Myth and Reality in Afghan “Neutralism”

LOUIS DUPREE

The Afghans have never been truly “neutral”, but they have always tried to be, in their own diplomatic argo, bi-tarafi “without sides”, and this literally has meant without sides in the great power conflicts of the 20th century: World War I, World War II, and the Cold War.

Afghan modern history, in my interpretation, begins with Abdur Rahman (1880–1901), whose policy was “a plague on all your houses”. Contrary to popular historic myth, the British did not “place” Abdur Rahman on the throne, but they acquiesced to a fait accompli. Abdur Rahman came from exile from tsarist Central Asia toward the end of the Second Anglo–Afghan War (1878–80), and gathered followers as he approached Kabul.

The British were engaged in conflict with Sardar Mohammed Ayub Khan, Victor at Maiwand, but immediately perceived Abdur Rahman as a neutral leader, and one who would oppose the Russians as actively as he opposed them. After defeating Ayub Khan at Zor Shah on 1 September 1880, near Kandahar, the British withdrew, leaving Abdur Rahman as Amir of Kabul. 1

Abdur Rahman then engaged in “internal imperialism”, spreading his influence, if not actual control, over most of what we call Afghanistan today. During this period, tsarist Russia and British India drew his external boundaries, so that at no geographic point would British India touch tsarist Central Asia. This is now only of passing historical interest, for Soviet troops sit on the boundaries of South Asia.

And, Abdur Rahman exploited the situation unmercifully, and received assistance from both sides. To quote that maligned, so-called “jingoist imperialist poet”, Rudyard Kipling:

Abdur Rahman, the Durrani Chief, of him is the story told.
He has opened his mouth to the north and the south and they have filled his mouth with gold. 2

This pattern, of course, had its disadvantages, because Afghan political access (i.e. diplomatic relations) with the outside world was
effectively blocked. However, Abdur Rahman actually preferred it that way. He was afraid the foreign encroachments from the British and Russian sides with Afghanistan threatened his fragile independent status, because these two great regional powers might feel obliged to occupy Afghanistan in their own security interests.

Habibullah I (1901–19) succeeded his father to the throne, and continued his father’s policies vis-à-vis the British and the Russians. He visited India as a guest of the British Indian government in 1907 (2 January–27 March), and was mightily impressed with British military strength.³

The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 formalised the British control of Afghanistan’s foreign policy. The Russians agreed that Afghanistan would remain in the British “sphere of influence”.⁴

World War I tested Afghan neutrality severely. A German–Turkish team arrived in Kabul in September 1915 (remained until May 1916), and attempted to get Habibullah and Afghanistan involved in an attack on British India. Many in the Afghanistan intelligentsia, including the influential Mahmud Tarzi encouraged the amir to join the Central Powers’ military efforts.

The Germans, at one point during the war, produced posters of Kaiser Wilhelm dressed as a Hajji, and proclaimed him to be a Muslim. This propaganda was mainly aimed at those Muslims revolting against Imperial Germany’s Muslim ally, Ottoman Turkey.

Habibullah, having been exposed to British armed might, and realising that Turkey and Germany were at great distance from Afghanistan whereas the British sat directly on his frontier, held out for neutrality. This stand was at least partly responsible for his assassination on 20 February 1919. His third son, Amanullah (son-in-law to Mahmud Tarzi) who, in order to pull the country together when civil war threatened (among other things), launched the Third Anglo-Afghan War in May 1919. The war ended inconclusively after three weeks for several reasons.⁵ For one, the British were exhausted after four years of official, state-sponsored trench warfare and massacres of Europe. For another, the British escalated the war by sending bombers over Kabul, a frightening experience for a people still fighting (in some cases) with flintlocks and spears.⁶

The most important aftermath of the war was that Afghanistan gained the right to conduct its own foreign affairs, and was among the first countries to recognise the new Bolshevik regime in Russia. Lenin reciprocated and the Russians were one of the first nations to establish a diplomatic mission in Kabul. Amanullah was sympathetic to the Central Asian Muslims trying to prevent their absorption into the Bolsheviki body politique, but was powerless to help.⁷

In addition, Lenin announced that the monarchy in Afghanistan
had legitimacy at this point in time because Amanullah opposed the British Empire specifically and imperialism in general. The Russians sent DH-4 biplane bombers (manufactured during World War I with British assistance), pilots and flight crews to help create an Afghan Air Force.

