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An Anatomy of events Led to Soviet Attack on Afghanistan

Abstract

This paper mainly deals with the chain of events that led to the Soviet attack on Afghanistan. This was one of the major events which took place during the last two decades of the twentieth century. As a result of this event, Afghanistan faced a massive economic loss. A lot of Afghan people lost their lives and about 4 million people migrated to Pakistan. Although it was a matter directly related to two countries i.e.; USSR and Afghanistan but it had profound effect on Pakistan and the US as well. This event did not take place all of a sudden but USSR planned it for two decades and staged it at the end of 1970s. This article explains the factors and circumstances which led to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Keywords: Pakistan, USSR, Soviet Intervention, Afghanistan, South Asia

Geography of Afghanistan:

Afghanistan is a Middle Eastern state situated in the southwest region of Central Asia. Its territory covers 655,000 square kilometers. Afghanistan shares about 5400 km long border with former USSR, about 800 kilometers long border with Iran, about 2200 km long border with Pakistan and just about 70 km long border with China. The border with Soviet Union mainly consists of Amu and Panj rivers and their channels (Wilson, 2002). The border with Iran is consisted of some plains, hilly areas and deserts, while Afghan border with Pakistan and China mainly runs through mountains (Wilson, 2002)¹. Afghanistan is regarded as a land locked land as no big ocean touches its boundary. Due to its mountainous geography it is perfect for guerilla fighting. Traditional war is not easy in the region and requires proper skill and acquaintance with the hilly patches and the passes that run through these mountains. The mountains at Afghanistan border with Pakistan are not as high and their heights vary from 2,000 to 3,500 meters (Wilson, 2002)². Between these mountains, there are narrow dry valleys which are used by the people of Afghanistan to come to Pakistan and India. These valleys are also not easy to travel through.

The country did not have adequate factories at the time of Soviet invasion and jobs were also not available to encounter the necessity of the people. Due to unstable political conditions, Afghanistan could not find a stable government since a decade or more before the Soviet invasion. That is why over 85 percent of the population of Afghanistan was involved in agriculture. Due to dry land, most of the agriculture of Afghanistan was consisted of farming and domestic animals kept by the nomadic people. Population of Afghanistan is 1.7 million and about 25

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people per square kilometer is the density of the population. In the main cities this density is many times greater than the average density. For example, in Kabul population density is about 300 people per square kilometer and in Herat it is about 150 people per square kilometer (Wilson, 2002)³. We find diversity in the origin of the population as there are people from over 20 nationalities belonging to various language groups. Pashtuns are the largest group, consisting of approximately nine million people which are more than half. Other main ethnic groups in Afghanistan include Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazars and Turks. Most of the population is Muslim out of which 90% are Sunni Muslims and 10% are Shia Muslims (Wilson, 2002)⁴. The conduct of classic military operations and combat, using the existing regulations and manuals of the Soviet Armed Forces, was practically impossible in light of the extremely difficult physical and geographic conditions.

Geostrategic Location and brief History of Afghanistan:

Before going through the events of war, it is significant to have a close look on the geostrategic position of Afghanistan and its brief history. The history of Afghanistan reflects back to eighteenth century when Afghan King Nadir Shah Durrani's rule ended after his assassination by one of his own guards. Afghanistan had to pass through different wars with the British. Then Amir Abdul Rehman tried to unify this country through internal invasions which was distributed among several independent tribes and regions. For this reason, Abdul Rahman is regarded as "Iron Amir" among the people of Afghanistan (Tomson, 2011)⁵.

When British came to the sub-continent, Afghanistan was an independent territory. The British fought a number of battles with the people of Afghanistan to include this region under their control but they could not do so due to the fighting spirit of these people. At last in 1893, the British after complete failure in including it in its dominion accepted its existence. On November 12, 1893, Sir Mortimer Durand established a 2430-kilometer-long border with the British dominion. This was a single page agreement which was signed between Amir Abdul Rehman, the Afghan ruler, and Sir Mortimer Durand. That is why it is regarded as Durand Line (Smith)⁶. Throughout the British rule in the subcontinent this region served the role of a buffer state between the British and the Soviet Union. It was also quite interesting fact about Afghanistan that from 1880 to 1979 no foreign invader could capture any of Afghan cities. Moreover, this region remained under the rule of Durrani Pashtuns from 1747 to 1978 (Walter, 2014)⁷. This shows the fighting spirit and qualities of Afghans as well as Durrani Pashtun warriors.

