

Afghanistan: Hard Choices for the U.S.

BY HELMUT SONNENFELDT

There is no doubt that the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan is a crisis, and a different sort of crisis than the kind we have been accustomed to over the years of the cold war and the period that came to be known as détente. The condition that we now confront is unlikely to be confined in time and space in the same manner that many of the postwar crises had been. The Berlin crises were serious and worrisome, but they came and went and some degree of normality was restored. We had a very serious and dangerous crisis over the Soviet deployment of missiles in Cuba in 1962, but that too came and went. We had crises over the Middle East, and even wars in Korea and Vietnam. Obviously, these past thirty years have been far from crisis-free! But I think we have here a manifestation of a number of serious problems and conditions that are likely to leave the world a different place from what we knew before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. President Carter said early in January that this invasion represented the greatest threat to peace since the Second World War. In some respects that is the case; in any event, it is a situation whose seriousness and implications cannot be underestimated. The reasons why these events occurred—indeed, are occurring—are of course in dispute and open to discussion. Certainly, they are in dispute between the United States and the Soviet Union, and they're in dispute between much of the world and the Soviet Union.

I think it may be best to see these events in two contexts. One has to do with the events in Afghanistan itself. There we had, until 1978, a nonaligned country quite friendly to the Soviet Union in its international political orientation, but not in any sense exclusively in the Soviet domain. Other countries, including the United States, had access to it, but still Afghanistan represented from the standpoint of the Soviet Union a relatively tranquil and positive associate and neighbor in the region. What precisely brought on the coup in 1978 is still clouded in obscurity. In any event, there

was a coup, even if in the Soviet Union it is viewed as a socialist revolution in which a friendly, nonaligned regime was replaced by a Communist one. This regime was subsequently and almost immediately given strong support (psychological as well as practical) from the Soviet Union in its endeavors to establish itself, endeavors that clearly ran into difficulty.

It is evident that by late 1979 the Communist rulers of Afghanistan were unable to govern the country, and under these conditions the Soviet Union, claiming to have been called into the country, moved in with massive military force. The legal basis by which the Soviets justified their invasion/occupation was the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation that had been signed with the new Afghan regime after the 1978 coup. As such (and this is an important point to bear in mind), this Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation served for the Soviet Union the same purpose that the Warsaw Pact had previously served in the occupations of Czechoslovakia and Hungary, when circumstances there threatened to run out of control from the Soviet standpoint. In other words, after the coup the Soviets considered that Afghanistan had in fact (and it appears de jure as well) become a member of the socialist camp and was therefore subject to its disciplines—which is to say, the right of the Soviet Union to intervene under whatever pretext might be established when things went badly. In these circumstances, the question of whether the Soviet action constituted a defensive or offensive act becomes relatively immaterial. What I think can be said of the event is that the Soviets acted defensively to maintain an offensive position that had been acquired the previous year.

There is no doubt that from Moscow's vantage point the events in Afghanistan did look as if they were running out of control and that this provided a powerful motive for indirect and then direct action. Such action might not have been so profoundly disturbing to the surrounding area and to the world at large if there had not been in the previous several years a broad pattern of Soviet interventional behavior. This pattern gave rise to the widespread judgment that the Soviet Union had become a power with an ever-expanding conception of its security interests, and had indeed reached what may be called a neo-imperial phase in its development as a nation. The growth of Soviet military power, which is the essential attribute of the growth of the Soviet Union in the last twenty-five years, was inexorable and mas-

Helmut Sonnenfeldt is currently a Guest Scholar at the Brookings Institution in Washington and co-author of a recent Adelphi Paper, "Soviet Perspectives on Security." Prior to his retirement from the State Department and Foreign Service in 1977 he served as the Department's Counselor of U.S.-European and East-West relations. This article is adapted from his address at a CRIA Conversation in late February.

sive. Since the accession of Brezhnev in 1964, the Soviet defense budget has increased annually something like 4 to 5 per cent in real terms; this means that it has doubled in approximately fifteen years. The proportion of GNP involved is in the area of 13-15 per cent, perhaps rising as Soviet GNP itself declines. This is a massive and persistent commitment to the growth of military power in all its dimensions—strategic, regional with respect to Europe, regional with respect to China, and in more recent years with respect to the capacity of the Soviet Union to use military instrumentalities directly or indirectly at great distances from the Eurasian land mass.

