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Afghanistan: The Contemporary Consequences of Imperialism

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Abstract

A study into the connections between contemporary issues in Afghanistan and the Cold War imperialism of both Soviet Russia and the United States of America, this essay summarizes the formal military engagement that began between the USSR in December of 1979 and the informal United States sponsored training of the mujahideen that began shortly thereafter. This essay ultimately studies the modern implications of American and Russian military interventionism and imperialism, as well as the ways in which ill-conceived military interference in regional conflicts by other nation states can have devastating impacts on civilian populations.

Keywords: Cold War, Imperialism, Afghanistan, USSR, United States, Mujahideen.

Afghanistan is one of the world's least developed nations, suffering from severe economic disenfranchisement and a great degree of internal unrest. While much of this can be attributed to the 2001 invasion of the nation carried out by U.S forces, the influence of Cold War imperialist legacies is also largely to blame for the current problems. In 1978, the People's Democratic Republic of Afghanistan took power, leading to a violent civil war which impacted nearly all elements of civilian life. However, what could and should have been a regional conflict quickly turned into an international affair, as the PDPA's ties with the USSR led to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December of 1979. This in turn was countered by the U.S funding the mujahideen and other factions opposed to the Communist government. Afghanistan's struggles to find an appropriate government were used by both of the Cold War superpowers as a means by which to extend their respective spheres of influence, and the devastation wreaked by foreign interference remains central to the suffering of the Afghan people today. Today, the nation of Afghanistan owes nearly all of its problems to interference on behalf of the United States and Soviet Russia. Afghanistan is, in and of itself, a testament to the long term devastation that so often stems from ill-advised imperialist war mongering.

Prior to the outright military intervention by the Soviets, the economic and political situations of Afghanistan were already deeply unstable following the Saur Coup of 1978. The late 1970's overthrow of President Mohammad Daoud Khan thrust what had previously been a relatively conservative nation

into the midst of dramatic social and economic upheavals, leading to many Afghan civilians feeling hostile towards the new regime of the PDPA (Saikal 2006, 352). While previous reformations had been attempted by Afghan leaders, such as King Amanullah Khan, who led notable efforts in regards to women's rights to education, the government of King Zahir Shah and Mohammed Daoud Khan had held a far more moderate position, and in many of the more rural areas of Afghanistan, ultra-religious and conservative values remained the norm (Misdaq 2006, 73-95). Following the PDPA's rise to power, dramatic social and cultural reforms were immediately enacted, giving little thought to the more religious values of many elites, and alienating large portions of the Afghan population with the state-enforced attitudes that sought to eradicate a great deal of traditional Islamic views. Some of the PDPA's goals, such as fighting illiteracy and supporting women's equality, are quite admirable from a Western point of view, but the speed with which the PDPA-led modernization took place created a great deal of open hostility. The new social changes were often perceived as being anti-Islam, and as far too heavily Western. The Khan government had also received a great deal of foreign aid from both the U.S and the USSR, allowing for dramatic improvements in infrastructure and a general economic boost. However, the new regime relied solely Communist aid, leading many to question the economic viability. Notably, the traditional view of many historians regarding the PDPA, that it largely collapsed from within and was eventually destroyed due to political infighting, largely ignores the Afghan people as a whole, erasing the role played on the ground by local people (Christia 2012). The alienation and hostility that was borne from overly hasty changes on behalf of the PDPA, changes that ignored many of the ideals that were enshrined in Afghanistan and reflected centuries of religious and cultural values, were in themselves forces that led to much of the disarray in Afghanistan today. The PDPA, and therefore to some degree the Soviet, policies that were implemented in the wake of the Saur Revolution ignored the voices of the Afghan people, and in many ways were doomed to fail due to the sheer hubris that came from ignoring the people's right to have a government that reflected their values.

The Soviet invasion of late 1979 occurred after Soviet financial support and military advisors proved to be insufficient for the PDPA to retain control (Hilali 2005, 673-716). Hafizullah Amin, who had deposed Nur Mohammad Taraki in September to become the new Afghan president, was overthrown in a Soviet-led coup in December, to be replaced by Babrak Karmal, who represented one of the rival factions within the PDPA (Westad, 2015, 310-322). Karmal was far more sympathetic to the USSR, and the Soviets capitalized on the infighting that had nearly torn apart the PDPA in order to place him in power. However, wide unrest continued across the country, as PDPA factions fought among themselves and as anti-Communist Islamic forces sought to eradicate the PDPA entirely. The Soviet military was drawn into urban warfare, fighting various enemies at once and causing a great deal of destruction within various key strategic regions. Civilians, often mistakenly assumed to be combatants by Soviet forces, were frequently killed, or suffered severe injuries from landmines. Estimates vary widely about the civilian death toll, with there being anywhere between 500,000 and 2 million Afghan non-combatants casualties upon the conclusion of the fighting (Khalidi 1991, 101-126). Widespread destruction engulfed the nation, with both insurgents and Soviets alike relying heavily on the use of landmines. The near-annihilation of various Afghan cities was the norm. Soviet strategy, often misinformed by the KGB, could not measure up to the insurgency led by the mujahideen; the Soviets were widely known to have experienced extremely large losses of personnel. Within the broader framework of the global Cold War, however, the impact of admitting military weakness was substantial, which in turn meant that the Soviet Union remained in Afghanistan for far longer than was actually viable. The USSR, already experiencing widespread internal unrest by the mid-1980's, continued to attempt to secure their southern border with Afghanistan by supporting the PDPA until 1989, when the financial, social, and human costs of the war finally proved too much. Soviet forces pulled out entirely and the focus turned largely towards conflicts

