The Accords on Afghanistan, signed in Geneva on April 14, 1988, have at best begun, not ended, the resolution of that country’s conflict. It is not only that the departure of all uniformed Soviet troops remains incomplete and uncertain. It is, far more important, that a civil war rages on, and millions of Afghan refugees still cannot return home to rebuild their land and their lives.

This is not the fault of the accords; disengagement by foreign powers is all that they were meant to achieve. Soviet troops are supposed to withdraw by February 15, 1989; Pakistan and the United States were supposed to cease aiding the Afghan resistance (the mujahidin) by May 15, 1988. In a last minute flurry of direct superpower talks, however, the United States insisted on “symmetry,” that is, on its right to aid the mujahidin as long as the Soviets arm the communist-dominated government in Kabul. While the Soviets never accepted this view, they signed the agreement knowing the U.S. interpretation, and aid to the mujahidin continued after May 15.

What the April accords did not attempt to achieve directly was internal peace. That is the next step. And it will come to Afghanistan only with the establishment of a broad-based government enjoying both general domestic support and good relations with its neighbors.

In fact, Diego Cordovez, the U.N. under-secretary-general for special political affairs who mediated and largely crafted the accords, always argued that the accords were just the “first track” of the peace process, which would also require a “second track.” This second track would involve the Afghan resistance (which did not participate in the Geneva talks and rejected their results), and would ultimately lead to a change in government. To promote that second track, Cordovez has presented a proposal for a National Government of Peace and Reconstruction.

Publicly, Washington’s position is that any Afghan regime not dominated by Soviet-supported Communists will be acceptable, and

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1 On August 1, 1988, Cordovez left his position as U.N. under-secretary-general to become foreign minister of his native Ecuador. He remained the U.N. secretary-general’s personal representative on Afghanistan until late November.

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that the only condition for such a government is the departure of Soviet troops. Privately, though, most American officials expect either a descent into anarchy or a bloody victory by the fundamentalists, and they have denigrated Cordovez's proposal in press leaks.

Background

This view — that the future of Afghanistan can be settled only in blood — accords with Western stereotypes of Afghans as vengeful tribesmen and religious fanatics. A closer look at Afghan history and culture, however, suggests that there may be less violent ways to re-establish Afghanistan's sovereignty and nonalignment. Anyone hoping to support such processes through diplomacy, of course, will have to understand something about Afghan history and the main sources of political legitimacy in Afghanistan's past: the tribes and Islam.

From the establishment of the Afghan monarchy in 1747 to its overthrow in 1973, Afghan rulers used various combinations of tribal and Islamic procedures to legitimate their power. Originally, tribal legitimacy was derived from successful conquest (de facto sovereignty) and ratified by a Loya Jirga or Great Council of the Afghan tribes. This Loya Jirga, whose armed members constituted the main military force of the state, developed from the more commonplace institution of the jirga, a council of adult males within the tribes, which meets to solve a specific problem or resolve a dispute. The first Loya Jirga, in 1747, chose Ahmad Shah Durrani as the first king of the Afghan tribes.

Afghanistan effectively entered the modern nation-state system by signing the Treaty of Gandamak with Great Britain (in 1879) and ending the Second Anglo-Afghan War (in 1880). Since then, its rulers have had access to bases of power other than tribal military prowess. They have drawn resources from the international system in the form of foreign subsidies and aid, as well as taxes on foreign trade, and used these resources with mixed success to build up a professional military separate from the tribes. Hence, the Loya Jirga has at times become an institution subordinate to the state rather than a genuine means of expressing the will of the tribes. Leaders have been able to pick the tribal representatives and have thus used it to ratify predetermined policies, much as leaders elsewhere have used referenda. Babrak Karmal and Najibullah, for instance, presided over several carefully controlled meetings they called Loya Jirgas.

Even so, the Loya Jirga sometimes represented real political power. This was the case with the jirga convened by the then king, Zaher Shah, in 1964. Rather than act as a rubber stamp for the
parliamentary constitution that had been prepared by a drafting commission of intellectuals, the representatives of the nation's tribes, ethnic groups, and clergy engaged in substantive debate concerning the constitution's provisions, and partly rewrote it before passing it. This *Loya Jirga* thus set a positive precedent for adapting the institution to modern conditions.