In the 1970s the Soviets made increasing use of military instrumentalities in the projection of Soviet influence and presence. In most instances the original circumstances that brought Soviet arms, equipment, technicians, and then proxy military forces to the scene were essentially local instabilities in a particular part of the world, most notably in Africa. Probably there was no particular pattern to these interventions; nevertheless by the late 1970s there were enough of these instances that a pattern had developed almost by its own momentum. There is a dispute in the West as to whether Soviet behavior operates according to some master plan or whether it is essentially a form of opportunism. This debate is hard to resolve, but the fact remains that as one looks at the growth of physical military power throughout the world one sees Soviet presences of various sorts from the Caribbean, where it established itself in 1962, to several parts of Africa, the Arabian peninsula, Vietnam, and now Southwest Asia. It therefore becomes relatively inconsequential whether one envisages the Politburo meeting in Moscow with a map and a timetable or whether one simply looks at what has happened. It is a pattern that cannot be ignored; it has become a part of the international landscape. There is no reason to believe that from the vantage point of Moscow, given the instabilities that abound in the world, this pattern is likely to change substantially.

CONNECTIONS

Against this context also the events in Afghanistan have to be seen—a combination of local circumstances and the broader pattern of behavior we have witnessed over the last ten years. It is important to note that while the justification for Soviet involvement in Angola, Southern Africa generally, and East Africa is support of the national liberation struggle or the invitation of a regime, in each case, even where the Cubans are the dominant factor present, there are Soviet military operations carried on that have nothing to do with the local conflict and grievance. That is to say, the Soviet Air Force and Navy use Luanda for purposes entirely related to Soviet strategic interests in the South Atlantic. The Soviets operate in Vietnam for purposes beyond those related to Vietnam's particular problems with China, or even Vietnam's operations in Cambodia, but connected entirely with the Soviet Navy, Air Force, and intelligence operations on a worldwide basis.

There are several particular consequences of the Soviet action in Afghanistan. First, it clearly represents a

new Soviet position in Southwest Asia. Though perhaps never to be pacified, Afghanistan is a country with a road network (constructed partly by the United States and partly by the Soviet Union) and important airfields that make it not simply a remote place, nor indeed even a buffer, but potentially a base from which military operations can be conducted in adjacent areas. Second, this Soviet position, unlike its positions in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, occurs in a region that is itself militarily weak and plagued by political turbulence. Third, this event has occurred in a region of the world that is crucial to the economic health and well-being of the world at large, particularly of the Western, industrialized world, because of both its oil resources and waterways. Fourth, the Soviet position in Afghanistan is clearly related to its attempt to surround China with positions or countries closely associated with the Soviet Union—a reaction to its anxiety about an encirclement stemming from the possible alliance between China, Japan, Western Europe, and the United States.

With respect to the Near East itself, the position in Afghanistan must be related to the Soviet presence on the Arabian peninsula, the potential instability on that peninsula, and to the Soviet position on the nearby African Horn. Of course, there is a wider context to this situation that has to do with the broad state of relations between the Soviet Union and the United States and between the Soviet Union and the Western world generally. Those relationships had their positive and hopeful elements ten years ago. At that time there was little doubt that Soviet military power was in the process of growing in all dimensions, nor was there doubt that the Soviet Union sought to have its influence felt in every part of the world. It is also true that the Soviet Union considered itself entitled to such a position in the world by virtue of its ideological pretensions. But there was an additional aspect of this Soviet evolution in the early 1970s—a clear indication from Moscow that the Soviet Union sought not only to contest the position of the United States as a major power, but that it expected to participate in the international system for beneficial and constructive purposes.

The 24th Party Congress in 1971 made clear that in the view of the Soviet leaders the Soviet economy had reached a stage at which it could no longer function entirely autarchically, that it had to find connections with the international economy—for capital, for manufactured goods, for technology. There was also a recognition in Moscow that this aspect of the Soviet interest in international relationships required a certain degree of international political tranquillity—not passivity, but sufficient restraint to make possible these more beneficial aspirations with respect to the outside world. It was in these circumstances that the Nixon administration sought to devise a broad-gauged strategy for dealing with the Soviet Union in a manner that would both protect American interests and lessen the likelihood of a catastrophic war. These policies came to be known (regrettably perhaps, because of the distortions that came with it) as the “détente policies of the 1970s.” On the one hand, they sought to maintain a balance of military strength and a clear definition of American interests; on the other hand, they declared American

