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91-7

US POLICY IN AFGHANISTAN:  
TIME FOR A CHANGE

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February 25, 1991

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OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE <b>25 FEB 1991</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>US Policy in Afghanistan: Time for a Change</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>see report</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>11</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

ISSUE: Contrary to US expectations, the departure of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in February 1989 did not lead to the collapse of the Najibullah government left behind in Kabul. Two years later, the mujahidin are no closer to dislodging Najibullah than they were in 1979. Given this stalemate, should the US continue its policy of supporting the mujahidin or look for another solution to the Afghan conflict?

BACKGROUND: Situated next to Soviet Central Asia, Afghanistan has long concerned rulers in Moscow. Afghanistan's boundaries are the result of Moscow's and London's desire for a buffer area between their colonial empires. The USSR has been a major aid donor for Afghanistan since the 1950s, and probably approved in advance the April 1978 coup by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The PDPA's reform attempts provoked opposition and increasing internal instability. In December 1979 Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan and installed a new PDPA government.

Various guerrilla groups and political parties, known collectively as the mujahidin, sprang up in opposition to the Soviet presence. Over the next decade, the USSR had as many as 120,000 troops deployed at one time in Afghanistan but failed to defeat the mujahidin. Soviet actions in Afghanistan were regularly denounced at the UN and proved an obstacle to improved relations with the US, China and Saudi Arabia. The war became increasingly unpopular at home, particularly in the era of glasnost, and increasingly costly, with at least 15,000 Soviet troops reported killed.<sup>1</sup>

For Washington, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, coupled with

turmoil in Iran and rising Soviet influence in states like Ethiopia and South Yemen, posed a direct threat to US interests in the region. After declaring a "moral obligation" to support the Afghan resistance, President Carter reportedly began a program of covert military assistance to the mujahidin.<sup>2</sup> Congressional Quarterly reports that direct US aid to the mujahidin had reached an annual level of about \$600 million by 1987. Congress strongly supported this aid, and its demand that the mujahidin receive "effective" aid apparently was satisfied by the provision of Stinger missiles in 1986.<sup>3</sup>

The campaign to "save" Afghanistan revitalized the US-Pakistan relationship, which had been buffeted by the US government's concerns about nuclear proliferation. The Reagan Administration provided multi-year, multi-billion dollar aid packages for Pakistan and obtained congressional waivers of potential aid restrictions. Pakistan also became the channel for money and weapons passing from other countries to the mujahidin.

When Gorbachev finally decided that the costs of Soviet Afghan policy outweighed the benefits, ongoing UN-sponsored talks resulted in the 1988 Geneva Accords. The Accords included a timetable for Soviet troop withdrawal, to be completed by February 1989; agreements between Pakistan and Afghanistan on mutual non-intervention and the return of refugees; and international guarantees from the US and the USSR, which undertook not to intervene in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US also issued a statement saying that it retained the right to "provide military assistance to parties in Afghanistan." Under pressure from Congress not to abandon the mujahidin, the Administration had proposed to the Soviets a policy of "negative symmetry," whereby each

superpower would cease aid to its Afghan clients. When Moscow refused, the US proposed "positive symmetry," which allowed the US to assist the mujahidin as long as the USSR assisted the PDPA government. If the USSR exercised "restraint" in its military assistance to parties in Afghanistan, the US would do likewise.<sup>4</sup> In signing the Accords, the other parties tacitly accepted the US position.

When the USSR completed its troop withdrawal on schedule, most US experts expected that Najibullah's days as President of Afghanistan would be numbered. Instead, he survived coup attempts and sought to broaden his base of support. Government troops defeated major mujahidin campaigns against the cities of Jalalabad and Khoet. The reasons most cited for Najibullah's "success" include large-scale Soviet resupply and assistance, weapons shortages on the part of the mujahidin, factional infighting by the mujahidin and their failure to establish a credible interim government, and general war weariness in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