Therefore, Soviet assistance to Afghanistan was not a simple post-World War II Cold War phenomenon, but goes back to the early 1920s. However, Soviet-Afghan relations, although usually officially correct, often were stormy.

To escape the landlocked image of his country, Amanullah sent emissaries to a number of European countries to seek official recognition and to establish diplomatic relations. Most European countries responded, but, as usual, the USA, knowing little about Afghanistan and caring less about the world beyond the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, remained negative.

The Royal Tour (December 1927–June 1928) of Amanullah and entourage contributed to the downfall of the young king. He was lionised virtually everywhere he went: British India, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, France, Italy, England, Germany, Poland and the Soviet Union.

Three major figures of the time had great impact on Amanullah: Mustafa Kemal Ataturk of Turkey: Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran: and Josef Stalin of the Soviet Union. Also, his anti-British stance was intensified by his visit to England.

Against the advice of some of his most trusted associates (including Mahmud Tarzi), Amanullah permitted the Soviet presence to expand. Also, he attempted social and political reforms which struck at the heart of a number of Afghan cultural traditions without an adequate military base of power to back him up, as had been suggested by Ataturk.8

A series of tribal revolts ultimately overthrew Amanullah. The British have often been accused of perpetuating — or at least encouraging — the revolts. Lawrence of Arabia is often mentioned as having a major role, but even though the heavy fist of British imperialism may have been involved (the British permitted the Musahiban brothers to move through — and to recruit in — tribal territory in their successful overthrow of Habibullah II — usually called Bacha Saqqao) the finger prints are elusive.

However, as a result of the rise of King Mohammad Nadir (1929–33) to power, Soviet political influence diminished, and that of the British was on the rise.

But when it came to economic assistance, the Afghans looked elsewhere. After World War I, several Afghan entrepreneurs (Abdul Majid Zabuli, Sher Khan Nashir, Abdul Aziz Londoni) began econ-
omic development programs on their own initiative. Naturally, their idea was to make money, but at the same time, making money helped Afghanistan begin its own economic development, which emphasised the creation of small scale industries to manufacture items which had been imported previously, such as ceramics, textiles, soap, etc.

In their search for outside assistance which they would pay for, the Afghans realised that if they went to the Soviets, the British would be unhappy and vice-versa. So always rejected by the Americans, they went to the three countries that would probably cause the least trouble in their part of the world: Germany, Italy and Japan.

Then came World War II. Afghanistan remained neutral but many of its intellectuals favoured the German cause. More important, indigenous Afghan development virtually came to a standstill. During the war, the Afghans exported their surplus agricultural products to wartime India and accumulated a large surplus of pounds sterling and US dollars. After the war, in 1946, an American company came in to help develop the massive Hilmand–Arghandab Valley Authority project, including irrigation and hydroelectric components.

The surplus funds rapidly disappeared as the American company made extensive feasibility surveys, built roads to project areas, and constructed “Little Americas” to house their technicians, instead of building dams, canals and power installations. These would come later, after millions of dollars had been loaned to Afghanistan by the Americans. In all fairness, it must be noted that millions of dollars in grants were also contributed by the Americans.

In 1955, the Cold War reached Afghanistan, which rapidly became an “Economic Korea”, and the USA and the USSR and their allies sought to gain friends and influence people through economic development projects.

Initially, an unwritten gentleman’s agreement kept the Soviets north of the Hindu Kush, and the West (mainly the USA) south of the Hindu Kush. But the Afghans in their own inimitable way, put an end to this when they announced the Soviets would develop the Ningrarah Valley Project and the Americans would build a road from Herat to the Iranian border, among other things.

In addition, the Soviets and Americans complemented each other in the areas of development. The Soviets aerially photographed the northern one-third of Afghanistan, and the Americans (under a Fairchild contract) did the same for the southern two-thirds. Common bench marks had to be established so the maps could overlap. Joint US–USSR–Afghan teams established the appropriate bench marks. The Soviets built roads from the Soviet border, the Americans built roads from the Pakistan border, and these two segments had to meet
somewhere. Again, joint teams oversaw the meeting points.

