence. Moscow had, in effect, to accept the US rewriting of the agreement, even though this contradicted the whole spirit of the Soviet rethink over the past three years. Sheverdnadze, Shultz reports, was visibly

[49] Chernyaev, *Shest Let*, p. 121.
[50] Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 261.
[51] Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, pp. 278–80; Pavel Palazchenko, *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 88–91.
[52] Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 1089. See Shultz, pp. 1086–94 and Cordovez and Harrison, pp. 260–6 for the shift in US policy.
[53] Cordovez and Harrison, p. 249, citing first deputy foreign minister Yuli Vorontsov.

disturbed by the US decision when it was communicated to him in March,[54] but when the Shultz letter was read out to the Politburo, no-one dissented.[55] On 3 April Shevardnadze flew to Kabul to inform Najibullah of US policy. They then flew to Tashkent to meet Gorbachev. A stormy meeting followed: Gorbachev pressed Najibullah into agreeing to sign, and the Afghan leader then pressed his representative in Geneva itself, who had up to then refused to sign, to assent.[56] Kabul, and Moscow, had to accept the US *volte-face*. In the event, Moscow continued to provide substantial military support to Kabul for another two years, enabling it to survive *mujahidin* attacks on provincial towns, and a potentially lethal coup attempt from within, by Minister of Defense Shahnawaz Tanai, in February 1990. It was only after the failed Moscow coup of August 1991 that Soviet aid ceased, thereby precipitating an internal crisis for the Najib regime. Growing factionalism within, exacerbated by the return of Babrak Karmal from Moscow in July 1991, and the disaffection of Uzbek militias in the north, led to the final disintegration and collapse of the regime in April 1992.[57]

Dimensions of policy formation

The history of Soviet policy towards Afghanistan may, initially, be seen as involving two major decisions, that of sending in combat troops, in December 1979, and that of withdrawing them, a process concluded in February 1989. Yet even if the decision to go into Afghanistan appears reasonably clear, having been taken on 12 December 1979, that to withdraw is much less identifiable, since the Politburo took a range of decisions from October 1985 through to the end of 1988, concerning the exploration of withdrawal, the decision to do so, and, not insignificantly, the decision not to reverse the withdrawal process. It is evident, moreover, that neither of these decisions, not even the apparently more clearly identifiable one of 12 December 1979, can be isolated from a wider context of policymaking preceding each of these two events, and from the place of Afghanistan in the broader perspective of Soviet leaderships in the 1970s and 1980s. To understand how Soviet policy on Afghanistan was made it is better to look not at the decisions alone, but rather at dimensions of foreign policymaking.

In each dimension it is possible to identify a set of understandings underlying each policy, and to show how each was challenged by the course of events itself. The first was that of the situation within the USSR and the Soviet bloc as a whole. By the mid-1980s the arguments in favour of maintaining Soviet forces in Afghanistan were not being made with any degree of confidence. The Soviet army had had its

[54] Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 1090.
[55] Chernyaev, *Shest' Let*, pp. 192–3.
[56] According to one source the Soviet representative Yuli Vorontsov drove Abdul Wakil around Geneva in a car for five hours, trying to persuade him to agree. But Abdul Wakil refused, 'as an Afghan', mentioning in particular the provisions on mutual recognition of the frontier with Pakistan.
[57] Najib himself believed that Babrak's return was part of an agreement between the KGB and the CIA to divide and destroy the regime (communication from Ahmad Sarwar). Shebarshin (*Ruka Moskvy*, p. 206) is at pains to deny this. For a general analaysis of Soviet policy between 1989 and the end of 1991 see Richard Weitz, 'Moscow's Endgame in Afghanistan', *Conflict Quarterly* (Winter 1992).

combat experience, but it had been of a most unsatisfactory kind.[58] Opposition to the war was widespread, if beneath the surface, and there was little support for the 'internationalist duty' in a country few Soviet citizens cared about.[59] Evidence suggests that whatever else he was criticised for, Gorbachev received popular credit for pulling Soviet forces out of Afghanistan.[60] The economic cost to the USSR was considerable. As for the demonstration effects on bloc cohesion, events in the mid-1980s had taken on a dynamic of their own with the search for detente in Europe, such that what happened in Afghanistan was of much less importance. The one direct consequence of the Afghan intervention may, originally, have been that it prevented, or contributed to preventing, a Soviet intervention in Poland in December 1980 or December 1981, i.e. made it less, rather than more, possible for the Soviet leadership to control eastern Europe.[61]

On the ideological front, the impact of the Afghan war was diffuse, compounding a series of shifts in Soviet attitudes, at both leadership and popular levels, that were to culminate in the collapse of the system itself. Three such elements of ideological disillusion and, more forcefully, delegitimisation can be mentioned: one was that of Soviet military power, the second that of internationalism, the third that of the advance of socialism.

