The Soviet-Afghan War

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is rooted in the Pashtunistan issue. When India was partitioned in 1947 Afghanistan raised the self-determination issue for the people of Pashtunistan, or the North-West Frontier Province, which was a part of Afghanistan, but which British India had brought under control as a result of the Durand Agreement of 1893. After Pakistan became a member of the US-sponsored regional military alliances of CEATO and CENTO, the US supported Pakistan on Pashtunistan, and, moreover, refused Afghanistan permission to purchase weapons in America. To modernize its army Afghanistan turned to the Soviet Union whose leader Nikita Khrushchev granted it loans and aid which ultimately by 1978 in the atmosphere of the Cold War reached $1.250 billion in military and $1.265 billion in economic aid while American aid during the same period amounted to $523 million in economic aid. The aid enabled the Soviet Union to penetrate the Afghan government and army through thousands of its advisers and the exchange of numerous official delegations between the two countries, even though their socio-political systems were radically different. With the expansion of the educated middle class and the democratic atmosphere of the constitutional decade, political parties of all shades of opinion arose among which was the communism-oriented pro-Moscow PDPA.

Hafizullah Amin, a leader of the Khalq faction of the PDPA, recruited over 300 military officers with whose help he toppled President Mohammad Da'wud in a coup on April 27, 1978, after his senior comrades had been imprisoned. The PDPA monopolized the new government headed by President Noor Mohammad Taraki with Amin as deputy premier and minister of external affairs. However, the people rejected it in numerous uprisings, all of which the army suppressed. Through the intelligence service (AGSA), Khalqi faction, and Khalqi-dominated army, the government ruled by imprisoning, terrorizing and liquidating. While the Soviet Union's extensive provision of military hardware and economic aid helped the government to consolidate itself, its wide-range association with it made it unpopular with the people, despite its land reforms and the issuance of eight edicts in favor of the commoners. Even the Soviet Union became disillusioned when the government began suppressing the Parcham faction of the PDPA after it had sent its senior leaders abroad as ambassadors and later dismissed them.

Acting as a "big brother", the Soviet Union devised a scheme for a national democratic government, to be composed of both factions and led by Taraki and Babrak Karmal, the exiled leader of the Parcham faction who
was a pliant partisan of Moscow, while Premier Amin was to be sent abroad as an ambassador. At this time Taraki and Amin were at variance with each other, and the latter had unsuccessfully asked the former to dismiss the scheming chief of AGSA along with three cabinet ministers. During two meetings with the Soviet leaders in Moscow on September 10 and 11 President Taraki agreed to execute their scheme. However, in Kabul, it went awry. First, the plot by AGSA’s chief, Asad Allah Sarwari, to gun down Amin while on his way to the airport to receive Taraki was foiled. Sarwari’s other plan, that Amin be eliminated on his way to meet President Taraki also failed. This happened on September 14 after the Soviet ambassador, Alexander Puzanov, assured Amin over the telephone of his safety. Present with Taraki in his office were also Soviet generals, B.S. Ivanov, and Ivan Pavlovskiy, who had arrived in Kabul in mid-August at the head of a military mission to assess the situation. When Amin entered the corridor leading to the presidential office he was fired at; his chief of secretariat was shot dead, while Amin escaped safely and took control of the situation.

The incident became a source for a chain of events that ultimately led to the Soviet invasion. Premier Amin became President Amin after he officially assumed all titles of Taraki, who was on October 9 suffocated. The conspirators found a safe haven with the Soviets and then smuggled to the Soviet Union. President Amin asked Puzanov to hand them over, but he denied the knowledge of their whereabouts. At the request of foreign office, Puzanov was replaced by Fikrat Tabeyev. To soften the regime, Amin appointed a constitutional commission, released some political prisoners, promised to free the rest, and declared the identities of twelve thousand inmates who had been eliminated. The government adopted the slogan of “security, legality and justice”, but it also began the second round of repression of the Parchamis. Amin had become disenchanted with communism.

Amin also attempted to come to terms with the rebels who were recruiting their fighters among the four hundred thousand Afghan refugees in Pakistan. For this and other purposes Amin established a dialogue with Pakistan, and tried to improve relations with all countries especially the United States on the basis of a balanced foreign policy. Pakistan responded positively to Amin’s overtures, but the US did not because its ambassador in Kabul had been mysteriously murdered after the government opponents had kidnapped him in February. Actually, the US considered Afghanistan to be under the Soviet grip, and mistrusted Amin although he had told its charge d’ affaires that “If Brezhnev himself should ask him to take any action against
Afghan independence, he would not hesitate 'to sacrifice his life' in opposition to such a request."

President Amin's main concern was Russia whose 5,500 advisers had obtained a commanding position in military and civilian departments. On this issue his instruction was that they should be treated only as advisers. His government was anxious to have close ties with Moscow, hoping to obtain economic assistance and military aid. It gave out that friendship with the Soviet Union was an integral part of "Afghan patriotism." But the suffocation of Taraki had angered Leonid Brezhnev, as he had endeared himself to the Soviet leaders by assuring them that "We will never be as close to anyone else as we are to you. We are the pupils of Lenin." The Soviet government maintained the appearance of friendship with Kabul, and diplomatic meetings took place as usual right up to the invasion. Actually, it was Amin's change of heart, his commanding position in the party and the army, his dynamic and persuasive personality, and, above all, his style of independent ruling, coupled with his open desire for American aid that alarmed the Soviet leaders some of whom believed that he might become another Sadat, in which case the southern flank of their empire would become insecure. As Harrison states, by November the GRU and the KGB agreed that "Amin was dangerously unreliable." It was, however, on 12 December that a few in the Politburo headed by Brezhnev decided to invade Afghanistan after they had been persuaded by the KGB's Vladimir Khrychkov that "there was no way to get rid of Amin without the presence of Soviet troops." On December 27, the Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan, murdered Amin and installed Karmal at the head of a new government.

The decision to intervene was unpopular and the military chief of staff and the commander of ground forces were against it. However, the Politburo was too powerful for dissidents and the Soviet government stated that "We are responding to an appeal from the Afghan leadership to repel outside aggression. We are responding with limited forces and for a limited time and as soon as the need is through we will get out."

In Afghanistan the response to the aggression was overwhelmingly patriotic. Initially, city population and students came out against it, and afterward the cause was upheld by the organized fighters or the mujahideen who drove away the communists from the countryside, and encircled urban centers and garrisons, a situation which remained basically unaltered throughout the occupation period. Many governments in the West and the Arab world condemned the invasion, and some particularly the USA and Saudi Arabia supported the mujahideen with millions of dollars with which the mujahideen were provided with modern weapons and other necessities of
war after these governments became convinced that they were genuinely determined in their cause. The USA also granted hefty aid to Pakistan for serving as a front line state and welcoming the continuous waves of Afghan refugees. The aid enabled the mujahideen to fight indefinitely although the Islamic Tanzimat which organized them were manipulated by the ISI similar to the Karmal regime which the Soviets controlled. However, the war continued unabated until the Soviet Union under Michael Gorbachov agreed to withdraw its troops by February 15, 1989 after the United Nations sponsored Geneva Agreement was concluded in April 1988.

The Soviet Afghan war cost the Afghans over one million men, and the destruction of their land, while the Soviet casualties were officially declared to be over 15,000, but the actual figure was much higher. The war also hastened the demise of the Soviet Union itself which occurred in December 1991. Its unintended consequences in Afghanistan were the uprooting of Marxism- Leninism, and, conversely, the emergence of the Islamic Tanzimat as a strong force and the consolidation of Islamic beliefs with far reaching consequences, nationally as well as internationally.