The physical facilities of Kabul International Airport were constructed by the Soviets and the Americans installed most of the electronic equipment. Plans had to be made to integrate the two.

Finally, planners from bilateral national and multi-lateral planners sat in the Afghan Ministry of Planning and devised ways of spending each other’s money.

In the post-World War II period the Afghans asked the USA to help refurbish their military establishments. Partly because the Afghans maintained their neutrality and would not join regional military pacts or sign bilateral agreements, the Americans refused. The Soviets were only too happy to take over the responsibility for training and equipping the Afghan army and air force, as well as increasing their commitments to economic development.

However, the USA did maintain a little known, little publicised but extremely important military assistance program with Afghanistan. Army and airforce officers came for advanced training in the USA. They attended various courses at the Air University (Maxwell AFB, Alabama), the various army schools at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and elsewhere. Also, young pilots learned to fly US jets and returned to Afghanistan to fly Migs. Some Afghan officers received training in both the USA and the USSR. Most came back pro-Afghan, rather than pro-Soviet or pro-American. Some were co-opted, but many of those trained in the USSR are now effective resistance fighters against the occupying Soviet troops and their puppet Afghans.

The pre-1978 Afghan voting record in the United Nations General Assembly has been criticised by many Westerners as being pro-Soviet, and following the Soviet line. The same criticism is leveled at most Third World countries. In a general sense, the opposite is true. The Soviet Union votes with the Third World. Many of the issues dealt with post-World War II independence of colonies from European imperialism. Whereas US strategic commitments with France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Great Britain, etc., precluded US support for the issues, the Soviets could freely vote with the Third World in these anti-imperialist, neo-colonial issues.

But throughout all the post-World War II period, most individual Afghans, in and out of government, remained pro-West. An interesting anecdote serves to illustrate this. In the early 1960s, Mr Francis Gary Powers, the U-2 pilot, was shot down over the USSR. The U-2 spy planes flying out of the USA Air Force Budaber air facility near Peshawar, Pakistan, had always flown over Afghanistan on their way to photograph targets inside the USSR. No protests were ever made, because the Soviets did not want the world to know that their airspace could be penetrated with such impunity.
However, the downing of Mr Powers was widely publicised, so the Afghan foreign minister, Mohammad Naim (later killed in the palace shootout during the 24–25 April 1978 leftist coup) called in US Ambassador Henry Byroade to deliver a formal protest over the illegal violation of Afghan airspace. The Ambassador accepted the protest, and turned to leave. Naim stopped him, smiled, and said, “Congratulations on your previous successes”.

A few words must be said about the role of Mohammed Daud in the period from 1953 until his death on 25 April 1978. Daud was considered by some as the “Red Prince,” but I disagree. I believe he was a genuine Afghan nationalist, a stubborn, opinionated man, who had the best interests of his country at heart. He brought in the Soviet Union to assist Afghanistan in its development because previous post-World War II regimes were leaning too much towards the West. Some Western nations were exploiting Afghanistan, and I hasten to add, in association with other Afghans. This is not the place, nor do I have the space to develop the pros and cons of Daud’s two periods in power (1953–63; 1973–78), but I feel that many of his Western-educated, Western-oriented detractors were just as responsible — even more so — for the eventual Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, for when they were in positions of power from 1963 to 1973, they failed to live up to their promises, for whatever reasons, but they did have the power. Therefore, they are directly responsible for the return of Daud in 1973, when we saw that the period of constitutional monarchy was failing. *Toman Shod*!

And the Americans must assume part of the blame for their gradual withdrawal or diminution of key assistance programs in the late 1960s, although many in the State Department and USAID fought to retain and even expand these programs.

Last, and probably the most important element of all is Islam, the great religion which evolved in the eastern end of the Mediterranean, along with Judaism and Christianity. All three are intimately related, and, in essence, proclaim the same beliefs in the human condition, and all believe in the same God. This simple fact prevents the Afghans from being neutral in the everyday condition of humankind.

In conclusion, I think we can safely say that no nation is 100% neutral. Until 1979, the Afghans were not genuinely neutral, but always strove to present a *bi-tarafi* face to the outside world. Now, however, the majority of its people are actively committed to the side of the angels.

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