The geography of Afghanistan is one of the main reasons of its importance for the great powers of the world. When the British were ruling the Indo Pak subcontinent, they also attacked for a number of times to capture and bring it under their jurisdiction. But they failed to do so they regarded it as the buffer zone between the British and the USSR. I think it was in favour of the British that Afghanistan was not under their dynasty. If they would have captured it then the British would be in direct contact with their boundary as Afghanistan had a large boundary with USSR.

Background of Soviet Attack on Afghanistan:

This land had been a source of great temptation for the super powers of the world. If we have a look on the map of the region then we come to know that out of four countries of the region including Pakistan, India, Iran and Afghanistan the easiest target could be Afghanistan as it had become weak due to internal fights after the removal of Zahir Shah. For the US this land could serve the best land to tackle the Russians. For the Russians this land was meant more than their life. Being surrounded by the cold and frozen seas, USSR had three options to reach the warm waters of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. First was through China, the second was through Iran and the third one was through Afghanistan. China was not suitable country for the USSR to attack as it was an emerging super power and had great manpower available to fight against a foreign invasion. Moreover, it was a communist nation and to restrict it was against the aim of USSR. Iran was also not an appropriate way because it saw an Islamic revolution just before Soviet invasion and turned Islamic Republic. Afghanistan got much geopolitical importance during the period of cold war between US and USSR in mid-twentieth century. For the US its location was most suitable to contain the USSR and for the USSR this region was more than oxygen because it was the only way through which USSR could access the warm waters of the Arabian Sea. Although USSR is surrounded by seas including East Siberian Sea, Barents Sea, Kara Sea, Laptev Sea, Bering Sea, and mighty Arctic Ocean but all of them are frozen so it is not possible for the USSR to use them for trade. The only way suitable for trade leads to the Arabian Sea through Afghanistan and Pakistan. So, both US and USSR started assistance programs for Afghanistan. Afghanistan was peaceful and stable under Zahir Shah. He ruled this country for four decades till July 13, 1973 when a coup led by his cousin Sardar Daud was successful and he had to go to room on exile. He was later on given the title of "Father of Afghanistan". Before Zahir Shah the people of Afghanistan gave this title to Ahmed Shah Durrani (Walter, 2014)⁸.

At the time of Pakistan's independence on August 14, 1947, one of the most important problems faced by Pakistan was the issue of the border with Afghanistan which is situated in the West. This border is about 2430 Km long and is chiefly composed of hilly areas. Although Durand Line was demarcated between Afghanistan and the British India but this border was of less significance due to the mutual relations between ethnic groups living on either side. These tribes were so unevenly distributed that Durand Line also bifurcated their lands and tribes. So the geographical declaration of the boundary was not accepted by the tribes in its true sense. After its demarcation many incursions were observed during the British rule as well (Ahmedzai, 2017)⁹. Actually, Afghanistan had close relation with the people of tribal areas of Pakistan. Both the regions have common language, culture, dress, customs and traditions. An important thing was that people were bound in different kind of relations as well and for this reason they had to go to visit their relatives across the border. It is also said that the people of tribal areas and Afghanistan used to cross the borders to graze their sheep and goats and, in the evening, they used to return to their homes. In such situation it was not possible to seal the long border completely or to impose any kind of restriction on the people.

Although, people of KPK decided to join Pakistan but some chaos was observed when Afghan government and its ethnic ally Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan of the Congress raised the demand of some other options including the choice of being an independent state or to join Afghanistan (Cheema, 1990)¹⁰. With the support of Congress and the Afghan government, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his party continued their demands. They argued that Durand Line was drawn according to an agreement between Afghan government and the British. Now as the British had left so the agreement had lost its significance. Pakistan was not a party of the agreement so the Durand Line was no more active and should be removed to give the people of same ethnicity an opportunity to live together as an independent state or under the government of Afghanistan (Ahmedzai, 2017)¹¹.