Along with tribal sanction, legitimacy in Afghanistan has also required Islamic sanction, institutionalized in decrees issued by leading *'ulama* (religious authorities). This sanction was not hard to get, however, for Sunni *'ulama* traditionally granted legitimacy to any de facto ruler who was a Muslim. Further, they did not claim that the Qur'an and *shari'a* (Islamic law) alone must be the source of all law, that the forms of the state or social relations were dictated by Islam, or that the *'ulama* themselves should rule.

As Afghan governments developed modern state institutions and expanded the educational system, the problem of legitimacy continued to develop. Afghan kings still had to satisfy the tribes and the Islamic authorities, but increasingly they also had to win sanction from a new class: the secular, Westernized intellectuals, on whom the modern state depended. These intellectuals developed ideologies and political organizations that would enable them to seek power, but the ideological quest simultaneously polarized them. Some turned to Marxism, some to fundamentalist Islam, and others to variants of nationalism, socialism, and liberalism.

The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which developed into a pro-Soviet Communist party, found its base among some of these intellectuals (including military officers). The strength of the leftists among Soviet-trained military officers enabled this party to seize power in an April 1978 coup, but it soon lost its chance to legitimate itself more broadly, when it tried to monopolize power, attack Islam, and transform society through state terror. In any case, the notion that a government is legitimate because it produces economic or social progress, of which the Marxist-Leninist notion of revolutionary legitimacy is but one variant, is limited to the narrow stratum of intellectuals. Even the PDPA now claims to have abandoned its monopoly on power and its revolutionary ideology, asserting legitimacy on the basis of a *Loya Jirga*, traditional Islam, and nationalism.

Other intellectuals, meanwhile, rejected Marxism and looked to a new, more activist Islam, one that also rejected tribalism and the quiescent Sunni tradition. In doing so they were able to ally with elements of the *'ulama* who were also becoming politicized. These groups claimed that Islam requires an "Islamic state," that is, a state

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whose institutions derive from the purest principles of Islam. It is important to emphasize that the leaders of such fundamentalist groups are generally not ‘ulama, but young intellectuals with a secular education who seek, in this form of Islam, a path to legitimate power. The clearest indication of their focus on seeking power (not a goal of the traditional ‘ulama) is their preferred form of organization—the Islamic political party. These fundamentalists are also divided between radicals, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of the Hezb-e Islami, who seek to replace traditional structures with the Islamic party, sometimes violently; and moderates such as Yunus Khales (leader of a party also called the Hezb-e Islami) and Burhanuddin Rabbani of Jamiat-e Islami, who build alliances between their parties and traditional leaders.

But, contrary to some impressions held in the West, Afghans are not divided between fundamentalists and Marxists. For example, the resistance also includes groups who favor political institutions based on Afghan national traditions, with varying types and degrees of reform. (Virtually all oppose restoration of the monarchy.) Affiliated with these groups are those intellectuals who favor liberal or nationalist views and who have chosen participation in the struggle over exile in the West. The other parties would agree to a modified Loya Jirga.

The Diplomatic Impasse

The premise of the Geneva talks was that negotiations among foreign participants would lead to their disengagement, permitting the Afghans to work things out by themselves. Of course, this premise did not prevent all the outside parties from trying to make changes in the Kabul government as side bargains or as preconditions of one sort or another.

Up until April 1983, Pakistani foreign minister Sahabzada Yaqub Khan insisted only that Pakistan would not sign an agreement with a government headed by Babrak Karmal, but appeared to make no further demands. The Soviets quietly indicated that “Karmal would not be a problem.” The U.S. State Department, however, was deeply skeptical of any agreement that did not provide for more thoroughgoing changes, and by October 1983 Yaqub stated that, to succeed,

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4 The resistance has many factions, often reflecting religious, ethnic, or political divisions. In Peshawar, Pakistan, an alliance of seven parties is held together under pressure from the governments of Pakistan and the United States. In Iran, there is an alliance of eight Shi’a parties (Afghanistan is about 20 percent Shi’a), although two of the most important Shi’a organizations in the resistance are not members of that alliance. These are the Shura (council) of Sayyed Beheshti and the Harakat-e Islami (Islamic Movement) of Ayatollah Mohseni. Affiliation with parties can also be pragmatic, however, since the parties function as transmitters of arms, refugee relief, and other forms of patronage.