Current US policy seeks: the establishment of a representative Afghan government through a process of self-determination, the return of refugees to a secure environment with dignity and honor, and an independent and non-aligned Afghanistan at peace with its neighbors.<sup>6</sup> The US and USSR have discussed how to reach these goals but have yet to agree on a transition mechanism to set the self-determination process in motion or on the role of Najibullah in that mechanism. The US wants him to step aside before an election or any other self-determination process takes place. In the meantime, Soviet aid to Kabul during 1990 was reportedly \$300 million per month. According to congressional sources, US covert aid for the mujahidin totaled

about \$280 million in FY-90, and was expected to continue in FY-91. The US also has provided about \$100 million per year under its cross-border humanitarian assistance program and other funds to assist Afghan refugees in Pakistan.<sup>7</sup>

ANALYSIS: The current US policy on Afghanistan seems likely to continue for awhile, due to bureaucratic inertia and the overwhelming preoccupation with the Gulf crisis, if nothing else. The mujahidin continue to have supporters in Washington, although congressional enthusiasm appears to be waning.<sup>8</sup> At this point, however, what are the US interests being served by our Afghan policy and how effective are the chosen instruments?

Before 1979 Afghanistan was of limited interest to the US, which provided some economic assistance but turned down Afghan requests in the 1950s for a stronger relationship. Afghanistan was far away and poor, and any sizable US presence ran the risk of unnecessarily antagonizing not only the USSR but also Pakistan, a US ally with a history of uneasy relations with its neighbor. Afghanistan continues to lack assets that would attract significant US interest. It offers no major resources that the US needs, and its relatively small, impoverished population is unlikely to buy many US goods. The one area likely to be of concern is narcotics since Afghanistan is a major opium producer.

Afghanistan became important to the US in 1979 because of its role in the broader struggle against the USSR. Should it remain important for that reason today? Although the Cold War has been declared dead, the future of the USSR remains uncertain. Today's

cooperative attitudes could turn antagonistic once again. In this light, perhaps it can be argued that the US must keep up its pressure, in Afghanistan and elsewhere. On the other hand, cooperation may be the better tactic for winning the Soviets over. In any event, the US claimed a major victory already with the Soviet withdrawal of troops in 1989. How much difference does it make now if Najibullah retains a role in a transition government, particularly if the US decides not to describe such an event as a Soviet "victory?"

If the US decides to maintain pressure to obtain its desired transition mechanism, the next question is whether military aid to the mujahidin is the appropriate tool for achieving this goal. Will US aid allow the mujahidin to defeat Najibullah militarily? At this point, the answer appears to be no. Since the mujahidin's recent military failures seem to stem as much from lack of organization as anything else, money alone is unlikely to be the answer. However, US and Pakistani experience over the past decade shows that outsiders have little hope of imposing cohesion on the mujahidin.

What incentives does Gorbachev have for abandoning Najibullah? The continued survival of the Kabul government represents a foreign policy success for Moscow. True, this success costs money, which the Soviet Union probably can ill afford. However, Gorbachev has to weigh monetary savings against the prospect of further antagonizing military and other hardliners. He also can gamble that US budgetary problems will lead Congress to cut off military aid to the mujahidin before economic problems in the USSR force him to cut aid to Kabul. The current Persian Gulf crisis also works in Gorbachev's favor. Soviet cooperation, particularly at the UN, has been crucial to coalition

policy. Is it likely that the US will risk losing that cooperation in order to make gains in Kabul?

Moving from the global to the regional level, Afghanistan's location again gives it a role to play in US bilateral relationships, particularly with Pakistan. This past fall nuclear proliferation once again dominated US-Pakistan relations, leading to a suspension in US assistance. Aid to the mujahidin, channeled through Islamabad, offers a way to keep cooperation with Pakistan alive. However, Pakistani interests in Afghanistan are not the same as US interests. The US can settle for a nonaligned Afghanistan; Pakistan's apparent goal is an Afghan government responsive to Islamabad.<sup>9</sup> Not only is this goal unrealistic, given Afghanistan's history of resistance to outside influence, it also has led Pakistan to support Islamic fundamentalist mujahidin who are strongly anti-American. It is not clear that overall US interests would be served if the desire for good relations with Pakistan shapes Afghan policy.

Other regional powers have an interest in US policy on Afghanistan but are less affected than Pakistan. India sees Afghanistan as a useful counterweight to Pakistan and is likely to base its views on how US policy affects US-Pakistani cooperation and Afghani-Pakistani ties. For countries like China and Saudi Arabia, US policy on Afghanistan is of interest but unlikely to cause any real change in relations with the US.