At the time of creation of Pakistan, Afghan government managed to establish good relations with both the US and the Soviet Union. When Pakistan entered into some alliances with the US then US stopped its assistance to the Afghanistan as it got a dependable ally in the shape of Pakistan. But the USSR gained a sound influence in Afghanistan with the passage of time (Ahmedzai, 2017)¹². Afghanistan had been serving a role of buffer zone between the British and USSR. The strength of the British did not allow USSR to think about entering Afghanistan. But in 1947, when British left the region, USSR got the opportunity to influence Afghanistan (Tomson, 2011)¹³. US just assisted Afghanistan in developing its agriculture in early 1950s in the plains along Helmand River and also built Kandahar Airport but USSR assisted Afghanistan in many ways. It helped Afghan government in the form of building dams, airfields, schools and irrigation schemes. The relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan were becoming worse and reached to its peak when in 1961, Afghan Prime Minister Sardar Daud raised the question of Pashtoonistan. He also had some support from Pakistani politicians on this issue including Bacha Khan and his party. His concept of Pashtunistan was not clearly defined and for the same reason it was not welcomed by the majority of the people of KPK. It was also noticeable that some Baluch tribes in Pakistan wondered why Sardar Daud included Baluchistan within Pashtunistan without their approval (Tomson, 2011)¹⁴. Actually, Sardar Daud took advantage of the reservations which Baluch tribes were having with the government of Pakistan. But that was related to some internal administrative issues only. Anyhow, after this development, Ayub Khan decided to close the border with Afghanistan in August 1961 (Ziring, 1990)¹⁵.

US also had some concerns about Sardar Daud's actions which he was doing to please USSR. The start of border issue and raising the slogan of Pashtunistan was no doubt possible with the backing of USSR. US President Kennedy and his administration was conscious about it and in 1961 US National Security Council memorandum it was mentioned that US should try to resolve the border issue of Afghanistan with Pakistan and some steps should be taken to encourage Afghanistan to minimize its reliance on the USSR regarding military training and equipment (Tomson, 2011)¹⁶. That is why several hundred Afghan military officers were invited by the US to participate in International Military Education and Training (IMET) program in the United States (Tomson, 2011)¹⁷. US provided major assistance to Afghanistan in the field of education. More than 2000 Afghan students were invited to US and in some other western countries to get education

from elementary school through college. Major part done by some universities of the US including, Columbia University, Indiana University, the University of Wyoming, Southern Illinois University and University of Nebraska at Omaha (Ahmedzai, 2017)¹⁸. The Center for Afghanistan Studies located at University of Nebraska Omaha is one the example of the whole development (Ahmedzai, 2017)¹⁹. Sardar Daud's attitude was autocratic and he even crossed the King in making some decisions which was not liked by the King Zahir Shah. So, in 1964, Sardar Daud was asked to step down by the king, and a new constitution was passed which offered more liberal freedom than Sardar Daud's strong and strict regime. At that time USSR had achieved a great impact on Afghanistan through KGB (USSR intelligence agency) and GRU (also a USSR intelligence agency) (Tomson, 2011)²⁰. The new constitution introduced by Afghan government also helped the communist sympathizer to gain power. As a consequence, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was founded in 1965, with active KGB's involvement, under the leadership of Nur Muhammad Tarakai (Tanner, 2002)²¹. Nur Muhammad Tarakai had established his close relations with KGB in 1951 when he was recruited by this agency and given the code name as "Nur" (Tomson, 2011)²². He also worked as the press and cultural attaché at the Afghan embassy in Washington in 1953 and then on Soviet instructions, Tarakai works as translator at the American embassy's US aid mission from 1956 to 1958 and later on in 1962-63 he worked in US embassy in Afghanistan and his job was to translate the important news from the Afghan press and to send its summary to Washington (Tomson, 2011)²³.