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a peace agreement would require an Afghan government that could carry at least some of the resistance with it.⁵

As the negotiations advanced, Afghans too began to jockey for power. At first, the only positive attempt to begin building a new, legitimate government was made by the exiled former king of Afghanistan, Zaher Shah, who has lived in Rome since 1973. In mid-1983, when it seemed that Soviet leader Yuri Andropov might successfully negotiate a Soviet pullout, Zaher Shah issued a public declaration calling on Afghans to unite to form a body that could represent them.⁶ Together with him, some former ministers and diplomats of the old royal government of Afghanistan, tribal leaders, and some supporters of the moderate resistance parties developed plans to hold a Loya Jirga. In response, however, radical fundamentalists in the resistance denounced these efforts as an attempt to restore the "corrupt monarchy." The Pakistani and Saudi Arabian governments were also hostile to the nationalist orientation of the former king and his associates; the negotiations were stalemated, and the plan for a Loya Jirga was shelved.

The next proposal came from Moscow. In a major speech on Soviet Asian policy delivered on July 28, 1986, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev called for the formation in the near future of an Afghan government "with the participation in it of those political forces which found themselves outside the country" — a reference to exiled resistance leaders, refugees, and the former king. On December 30, 1986, after returning from a trip to Moscow where he was accompanied by the entire Kabul leadership, Najibullah announced details of a proposal for "national reconciliation."⁷ Essentially, the Kremlin gave the Afghan Communists a year to build themselves a stable base of power with the help of Soviet troops. In early 1988, the withdrawal of Soviet troops would begin. As Gorbachev reportedly told Najibullah during the latter's visit to Moscow, in July 1987, "I hope you are ready in twelve months because we will be leaving whether you are or not."⁸ During that same visit to Moscow Najibullah stated at a press conference that he would be willing to resign if it were in the interests of Afghanistan.⁹

In theory, the national reconciliation program envisaged a coalition government composed of all political elements, including the exiled resistance parties. For the first time, the Afghan Communists recognized the legitimacy of other organized political currents and offered them representation. The regime approved a law for the registration of multiple political parties. In November 1987, a meet-

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⁵ Selig S. Harrison, "Inside the Afghan Talks," Foreign Policy, Fall 1988, pp. 42-49.
⁶ Le Monde, June 22, 1983.
ing the regime called a *Loya Jirga* adopted a new constitution that renamed the government the Republic of Afghanistan. Statements by *'ulama* legitimizing the government were prominently featured. Najibullah publicly appealed to major resistance commanders (some of whom his government had previously sentenced to death in absentia) to join the government. The Communists hoped to attract former royalist forces, tribal forces, and major resistance commanders by exploiting their war-weariness and offering them attractive positions. They hoped to legitimate their government by manipulating traditional symbols such as the *Loya Jirga* while maintaining an effective monopoly of power.

The effort was doomed, as the resistance responded unanimously in the negative. It contested the legitimacy of the *Loya Jirga*, claiming it was unrepresentative, and denied that the *'ulama* who supported it were authoritative or, in some cases, actually *'ulama*. Furthermore, the Soviet Union had not agreed to withdraw, and driving out the Soviets and their Kabul agents was one of the few goals the entire resistance agreed upon.

Nevertheless, the PDPA tried to implement the new constitution. It organized electoral procedures in some areas it controlled, and on June 18, 1988, President Najibullah announced the formation of a new government. Most of its members were said not to be members of the PDPA, though they did not come from the opposition movements either. Prime Minister Hasan Sharq, for example, although not a party member, had been closely linked to Najibullah's Parcham faction and had served the regime as ambassador to India, one of its top diplomatic posts.  

As Kabul, under strong pressure from the Soviets, proclaimed the policy of "national reconciliation," negotiators confronted the question of how, if at all, to link the formation of a broader government to the Geneva accords. From the announcement of the national reconciliation program in December 1986 until October 1987, the Soviets said they would present a definitive, short timetable for troop withdrawal only after a "government of national reconciliation" capable of maintaining stability had been established in Kabul. The U.S.-Pakistani position turned this around, calling for a short timetable and a "date certain" for the withdrawal of Soviet troops, after which could come national reconciliation.