at home. Meanwhile, Afghanistan was in ruins, and the limited Soviet support that continued until the USSR's dissolution in 1992 did little to alleviate the suffering of Afghan people.

The Soviet-led invasion worked in tandem with the covert American-led support of the mujahideen to deeply destabilize a nation already suffering from various internal issues. CIA-funded operations to first radicalize, then train, the various Islamic groups that felt hostile towards the Soviets, however, would lead not to a democratic fighting force as the Americans had hoped. Instead, the mujahideen became an unpredictable group of Islamic militants, equipped with both weapons and professional training. Western involvement in Afghanistan greatly predates the actual invasion by Soviet troops, as evidenced by the historic rivalry between England and Russia in the early 1900's, yet it was the Soviet invasion that led to far greater Western, specifically American, involvement in Afghanistan. For the U.S, the Soviet invasion was seen as a great opportunity, primarily because it seemed to be an easy means of damaging the USSR with minimal cost. As John Pradas notes:

Soviet involvement in Afghanistan long predated both the April revolution and the anti monarchist coup of 1973. Beginning in 1955, the Russians had furnished both economic and military aid in amounts totaling \$2.5 billion by 1979, and the Soviet Union had become Afghanistan's leading trading partner. At the time of the April revolution there were already a thousand Russian technical experts and military advisers in the country. Much as the political machinations of local clients had deepened the American stake in South Vietnam, the Communist coups in Kabul committed the Soviet Union more deeply in Afghanistan. Washington perceived an opportunity to turn the Afghan commitment into a running sore for Moscow. (Pradas 2002, 466-467).

In many ways, Afghanistan was viewed as a viable way to strike back at the Soviets for the loss of Vietnam, a failure still heavily prominent within the American political consciousness. The method of the Americans to turn Afghanistan into the USSR's own Vietnam would actually mirror many of the tactics used by Soviets in the previous conflict, with a heavy focus on radicalizing local peoples and strongly supporting the use of guerilla warfare. The already present resentment towards the PDPA and the Soviets was capitalized on by the CIA, who sought to recruit Islamic fighters and spark a counter insurgency against the Soviet forces. Infusions of funds, training, and weapons all served to further this goal, with fighters from across the nation being mobilized. The quagmire that was Vietnam served as a lesson to American politicians, who sought to win Afghanistan through covert means, much like Eisenhower's original Cold War strategy, versus through outright military intervention. However, this approach to the Afghanistan ignored a key detail: Afghans did not exist simply as pawns for foreign powers. The forces mobilized by the CIA, the mujahideen, were not pro-American; they were simply anti-Soviet. These Islamic fighters had their own goals in mind, and sought not to serve Western imperialists but to free their nation from what they considered to be oppressive forces. It was a distorted view of Islam that served to unify these fighters, as evidenced by their views on the importance of jihad, and American support was simply a convenient means by which the mujahideen could further their own goals. Despite Iran, the CIA's previous key success story in the Middle East, experiencing a radical Islamic revolution, the force of religious ideology and anti-Western sentiment was nonetheless underestimated by America's political strategists. Support continued to be channeled towards the mujahideen. As Douglas Little writes:

Over the course of the following decade, the Carter and Reagan administrations would use the CIA to funnel nearly \$3 billion into Afghanistan to help the Muslim resistance fight pro-Soviet president Babrak Karmal, his like-minded successor Mohammad Najibullah, and a hundred-thousandman Russian expeditionary force. By July 1980, Washington was providing the mujahadeen with everything from

captured Soviet AK-47 assault rifles to Chinese rocket-propelled grenade launchers via a covert arms pipeline running through Peshawar, a Pakistani frontier town near the Khyber Pass. (Little 2004, 689).

As American support continued, and guerilla fighters operated with a substantial support base from local populations, the USSR continued to channel funds and resources into the war. Eventually, the strategy of forcing the Soviets to continue spending more and more money in an attempt to secure Afghanistan would contribute to the USSR's total collapse, which was undeniably an American victory. However, the lack of hindsight displayed by the CIA in regards to the influence of the mujahideen would prove to be a dangerous miscalculation, and the ultimate blowback from this deep-rooted error would come full circle in the terror attacks of 9/11.