Soon PDPA became much powerful in the country. It was the right time for KGB to move towards the plan of achieving communist objectives in the region. The first step in this regard was probably to get rid of the King Zahir Shah who was having close ties with the US. But the problem was that Nur Muhammad Tarakai was not capable to accomplish this task. However, Sardar Daud was the right person to do this job as he had a vast experience of administration during his prime minister ship and he also had close relations with some military high officials who could be more effective in launching this plan. Moreover, Sardar Daud was not happy with Zahir Shah's decision of removing him from the office of Prime Minister. Later on, in 1964 constitution of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah made one provision which was later known as "Daud Clause". According to article 24 it was approved that no member from the Royal House should participate in any political party and to take the important office within the country such as Prime Minister or minister, member of parliament, Justice of Supreme Court (Tomson, 2011)²⁴. This clause also infuriated Sardar Daud Khan so he was making some underground planning against the government. KGB was backing him and for taking revenge from the King, Sardar Daud planned to dethrone him when he was on an official visit to Italy. Sardar Daud managed it in 1973 without a single drop of blood. This easy coup was made possible only with the support of KGB, PDPA and other military elements within Afghan army who were having close relations with Sardar Daud (Ziring, 1990)²⁵. Zahir Shah had to take asylum in Italy. At that time Soviet interference had reached to a great extent in Afghanistan. Sardar Daud after assuming sole power in the country, tried to reduce Soviet impact in the country. He took some steps which were not welcomed by the USSR. He started to build good relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia which were not pro-communist.

Moreover, he also tried to reconcile Afghan and Pakistan relations which were not going well on the issue of Pashtunistan. Interesting thing was that the issue was also his own assumption. As advancement in this regard Bhutto and Sardar Daud made exchange visits to their neighboring countries (Raees, 1994)²⁶. Within his own government, Sardar Daud also started to discourage the communist elements but he was too late in his actions. USSR was closely monitoring the developments and USSR head of the state Leonid Brezhnev pointed towards everything before Sardar Daud during his visit to Soviet Union from April 12-15, 1977. Brezhnev mentioned his reservations about ignoring communist elements in the government. He also showed his anger about Daud's criticism about Cuba and Ethiopia which were also communist countries (Hutson, 2017)²⁷. The main event which accelerated the change of government in Afghanistan was the event of assassination of a communist leader Mir Khyber Ali on April 19, 1978. During his funeral ceremony more than 2000 people were gathered to participate in the ceremony and to listen to the speeches of Hafeez Ullah Amin, Babrak Karmil and Nur Muhammad Tarakai. Daud order arrest of these leaders but the speed of his action against the communist leaders was quite slow which made it possible for pro-communist elements of Afghanistan and USSR to play their role in over throwing Sardar Daud from the government. A large number of communists marched out in the country as protest against this assassination the arrest of communist leaders. Sardar Daud tried to cease this protest with iron hands but the intensity of the protest was beyond his expectations. On 27 April 1978, his palace was surrounded by communist backed troops. The rebels also took full control of Kabul Airport, and used MIG-21 aircraft to destroy the palace (Tanner, 2002)²⁸. Sardar Daud's loyal forces were defeated and most of the family members of his family were assassinated. This bloody revolution was named the "Saur Revolution" as April is also called "saur" in Pashto language. After this revolution, a large number of Soviet experts entered Afghanistan. Noor Muhammad Tarakai took the charge of the government. USSR did not publicize its involvement in the Afghan internal affairs up to its full grip on the government which had been accomplished by the entrance of Tarakai as the head of the state. The chief of KGB's First Directorate, Vladimir Kryuchkov was the first high level USSR official who paid an official visit to Kabul after the coup (Tomson, 2011)²⁹. Tarakai was also satisfied on USSR full cooperation in bringing him to power. He regarded this Saur Revolution similar to Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 regarding significance (Hutson, 2017)³⁰.

As soon as Tarakai took control over the government, a lot of Soviet advisors entered in Afghanistan. According to an estimate their number increased from 200 to 2500 in a few months. People used to joke that even an Afghan cook had a Soviet advisor (Tomson, 2011)³¹. Although Tarakai was constantly claiming that Afghanistan was non-aligned but actually it had established close ties with USSR. On December 5, 1978, an agreement was signed between Tarakai and Brezhnev in Kremlin. According to one clause of this agreement it was agreed that USSR and Afghanistan would consult each other to take appropriate measures to ensure the security, independence and territorial integrity of the two countries. According to Peter Tomson, this was the clause on the basis of which USSR justified its invasion of Afghanistan (Tomson, 2011)³².