**The Cordovez Proposal**

Faced with this impasse, Diego Cordovez made his first attempt at a "second track," outlining a way to bring the resistance into talks and begin movement toward national reconciliation. In July 1987,
Cordovez drafted a proposal for a U.N.-sponsored meeting of representatives of all Afghan parties. The meeting was to include the seven major Sunni parties who belonged to the resistance in Peshawar, Pakistan; resistance commanders; refugee and tribal leaders; the former king and his supporters; and the PDPA. The meeting, taking the form of a national jirga, was to choose an interim government in which "no party would be assured a predominant role."\(^{11}\)

Cordovez recognized that a genuinely broad-based Afghan government would deny a major role to the PDPA — which would at most come away with an unknown party member being designated minister of sports. Since Cordovez realized that the resistance would not recognize the Kabul regime as the government of its country, the PDPA was to participate as one Afghan party among many, and there was no formal participation by the regime. In effect, the PDPA, under Soviet pressure, was to assist in the process of negotiating its own demise in order to provide the Soviets with a face-saving out. Such participation seemed to meet the minimal demand of the Soviets, and it seemed necessary for any negotiated change of government.

But Cordovez's insistence on the participation of the PDPA aroused suspicions that he aimed at perpetuating that party's power. It also violated the widespread patriotic feeling that the PDPA was guilty of treason. And the whole proposal, based on the nationalist idea of an "all-Afghan" meeting or national jirga, ran counter to the beliefs of the fundamentalist parties, which denied any political role to "anti-Islamic parties."

Nor did the Soviets formally assent to Cordovez's proposal, though they did encourage him to use it as a basis for discussion. The United States and Pakistan did not oppose the proposal, but saw it as premature — first came a firm commitment to a quick Soviet pullout, then discussion of the Afghan successor government. According to Selig Harrison, the Washington and Islamabad governments worried that by making agreement among the Afghans a condition for Soviet withdrawal, Moscow might shift the onus for its continued presence in Afghanistan onto the mujahidin.\(^{12}\)

Cordovez nevertheless circulated his proposal. Blocked by the Pakistanis from getting direct access to the Afghan leaders in Peshawar, he brought the proposal to their attention through intermediaries and through informal talks with some members of the delegation of the resistance parties that attended the U.N. General Assembly session in the fall of 1987. Responses ranged from negative to noncommittal. The participation of the PDPA in the meeting (though not necessarily in the subsequent government) was the major

\(^{11}\) Harrison, "Inside the Afghan Talks," p. 54.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
problem. In addition, though, even moderate forces open to some form of compromise saw no reason to jeopardize the tenuous unity of the resistance before the Soviets had even committed themselves to withdrawing from Afghanistan.

The Kremlin Retreats

After these consultations, Cordovez met in his U.N. office with a high-level Soviet official, to whom he explained that there was no possibility of progress toward a coalition government without a firm Soviet commitment to withdraw. Cordovez soon received word that Moscow had decided to propose a short timetable for withdrawal, making no conditions about progress on the second track. On October 30, 1987, Soviet deputy foreign minister Yuli Vorontsov confirmed this decision to U.S. deputy secretary of state Michael Armacost in Geneva. In a dramatic speech on February 8, 1988, Gorbachev himself proposed a ten-month timetable and explicitly stated that there was no link between the withdrawal and national reconciliation. The impasse was broken.

Gorbachev’s speech met Washington’s demand for a short timetable and a “date certain” for withdrawal, and it stole a march on his reluctant clients in Kabul; but it was also aimed at countering a new position taken by Pakistan, or at least by President Zia ul-Haq. When he realized that the Soviets were about to meet the Americans’ demands for a timetable, Zia seemingly reversed his position and stated that he did not want to sign the agreement without the formation of an interim government. Under strong Pakistani pressure, and despite continuing sharp differences over the form of a future government of Afghanistan, the alliance of Peshawar-based resistance groups announced on February 25 that it had agreed on a formula for an interim government. But it was not until June 19 that the alliance could agree on even a partial cabinet.

The alliance’s proposed government consists almost solely of officials of the Peshawar parties and is dominated by radical fundamentalists. It contains no resistance commanders from inside Afghanistan, no representative of the Shi’a resistance parties, and no important independent intellectuals or technocrats. Predictably, the proposal has met with a cold reception from the Afghan refugees and resistance commanders.\(^{14}\)

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\(^{13}\) The civilian government of Pakistan, however, led by Prime Minister Mohammad Khan Junejo, preferred to go ahead and get the Soviets to sign off on their commitment to withdraw without waiting for Afghans to reach agreement about their future. So did the United States. The government of Pakistan eventually dropped Zia’s demand for an interim government. Junejo’s effectively cutting Zia out of the decision to sign the accords contributed to Zia’s decision to dismiss his government on May 29 and support continued military aid to the mujahidin after May 15.