For the first time since World War II Soviet armed forces faced a serious combat challenge, and failed to overcome it. The costs of 'internationalism' turned out to be too high, especially as the people in whose name this 'duty' was being performed seemed to care little for it. The revision of attitudes to Third World socialism had been in train for some time, going back at least to the failure to hold Egypt in the early 1970s: Afghanistan reinforced this scepticism, and in so doing further undermined the whole idea of a transition to socialism on which the Soviet system rested.[62] By the latter part of the 1980s top Soviet officials were emphasising that what had occurred in April 1978 was not a revolution but a coup.[63]

The third dimension of policymaking, the international and strategic, i.e. Soviet–US, both contributed to the decision to invade and was a major factor in the making of post-1985 policy: this was true in the sense that Moscow did not want to pay the price in relations with the US which Afghanistan imposed on it, and in the sense that, in the 1985–88 period, Moscow made further concessions to Washington, culminating in the acceptance of 'positive symmetry'. What this entailed in practice was that the whole basis on which the Soviet leadership had been prepared to begin the reformulation of Afghan policy was negated.

Fourthly, there was the situation inside Afghanistan itself: if the Soviet intervention had both military and political purposes, it had become evident by the early 1980s that neither were being achieved. But the hope remained for some time

[58] For a sombre overall evaluation see Akhromeyev in Akhromeyev and Kornienko *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata*, pp. 166–70. See also Galeotti, *Afghanistan* and Mark Urban, *War in Afghanistan* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

[59] Chernyaev, *Shest' Let*, pp. 37–8.

[60] Communication from Jonathan Steele, at that time *Guardian* correspondent in Moscow.

[61] On the Soviet decision not to go into Poland in December 1980 and again in December 1981 see Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 161–9, 233–9. On 1981, *Le Monde*, 30 August 1993. In their memoirs both Jimmy Carter and Zbignew Brzezinski argued that US pressure on Soviet forces in Afghanistan prevented an intervention in Poland.

[62] Jerry Hough, *The Struggle for the Third World*, Margot Light (ed.), *Troubled Friendships,* Fred Halliday, *Cold War, Third World* (Hutchinson/Radius: London, 1989).

[63] Akhromeyev and Kornienko, *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata*, p. 171.

that a watered-down version of these goals could be attained, through the military and political transformation of the Kabul regime: this was the reason for the switch from Babrak to Najib in 1986. Najib was, indeed, partly successful, but not successful enough; he showed, moreover, that he could manipulate divisions inside the Soviet leadership and so delay agreement on the Soviet pullout until adequate guarantees were provided.[64] In the end the Soviet leadership decided to withdraw its forces with a mixed view of the Afghan situation. On the one hand it concluded, with exasperation, that Moscow had done all it could for the Afghans and that it was not worth continuing to back them; on the other Moscow worked hard, above all through military supplies, to keep the regime in power. Until the very last minute it was not, however, certain that Kabul would sign the Geneva Accords.

Finally, as in the 1979 decisions, so from 1985 onwards, personal factors played a role; Gorbachev himself showed little personal interest in Afghanistan—he never went there, and appears to have regarded the war throughout as an embarrassment he wanted Moscow to be rid of.[65] Yet he could not simply push this policy through: the military, while accepting in principle the need for withdrawal, seem, through their time in Afghanistan, to have developed a commitment to sustaining the regime—even after withdrawal began in 1988 requests for further assistance were coming in; the KGB had become heavily involved in Kabul politics and Krychkov pushed hard for continued aid to Najib; the surprise was, however, that Shevardnadze, for all his belief in detente with the US, played a similar role. The pushing forward of the actual deadline involved, therefore, significant shifts within Moscow politics.