Looking at the national level, how does current US policy help shape the foreign policy views of any future Afghan government? Accepting US aid does not make the mujahidin pro-American. Nor does being anti-PDPA make them pro-democracy. Many of the fighters and

their groups are neither, and there are reports that their tactics are producing anti-US sentiment in Afghanistan. The nature of the groups receiving our support was secondary when the overriding goal in Afghanistan was to defeat the USSR. Not only are Soviet troops now gone, the USSR and its clients are undergoing economic and political change. In this context, why would a mujahidin government serve US interests more than a Najibullah government?

One last US interest should be mentioned--humanitarian assistance. Afghanistan has suffered tremendously from a decade of war. Of the 15 to 18 million Afghans in 1979, at least one million died in the war, five million are refugees in Iran or Pakistan, and another million are internal refugees. Afghanistan needs outside aid and helping to provide that aid fits the values that Americans like to see their foreign policy promote.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Cease US military assistance to the mujahidin.
- Continue discussions with the USSR on a political settlement, including the possibility of Najibullah in a transitional role.
- Continue humanitarian assistance, giving consideration to channels other than the mujahidin parties in Peshawar.

Ideally the first two recommendations would be linked, with the US willingness to cease assistance being used as a bargaining chip in talks with the USSR, possibly to get a return to the idea of negative symmetry. Even if discussions do not produce results, the US should unilaterally cease military aid to the mujahidin. It is difficult to see that our interests in the region now merit continued funding at

reported levels.

There are potential risks to this policy change. Some may see a US loss of face. Pakistan is likely to be upset but stands to gain if a political settlement encourages refugees to return home. The US and USSR could also probably help Pakistan achieve some of its goals, such as nonaligned status for Afghanistan and official Afghan acceptance of the current border with Pakistan. Congressional opposition is possible but less likely as time goes on. Last, but not least, there are mujahidin groups which will reject any deal which does not remove Najibullah. These groups probably have enough arms stockpiled to cause difficulties, but it is not clear that they can block a political settlement. It is quite possible that these and other disputes among the Afghans themselves will doom any settlement. However, it is not clear why the US should continue to spend its limited resources because Afghans cannot agree.

The risks appear worthwhile when compared to what the US currently "gets" in return for its covert aid. We are apparently supporting groups who are militarily and politically ineffective, and not likely to be pro-US in the long-run, so that we can stand firm against the USSR, with whom we increasingly cooperate. US policy appears to be dictated by the mujahidin's unwillingness to accept Najibullah rather than by US interests in South Asia. We are no closer to a political settlement that could induce refugees to return, and continued fighting only adds to the destruction of what remains in Afghanistan. Getting out of Afghanistan is potentially risky, but the inability to find a neat way out seems a poor reason for continuing a policy that no longer serves US interests.

## NOTES

1. "Lessons of Afghanistan," Newsweek (February 20, 1989), p. 26.
2. Carroll J. Doherty, "Wars of Proxy Losing Favor As Cold War Tensions End," Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report (August 25, 1990), pp. 2724-5.
3. John Felton, "Afghan Deal Won't End War, Policy Questions," Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report (April 16, 1988), p. 995.
4. "The Geneva Accords on Afghanistan," Hearing before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives (May 19, 1988), p. 55.
5. Examples of these views are in: Zalmay Khalilzad, "The United States in South Asia," Current History (December 1989), p. 452, and Barnett R. Rubin, "Afghanistan: Back to Feudalism," Current History (December 1989), p. 445.
5. "The Challenge of Regional Conflicts: Afghanistan, Cambodia and U.S. Policy," Speech by Under Secretary of State Robert M. Kimmitt to the Asia Society (April 18, 1990).
7. Doherty, p. 2722 and Congressional Presentation Document for FY-91 Security Assistance.
8. Doherty, p. 2722.
9. Marvin G. Weinbaum, "War and Peace in Afghanistan: The Pakistani Role," The Middle East Journal (Winter 1991), pp. 71-85.
10. John F. Burns, "Now They Blame America," New York Times Magazine (February 4, 1990), pp. 23-29.