Excluding so many, this government was based on the notion held by, for instance, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the radical fundamentalist Hezb-e Islami (Islamic party), that the alliance of the seven Peshawar parties by itself constitutes a source of Islamic legitimacy. To further legitimate this so-called interim government, he and some other fundamentalists in the resistance, supported by the Pakistan military, intended that the mujahidin capture Qandahar, Jalalabad, or another major provincial center during the first phase of Soviet troop withdrawal, and establish a base for the government on Afghan territory. At that point, he hoped, their regime would gain international recognition from Muslim countries and the West, thus qualifying it for international assistance. To determine the ultimate distribution of positions among the parties, elections would be held in the refugee camps and the mujahidin-controlled areas of Afghanistan. As the resistance leader closest to the Pakistani authorities, Gulbuddin would obviously have benefited from such elections, since a disproportionate amount of the balloting would have taken place within Pakistan. Thus the political officer of the fundamentalist Jamiat-e Islami, whose Persian-speaking base is poorly represented in the predominantly Pashtun refugee camps, argued against holding elections in this manner.

This elaborate scenario came to naught in the short run, for Gulbuddin and his supporters had not made the military and political preparations needed to take and hold cities. The Kabul regime managed to retain control of these cities through the pullout of the first half of the Soviet contingent. By November, however, with the consolidation of resistance control over several smaller provincial capitals and increased pressure on Qandahar and Kabul, the resistance leaders in Peshawar announced a plan to hold elections to a 400-member shura (council) by the end of the Soviet pullout.

After the signing of the Geneva agreement, the four state parties to the accords granted Cordovez a mandate to assist Afghans in the formation of a broad-based government, and he went public with his effort. In a widely noted article in *The Washington Post* on May 8, he predicted that, after the evacuation of most of Afghanistan by the Soviets, which would occur with the departure of the first half of their troops, the Afghan people would "face, once again in their history, a moment of truth." He held that the Afghans would confound those who thought they were capable only of fighting. They

would find a way to resolve their differences through such traditions as the jirga.

A National Government of Peace and Reconstruction?

In pursuit of that goal, Cordovez continued to consult with Afghans to find some way both to include the PDPA and yet, in effect, to remove it from power. Abdul Haq, the most important resistance commander around Kabul and an affiliate of the faction of Hezb-e Islami led by Yunus Khales, accepted an invitation to come to U.N. headquarters in New York on June 21. He engaged in several days of intense discussions with key aides of Cordovez. Out of these and other meetings developed a proposal for the formation of a “National Government of Peace and Reconstruction.” Cordovez took this with him during a ten-day visit to Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan starting June 30.

Cordovez argued that it was necessary to try a new approach, for neither Kabul’s plan for “national reconciliation” nor the alliance’s “interim government” had gathered significant support. He suggested two stages: a “cooling off” period and a Loya jirga. In the first, “leaders of all existing political parties would agree to postpone their active struggle as a patriotic sacrifice.” During that period, Cordovez suggested:

One possible course of action would be for a National Government of Peace and Reconstruction, consisting of Afghans of recognized independence and impartiality, to take office in Kabul on 1 September 1988 and for a de facto ceasefire in place between contending Afghans to become effective on that same date.

Cordovez did not emphasize the obvious: he was suggesting the PDPA quit the government in the interests of peace.

The new government would then prepare for the convening of a Loya jirga under rules acceptable to all parties. It would meet not later than March 1, 1989 (two weeks after the end of the Soviet troop withdrawal) to draw up the charter for the new government of Afghanistan.

This plan tried a new tack. It separated the departure of the PDPA from the establishment of a permanent new government. Instead of seeking a way for the PDPA and the resistance to serve in the same government, Cordovez suggested an interim government that would exclude both. Members of this Government of Peace and Reconstruction would most likely be intellectuals and former ministers and diplomats, men who could be considered reasonably impartial.