The CIA's training and funding of the mujahideen, which began as mainly financial backing under the Carter administration and turned to supplying weapons, (notably anti-aircraft Stinger missiles) under the Reagan administration, allowed in large part for the rise of both the Taliban and al-Qaeda (Rubin 2002). Alongside the funding, which was mainly channelled through Pakistan, was the role of CIA sponsored training camps, which allowed for numerous mujahideen to directly acquire various skills relating to guerilla warfare. These camps trained thousands of fighters, with journalist Jason Burke noting that "American officials estimate that, from 1985 to 1992, 12,500 foreigners were trained in bomb-making, sabotage and urban guerrilla warfare in Afghan camps the CIA helped to set up," (Burke 1999). Following the withdrawal of Soviet troops, large numbers of the mujahideen found themselves redundant, yet many fighters still decried the rise of anti-Islam and pro-Western influences in the Middle East. For the now-radicalized forces, returning to civilian life was an unlikely possibility. The need for a new enemy arose, and the mujahideen, with combat experience, training in guerilla warfare, and American weaponry, saw the U.S itself, which now remained as the sole global superpower and was quickly becoming a regional hegemon, as the new force to fight against. Following the Gulf War of 1991, the sentiment that U.S power in the Middle East was corrupting traditional values grew stronger, and the mujahideen were able to retain a large base of support. Certain factions branched off, forming the organization that would later be known as al-Qaeda, and directing their dissatisfaction towards what they perceived to be overly-prominent American influence. Thousands of fighters, trained and armed by the CIA, would grow to become one of the most hostile anti-American forces in the world, due in large part to the ignorance of American policy makers regarding the mujahideen's own directives and goals being distinct and autonomous from the goals of America.

In Afghanistan, a state of chaos had emerged following the Soviet retreat, with multiple factions of the mujahideen jockeying for power. As Daniel P. Sullivan notes, amid the chaos it was the civilians who suffered the most:

The loss of a common enemy brought back prior cleavages among the Mujahedin that no single group could overcome. De facto control of the country was divided among warlords who stole or demanded outrageous tolls for traveling or transporting goods across the country. Kidnapping, rape, and pillaging were widespread. UN efforts at a power sharing agreement failed. (Sullivan 2016, 96).

In 1992, the destruction left in the Soviet's wake evolved into greater instability, with little semblance of government retaining any form of control and various Islamic fighters streaming into the country. Pakistan, a key player in directing American aid to the mujahideen during the war, served as a home for many disaffected Islamic fighters, many of whom migrated into Afghanistan following the dissolution of the previous government. The nation experienced a form of power vacuum at this point in time, as a multitude of forces attempted to gain control and promote order. The chaos and suffering of this era

cannot be understated, as the civilian population, which had now suffered for decades due to various conflicts, largely sought any form of governance that could provide any degree of stability. Quality of life had degraded substantially for the vast majority of Afghans, and basic necessities were in scarce supply. Families were torn apart by various losses experienced amid the conflict, and across the nation suffering permeated the prevailing attitudes on how the country should be run. City centers, largely destroyed by the fighting, were still unsafe for civilians, but the countryside often proved to be little better, largely due to the heavy prevalence of landmines. On the everyday reality endured by the Afghan population in the midst of and in the wake of war, Farhang Jahanpour writes:

Hungry, divided, and with no prospect in sight of a return to normality after two decades of civil war, they confront the costs: over one million dead, over six million displaced, and the entire fabric of society in tatters. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, Afghanistan is one of the most mine-infested countries in the world. According to one estimate, 20 to 25 people are injured or killed by mines daily in Afghanistan. (Jahanpour 1999, 102).

The Islamic fighters of certain factions, notably many of those from Pakistan, utilized this instability as a means to rise to power, and amidst the wreckage of the fighting and the chaos that engulfed the nation, the Taliban rose to prominence on the promises of stability, Islamic traditions, and order. From 1992 onwards, the Taliban would control large swathes of Afghan territory, with local people suffering from often brutal measures utilized by the Taliban as a method of retaining subordination.

Afghanistan, a nation that remains in the headlines today, experienced a great deal of tumult internally that was worsened intensely by both the Soviet invasion of 1979 and the American involvement in supporting a counter-insurgency. Soviet troops caused widespread destruction and did little to solidify the PDPA's hold on Afghan politics, eventually leaving the nation in far greater disarray than it had experienced when it was merely internal conflict that caused problems. The mujahideen, possessing a variety of independent goals and seeking an end to Western interference, were deeply underestimated by the CIA and American politicians, who believed they could be utilized simply to further American priorities and regional hegemony with little thought to the long term consequences. The Afghan people, the ultimate victims of both brutal internal conflicts and unneeded interference by both Cold War superpowers, suffered great losses after the Soviet invasion, and continue to suffer under the American-created Taliban's oppressive policies in regions around the nation. What Americans perceived as a proxy war that concluded with the USSR's ultimate destruction was in fact a regional conflict that continues to unravel in present Afghanistan, and ultimately, it is the civilian population that continues to pay the price for the reckless and militant imperialism of both the U.S and the USSR.

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