10 Soviet Relations with Afghanistan: The Current Dynamic
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PRECEPTS

Ever since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, there has been a tendency by outside observers to oversimplify Moscow’s motives. The interpretations range from those of demonologists, who see the invasion merely as the finale to a drama whose every act and scene was carefully scripted by prescient Kremlin planners decades ago, to apologists who assert that the Soviet motivation was essentially defensive and even spontaneous. One also encounters analysts who seem to assume Soviet intentions are immutable and Soviet capabilities are infinite, leading to the unconscious conclusion that whatever Moscow determines to be in its interests today it will inevitably implement tomorrow.¹

Finally, there is often an almost unconscious presumption that a constant flow of accurate, objective information provides a reliable foundation for Moscow’s tactical decisions, which in turn are seen as invariably logical and unaffected by ideological or cultural blind spots.

In one respect the invasion of Afghanistan was indeed the culmination of a consistent and conscious Soviet policy to dominate its southern neighbor, but the military occupation must be viewed more as an unsuccessful means than an end in itself.

Seen from Moscow, the imperative for expansion southward has always been strong. The drive for a warm water port on the Indian Ocean can be traced back to Peter the Great, in the early eighteenth century. Although thwarted to the south by other powers and occupied in absorbing other territories to the east and west, Moscow appears never to have lost sight of this goal. Well before the October Revolution, Russian papers were calling for a ‘free access for Russia to the Indian Ocean’ and demanding Russian hegemony over Iran. In November 1940, when Hitler had suggested that the USSR join the Axis powers, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov listed as one of Moscow’s four conditions explicit recognition of ‘the area south of Batum and Baku in the general direction of the Persian Gulf’ as the ‘center of the aspirations of the Soviet Union’.²

Although Moscow has traditionally viewed Iran as its most logical pathway to the sea, Afghanistan has emerged at various times as a possible...
alternative route, even though Pakistan would still remain as a last barrier to the water. Especially in the postwar period before 1979, the US commitment to defend Iran, the inconsistency of its support of Pakistan, and its benign neglect of Afghanistan may have led the USSR to feel that the route south was better taken via Kabul and Islamabad than Tehran.

Moreover, the impetus for taking action had become much greater than in previous times. Moscow did not need the Middle East oil fields for itself, but it had a vested interest in denying (or threatening to deny) access to them by its industrialized rivals, east and west, for whom they were a vital resource. It also needed an Indian Ocean port to help support its vulnerable Maritime Province settlements in the Far East, then served principally by one trans-continental rail line that lay dangerously close to the Chinese border.³

Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that the 1979 military invasion was an integral part of some long-range master plan. Nor is it correct to ignore the unarguable defensive considerations that a successful Islamic revolution against a self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist state would have posed for Soviet Russia, especially when that state lay contiguous to the USSR's own Muslim republics. In 1979, such a revolution was not only under way, but on the point of succeeding against the tottering Kabul government and its obstinately 'socialist' leader, Hafizullah Amin.

**Failure of Soviet Strategic Intelligence**

The invasion must be seen, rather, as the violent culmination of a series of failed strategies that would have fixed Afghanistan in the Soviet orbit by relatively peaceful means. In the post-Stalin era, the USSR first tried to establish control over Afghanistan economically (1953–63), later politically (1963–78), and then ideologically (1978–9). Each of these gambits represented a progressively more expensive investment, and as each seemed to be in danger of failing, Moscow moved on to the next, raising the ante and limiting its maneuver room for withdrawal in the process. Only when it appeared that a wave of spontaneous insurgency would wreck all previous investments did Soviet strategists resort to that most exorbitantly expensive but at least decisive (so they thought) investment, the military invasion.⁴

Even after that decision, it is unlikely that the USSR intended to maintain a large, permanent military presence in Afghanistan in the immediate wake of its expected victory. The main goal was to put in power a stable, powerful, Marxist-Leninist government capable of dealing with any domestic insurgency on its own, a state that would be outwardly Islamic, non-aligned, neutral, and independent yet completely obedient to Moscow's orders. Once that goal had been achieved, many if not most of the Soviet troops would probably have been withdrawn. Only after the