19 “Notes used by Under Secretary-General Diego Cordovez, Representative of the Secretary-General, on the Settlement of the Situation Relating to Afghanistan during a Press Conference held in Islamabad on Saturday 9 July 1988,” mimeograph, p. 3.
The second step in Cordovez's plan, convening a Loya Jirga, pointed to the need for a formula acceptable to both sides. The regime had tried to use this symbol, but had failed. It was also popular among the moderate and traditionalist parties, as well as among resistance commanders and refugees. Abdul Haq, for instance, had suggested holding a Loya Jirga at the United Nations. The Loya Jirga could provide a link to the past and it would be understood by the masses. It could also resolve the question of the participation of the PDPA, for individual members of the PDPA could participate as members of their tribes or ethnic groups.

On October 21, frustrated that the Afghan political situation remained deadlocked, Cordovez revealed that he had called on Zaher Shah to take a more active role in encouraging a domestic settlement. He also named three prominent former officials as examples of those who might promote such a settlement: Abdul Samad Hamid, a former deputy prime minister living in West Germany; Abdul Satar Sirat, a former minister of justice living in Saudi Arabia; and Abdul Wakil, a former minister of agriculture working for U.S. AID in Pakistan.

Second Thoughts in Moscow

Is Cordovez's mission a naive effort to find a compromise solution to a battle that can only be decided by force? American officials who denigrate it in press leaks seem to think so, and so did the late President Zia. Certainly, it has flaws and omissions, and a decade of war makes it easy to argue that more war is the only answer. Still, significant sectors of Afghan opinion, including traditionalist resistance parties and important commanders from at least one moderate fundamentalist party, support the initiative (or a close variant thereof). Furthermore, contrary to assumptions that were widespread only a year ago, half of the Soviet Union's troops have departed from Afghanistan. Perhaps this makes it permissible to indulge in some optimism.

Looked at closely, the proposal may seem naive because it calls on Najibullah simply to step down; obviously, he will not do so voluntarily. This proposal can test, however, whether the Soviets will accept or even encourage the formation of a non-communist government in Afghanistan. Such a Soviet policy is necessary for any genuine resolution to the conflict, but it would contradict decades of experience with Soviet treatment of communist-controlled regimes on the USSR's borders. Some critics of the accords argue that Soviet determination to maintain its client party in power in Kabul has not

21 S. J. Masty, "The U.N. May Win One in Afghanistan."
wavered, and that the accords, by depriving the resistance of external aid, will enable Moscow to accomplish this goal without having to commit its troops.23

At least some Soviet analysts, however, do not share such an optimistic assessment of the Kabul regime’s capabilities. For instance, Soviet general Kim Tsagolov, who had extensive experience in Afghanistan, has stated that he is not confident the regime can survive after the Soviet withdrawal. He predicts at least a temporary victory by the Islamic movements, and does not urge that Soviet forces should intervene to prevent it. Of course, other military men disagree.24

Furthermore, the Soviet party and government have engaged in a critical evaluation of their effort in Afghanistan, which is now seen as a failed product of the policies of the Brezhnev era. A letter circulated by the Central Committee to all party members in May 1988 characterized the sending of Soviet troops to Afghanistan as the result of a series of miscalculations and errors.25

Official Soviet analysts have drawn three main lessons from Afghanistan. The first is that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to establish a stable socialist or “socialist-oriented” state in a “backward” country by imposing the rule of a militarized Marxist-Leninist party. This conclusion derives from other experiences in the Third World as well.

Second, the failure of overwhelming force to subdue such a seemingly weak, disorganized opposition has provided a sober lesson in the limits of military power. In an authoritative article in the Communist party’s theoretical journal, Kommunist, Izvestia commentator Aleksandr Bovin has compared the Soviet experience in Afghanistan to that of the United States in Vietnam and Iran, all situations where, he writes, “power becomes powerless.”26

Finally, Soviet commentators assert that foreign-policy decision making must be opened up to wider participation. Contrary to the claims made since 1980 that the decision to send Soviet troops to

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23 Rosanne Klass, “Afghanistan: The Accords,” Foreign Affairs, Summer 1988, pp. 922-45. Some observers have argued that the November 5 Soviet announcement of a “pause” in their withdrawal confirms that the Soviets have no intention of abandoning the Kabul regime. Moscow’s statement, however, carefully refrained from casting doubt on its commitment to the February 15 withdrawal deadline.

24 See the interview with Tsagolov (by Artem Borovik) in Ogonyok, July 23-30, 1988, pp. 25-27. For translation of a condensed text, see “Will Kabul Fall After Soviet Withdrawal?” The Current Digest of the Soviet Press, September 14, 1988, pp. 1-5. The same issue of Current Digest includes replies by military men who disagree with Tsagolov. The possibility of the fall of the Kabul regime was a constant theme in discussions about Afghanistan that this author had in Moscow in June 1988.