Conclusion

Not surprisingly, explanations of Soviet policymaking in Afghanistan reflect distinct theoretical, and sometimes political concerns. Critics from within the former USSR who now wish to reject the Soviet system as a whole, cite Afghanistan as an example of the dictatorial, often corrupt, policies of the leadership: Afghanistan has become one among several symbols of post-Soviet disillusion.[66] By contrast, former officials of the Soviet party and state ascribe failure in Afghanistan to a variety of factors including the misapplication of Marxist-Leninist principles, the neglect of objective factors, 'adventurism', and a 'failure to study' the specificities of the Afghan situation.[67] Outside the former USSR other variations of explanation can be observed. For more conservative critics of the Soviet system, the withdrawal from Afghanistan is seen as a triumph of Western military pressure, above all as a result of the despatch of Stinger missiles in 1986. By contrast, liberal critics tend to assimilate the Soviet failure in Afghanistan with that of the US in Vietnam, drawing a parallel as to the limits of military power in general. An alternative, liberal, explana-

[64] According to Ahmad Sarwar, Najib had come to the conclusion by 1987 that there could be no solution as long as Soviet forces remained.

[65] Not only did Gorbachev never, so far as we know, visit Afghanistan, but he omits it almost entirely from his, in most other respects, very extensive memoirs.

[66] Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, ch. 9, 'The War and Politics: Consequences'.

[67] The word *avantyura*, meaning a dangerous military venture, was frequently used in this context.

tion ascribes change within the USSR as a whole, and the change of policy on Afghanistan in particular, to shifts within the Soviet elite itself, in particular to changes in policy-related advice and ideas, tied to the greater openness of the Soviet leadership to the specialist communities.[68]

All of these explanations have, however, a risk of partiality about them, in that they seek to insulate the process of decision-making from two other, vital, extra-Soviet contexts—the situation within Afghanistan and within the Afghan communist regime, and the overall state of US–Soviet relations. Any history of Soviet policy and practice on Afghanistan has to operate on three levels—the Soviet, the Afghan, and the international.

With hindsight, assessment of the role of Afghanistan in the fall of the Soviet system has to rely on a broad, qualitative, answer: accepting that all major events have multiple causes, one need not look for one cause of the fall of the USSR. What one can say is that beyond broad, long-term and structural factors, such as economic performance, the loss of ideological conviction, social and generational change, certain particular events in the 1980s contributed to accentuating the strains within the Soviet system. Some were individual events—the success, by no means pre-ordained, of Gorbachev in his bid for the party leadership in March 1985, the Chernobyl explosion of April 1986, and the Matthias Rust plane landing in Red Square in May 1987. Others were more extended: the widening of the US military-technological gap being one, and Afghanistan being the other. In terms of international events, the key development in the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the USSR was the decision to cease using force to maintain the regimes in eastern Europe.[69] Had the Afghanistan intervention occurred in an otherwise more solid political and strategic context the USSR could have sustained it indefinitely: let us not forget that more than twice as many Soviet soldiers died each year in peacetime incidents as died annually in the Afghan war. As it happened, the gradual and then accelerated collapse of the system in the 1980s turned Afghanistan both into a strategic withdrawal, and into an object of controversy within the cascade of Soviet collapse itself.[70]

[68] This is, in particular, the argument of Sara Mendelson ('Internal Battles and External Wars'). Mendelson ably reconstructs thinking within the Soviet political and policy research elites, but there are some problems with her analysis, as an overall explanation of how the withdrawal came about. First, it tends to overstate the autonomy of experts—leaders listen to, and promote, experts who suit their own predilections; there were plenty of 'experts' who endorsed the 1979 decision to go in. Secondly, Mendelson rather conflates experts *on Afghanistan* with broader experts on East–West relations: it was, if anything, the latter who, not wishing to prejudice East–West relations because of Afghanistan, played the main role *vis-à-vis* Aghan policy. Thirdly, the main factor leading to a revision of Soviet policy was history itself, the realisation that they could not win. Gorbachev himself allowed the military to have a go at escalation and victory in 1985–6, as he did in other parts of the Third World.

[69] This change too allows of no easy identification of a 'decision': the announcement of what came to be known as the 'Sinatra Doctrine' was made in a casual remark by a Soviet press spokesman in 1988. The key moment when it became real was in the partially free Polish elections of June 1989.

[70] For a judicious overview of this subject, see Michael Cox (ed.), *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse. Sovietly, the Death of Communism and the New Russia* (London: Pinter, 1998). Significantly, this volumes contains but one mention (pp. 33–4) of the place of Afghanistan in the Soviet collapse. For more general studies that set Afghanistan in the overall context of Soviet policymaking, see Jonathan Steele, *Eternal Russia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) and Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (London: OUP, 1996). For an analysis covering some of the same ground as this article, but received only after its completion, Pierre Allan and Dieter Klay, *Zwischen Bürokratie und Ideologie: Moskaus Afghanistankonflikt*. Eurschied ungstozesse in Moskaus Afghanistan Iemflles (Bern: Paul Haupt, 1999).