Tarakai started to accomplish the communist agenda in the country for which he was brought to power. But resistance to this agenda by some non-communist elements of the country began to grow in different parts of the country. Some measures which were taken by the new government directly contradicted the traditions and cultural norms of the tribal Afghan society. The other main reason of the new government was land reforms, which included distribution of land and control of irrigation channel by Ministry of Water and Energy. Seeds and fertilizers were provided to the peasants on loan with on difficult terms and the condition of poor peasants went worse (Hutson, 2017)³³. Government also made some laws about women which were either contradictory to Islam or the traditions of the tribes. For example, it was proposed that men and women would have equal rights in the field of civil laws which was not matching to Pashtun tradition (Hutson, 2017)³⁴. Moreover, according to this law, parents could not arrange marriage of their girls with their mutual consent. As Afghanistan society was a male dominated society so these laws were not accepted by them and they regarded it as the intervention of their family affairs (Raees, 1994)³⁵. Being non-Islamic nature and having full backing of the USSR, these laws were rejected by the people of Afghanistan (Ahmedzai, 2017)³⁶. People not only rejected these reforms but also initiated a wide spread protest against them. Soon these revolts spread in the Kunar, Badakhshan and Central Hindukush regions. These regions became a hotbed of anti - government resistance. Thousands of government soldiers deserted, taking their weapons and equipment along with them (Tanner, 2002)³⁷. The grip of USSR over the situation was getting weaker day by day which finally resulted in Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December, 1979. Moreover, in February 1979, the US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Adolf Dubs was kidnapped and was killed in a failed rescue effort. CIA blamed about Hafizullah Amin's hand before this whole incident (Coll, 2004)³⁸. Later on, forensics tests showed that nine out of twenty bullets from his body were fired by a 0.22 caliber weapon but in the room, it was shown by Afghan government that only a machine gun and a higher caliber gun were present in the room and it was announced that these weapons belong to the kidnappers (Tomson, 2011)³⁹. The intensity of the rebellion movement in the country had increased to a great extent that in March 1979, the Afghan army used massive fire power and air support to suppress a rebellion in the city of Herat, which resulted in more than 5000 casualties (Coll, 2004)⁴⁰. It was not favour of Afghan government that more than 100 Soviet advisors were also killed in this attack and their bodies were hung on the poles which was not tolerated by the USSR at any cost. Moscow decided to take stern action in this regard and the replacement of Tarakai with Hafeez Ullah Amin was also included in their agenda (Tanner, 2002)⁴¹. This wave of violence spread across the country rapidly and in August, the same year, the Soviet backed forces suppressed a rebellion in Kunar with iron hands. Tanks and gunship helicopters were used which resulted in indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians. The whole development in Afghanistan made the Soviet government to think about replacing Nur Muhammad Tarakai with Hafizullah Amin. In December 12, 1979, meeting of the selected group of Kremlin's leaderships, took the fateful decision of sending in the Red Army to accelerate the Communist Revolution (Hutson, 2017)⁴².

Just a few months earlier to this invasion of Afghanistan, the world witnessed a great change when in Iran, Ayatullah Khomeini ousted US most trusted ally, the Shah of Iran. US had lost its most credible ally and intelligence bases in the region. Now US needed regaining control over the region through other means and the most suited for them at that time was Afghanistan. This change in Iran was also not in favour of USSR so for them the survival of a pro-Moscow regime in the strategically vital Afghanistan became a major priority (Tanner, 2002)⁴³. Before the incident of the revolution in Iran the war in Afghanistan was just a war between pro-Soviet forces and the Afghan tribes but now as the US were also in search of a military base in the region so the limited war was going to be transformed into a war between two super powers (Ahmedzai, 2017)⁴⁴.

CONCLUSION

Although there are a number of factors which were responsible for the Soviet attack on Afghanistan but the most significant factor was that USSR was considering it an easy target or a two days game. It was the geostrategic location of Afghanistan which was a source of temptation for the super powers. Afghanistan is a Muslim country and its natural alliance could be with Pakistan. But due to some reservations on border issues, Afghanistan raised the voice for Pashtunistan through its close associates in Pakistan. Therefore, Afghanistan tried to seek assistance from USSR in different field which resulted in political influence of the Communists over Afghanistan. Internal political conflicts within the royal family of Zahir Shah and later on between different political fractions of the Afghan government also aroused the intentions of the USSR to attack it. The changed political scenario as a result of the revolution in Iran also had a profound effect on the politics of the region.

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