Afghanistan was made "with unanimity" after broad discussion, the party now claims that the decision was made in haste and secrecy by only five people. This group supposedly did not consult academic institutes, the Central Committee staff, or the embassy in Kabul before making the decision.27

The implications of these lessons, which are repeated and elaborated in the Soviet press, are clear. First, the problems of the PDPA are not due solely or even primarily to "external interference," but to fundamental social causes found in the nature of the Afghan social formation and the PDPA itself. Second, its problems cannot be overcome through the application of military power.

Ruling out direct military intervention does not mean that the Soviets consider they have no vital interests in Afghanistan. Rather, they have defined them less ideologically and concluded that they can better protect these interests in other ways.

Ruling out direct military intervention does not mean that the Soviets consider they have no vital interests in Afghanistan. Rather, they have defined them less ideologically and concluded that they can better protect these interests in other ways. The many policies aimed at making the Afghan state and economy structurally dependent on the Soviet Union may well be attempts to protect these interests regardless of the political complexion of a future government.

The Cordovez Proposal's Virtues

Indeed, despite continued official support for the government of Najibullah and his policy of "national reconciliation," a commentary in Izvestia by Aleksandr Bovin has spoken positively of Cordovez's proposal, Zaher Shah, and the Loya Jirga.28 Furthermore, at the request of the Soviet Union, direct talks between Soviet diplomats and the resistance are tentatively scheduled to begin in Islamabad in late November. The initial subject of discussion is limited to Soviet prisoners of war, but the two sides could also discuss political issues, as the resistance prefers.

27 Interview with former official of the International Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU who was working on Afghanistan at the time. On the earlier claims see Raymond L. Garthoff, Detente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1985), pp. 915-37, and Henry S. Bradsher, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1983), pp. 163-68. This author was told that the decision was made by Brezhnev, Ustinov, Andropov, and "two people who are still alive," presumably Gromyko and Shcherbitsky.

Cordovez's plan might protect the Soviets from the embarrassment of seeing their clients routed, or even massacred. It also reduces the chances of the radical fundamentalists directly assuming power. Perhaps to keep their options open, without endorsing Cordovez's plan, the Soviets have encouraged his efforts and have facilitated his contacts with Kabul.

If the Soviets refuse to have Najibullah step down, the mujahidin and their supporters can still gain politically by the U.N. proposal. Meanwhile, pursuing negotiations does not mean abandoning other aspects of the struggle. Abdul Haq has shown this by intensifying the military pressure on Kabul even as Najibullah has argued for exploring possibilities of a domestic political settlement.

When Cordovez presented the plan to Najibullah in Kabul on July 7, the official reception was muted. In private, the PDPA leader reportedly commended him and told him to proceed. Kabul's initial public reaction was a vaguely worded statement from the spokesman of the Foreign Ministry:

Propaganda of some foreign mass media on formation of a coalition government on a broader basis in Afghanistan ... are in contradiction with the stand of the Republic of Afghanistan in this regard ... We are of the conviction that the views and schemes which are not feasible cannot help this process [of negotiation and dialogue] and cannot envisage the high interests of the people of Afghanistan.

This is a mild statement by a sitting government, a member of the United Nations, which has been asked by the U.N. under-secretary-general to resign. Further, as mujahidin military pressure became more intense, he issued more urgent appeals for "well-intentioned assistance in achieving a domestic settlement."

Cordovez's plan received a mixed reception from the Afghan resistance. The eight Shi'a parties based in Iran offered Cordovez their support (and harshly criticized the Peshawar interim government). On the other hand, the four fundamentalist parties in the Peshawar alliance out-voted the three moderate parties, and so the alliance there did not meet with Cordovez. But then the leaders of two moderate parties, Sayyed Ahmad Gailani (alliance spokesman at that moment) and Sebghatullah Mojaddedi, issued positive statements on their own. Abdul Haq asked to speak to Cordovez's delegation; he did not do so only because of scheduling problems. Jalaluddin Haqqani, the key commander of the border tribes of Paktia province, sent a delegation of support to Cordovez's Islamabad hotel suite. A number of tribal leaders from the refugee camps also met with him, and others attempted to.

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Opinions within the resistance, however, are not simply divided between pro and con. Some commanders, as well as other persons, have argued that the proposal is a step in the right direction but needs to be modified or refined. Abdul Haq, as noted above, has suggested that the United Nations convene a Loya Jirga outside Afghanistan, perhaps at the General Assembly when it is in session. Jamiat-e Islami, in its rather mild rejection of the plan (which it said "seems impractical") noted that even during a cease-fire, the secret police and militias controlled by the PDPA might continue to work to the disadvantage of the resistance.31

Foreign Sponsors

Splits in the resistance make the actions of its foreign supporters particularly important, for the way they give aid largely determines the military strengths of the resistance parties.

Pakistani military intelligence has distributed American and other aid to the mujahidin in accord with the belief, challenged by many other observers, that the Hezb-e Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was the most effective military organization against the Soviets. This party also had an association with Pakistani intelligence going back to 1974, (when Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto first authorized aid to the Afghan fundamentalists), because it was considered to be most amenable to Pakistani interests. It also received personal support from President Zia. To the extent that this pattern continues, it strengthens those who oppose the U.N. plan or other plans involving a Loya Jirga.

Furthermore, the United States and Pakistan insist that the parties can receive aid only if they remain in the alliance and conform to its decisions. Hence the moderate leaders who favor Cordovez’s initiative cannot act on their views without losing their foreign aid.

To be sure, if the ideology of fundamentalist Islam has actually gained widespread support among the Afghan people in the course of the war, then the conflict cannot be moderated through traditional means. But if the strength of the fundamentalist parties reflects more their role as favored conduits for arms aid from Pakistan, then they are likely to lose their influence as the peace process continues. For this very reason, they may try to disrupt it.

The Pakistani government also has prevented more active participation by another force, the ex-king of Afghanistan, Zaher Shah, whom many refugees favor over the party leaders. A survey found

31 "Cordovez’s proposal seems impractical," AFGHANews, August 1, 1988, p. 4. Jamiat also argued, however, that the Loya Jirga was not an institution capable of dealing with conflicts such as that between “Islam and atheism.” Its leader, Burhanuddin Rabbani, supports a “reformed Loya Jirga,” but only after the defeat of the Kabul regime. See "Prof. Rabbani promises equal opportunities for women," AFGHANews, September 15, 1988, p. 6.
that 72 percent of male refugee respondents favored him as a future leader, and the ex-king, as Cordovez recently revealed, would be central to the formation of the government of Peace and Reconstruction. Since early 1987, however, Zaher Shah has been unsuccessfully requesting permission either to visit Pakistan or to send his representative there. Pakistan has consistently refused to grant a visa to him. At one point, Pakistan did agree to allow his representative to come, but imposed such restrictive conditions (virtual confinement to a hotel in Islamabad) that he refused to take up the offer.

This is not to say that either Washington or Islamabad unalterably opposes the Cordovez plan. Just as the Soviets are still trying to preserve as much as possible of the PDPA's power, Washington and Islamabad still hope to accomplish their preferred goals: a clear military defeat of the Soviet Union's clients (the main American interest) and the victory of those fundamentalist groups backed by Pakistan (the main Pakistani interest). If, after a certain time has passed, it seems that the mujahidin are not going to be able to win a quick military victory, Pakistan and the United States might shift their policy. The outcome of the November national elections in both countries might also lead to a policy change, especially in Pakistan.

Foreign powers alone, of course, cannot make a success of the U.N. proposal for a Government of Peace and Reconstruction — or of any other proposal. Nor can they determine the form of government for Afghanistan, as the Soviets tried and failed to do. As Naim Majrooh recently warned:

Those friends of the Afghans who do not have a clear understanding of Afghan society, its customs and traditions, but who prefer to pursue their own interests, are taking the risk of damaging hitherto friendly relations. By attempting to influence the Afghans by offering selective assistance at a time of need they may prolong the war. 33

What the friends of the Afghans can and should do is help create some of the conditions for the Afghans to make their own choices. They can do so by publicly encouraging Afghans to respond to the U.N. proposal for a Government of Peace and Reconstruction, and by supporting the search for a domestic settlement.

32 "What Do the Afghan Refugees Think? An Opinion Survey in the Camps," Afghan Information Centre Monthly Bulletin, July 1987, pp. 2-8. Although the methodology of the survey is flawed, the result is so overwhelming that the poll has some validity.