readiness, along with our allies, to engage in negotiations on limiting the intensity and scope of military programs and to provide opportunities for economic interaction on the basis of mutual advantage. But it was clear that in the view of the Nixon administration these beneficial aspects in the relationship, particularly the economic, had to bear some connection to the state of political and security relations. This, roughly speaking, is what came to be known as the notion of "linkage"—another word that unfortunately became grossly oversimplified and interpreted in far too technical and tactical terms. Unfortunately, this approach to relations with the Soviet Union was imperfectly implemented in the mid-1970s by the United States and others, and so failed to have the desired impact on the dual manner in which the Soviet Union emerged into the world: as an assertive power on the one hand, but also as a power seeking beneficial relationships.

The reasons for the inadequate construction of these policy elements had to do partly with our own domestic difficulties (the divisions and uncertainties of Vietnam, Watergate, the decline in presidential authority, the problem between president and executive), with inadequate coordination with other countries, and, of course, with the fact that the Soviet Union, as its power grew and the United States became less clear in defining its security interests, pressed outward for whatever advantages were available. As a consequence, the overall relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union deteriorated, and the events in Afghanistan have been a dramatic illustration of this deterioration, of the failure of U.S. policy to be implemented adequately, and of the natural tendency of the Soviet Union to seek power at least risk and least cost to itself.

We are now faced with very serious choices in dealing with this situation. For one thing, we must take some action in this region and elsewhere in the world that will clearly show the Soviets that U.S. military power has not eroded, or at least is no longer eroding to the extent it did over the past ten years. I don't believe it is generally appreciated that American defense expenditures have been steadily declining since the Vietnam war, particularly in military hardware. Unless we maintain an adequate defense position, and by that I mean a balance between Soviet and Western power, the U.S. will be at a great disadvantage in matters of foreign policy.

The short-term military actions necessary to prevent the *potential* consequences of the Afghanistan events from becoming *real* are urgent and have substantial support in the country and the Congress. They are difficult to take. The military problems are of the severest kind for the United States, a maritime power without allies in the region between Southeast Asia and the Mediterranean. Nevertheless it is necessary to infuse some sense of risk into the calculations of Soviet leaders as they contemplate the opportunities opened to them by the events in Afghanistan.

Of course, military actions in and of themselves are inadequate to deal with the turbulence of the Near East or elsewhere. The U.S. and others (in this case the Europeans, Japanese, and Chinese) can contribute significantly to more stable economic and political devel-

opments. It is important in these circumstances that the NATO alliance achieve a common assessment of the challenges and implications that we face, and that Europeans and Americans work together—not necessarily in total congruence, but with the understanding that we should reinforce each other rather than operate at cross-purposes.

Certainly, the interest of Europe and Japan in the security of vital supplies coming from the Near East is as great if not greater than that of the U.S., even though in the military sense the capacity, and therefore the responsibility, of the U.S. is going to be greater than that of the Europeans and the Japanese. These approaches need to be pursued for many years to come, as well as special programs with respect to Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran. The U.S. will not be able to avoid a long-term defense program substantially greater than that which has been projected since the bargains made in Washington for the sake of SALT ratification. And in this respect European allies, Japan, China, and others need to see their own interest in bearing their share of maintaining what must be a military balance.

It is clear that the United States *cannot* foreclose the possibility of negotiation with the Soviet Union, even though lines of communication are at present badly clogged. Personally, I do not have much hope that arms control negotiations of the last ten years will have a significant effect. Still, they can play an important marginal role in some technical areas and in certain other respects. Moreover, I think it is important in democratic societies that our publics have confidence that their governments are attempting to use means of negotiation to protect their interests.

Economic contacts between ourselves and the Soviet Union and between the other industrialized countries and the Soviet Union should be pursued, but we cannot afford to have these economic relationships conducted essentially by individual firms. Clearly, the commercial interests are the ones that do the business and must operate on the principle that business should be profitable. Nevertheless it is important that these decisions in future occur within a broad framework of strategy that relates the scope, intensity, and type of economic relations to the totality of our relationship with the Soviets.

Finally, to picture the American/Soviet relationship as a choice between cooperation and confrontation or cooperation and competition is oversimplified and false. I regret that it has been so pictured in statements by the president and others. Unless of course we go to war, there is going to be no clarity or simplicity in our relationship with the Soviet Union; it is going to remain essentially competitive and antagonistic, and even in its cooperative and beneficial aspects (as and when these return to the scene) the competitive element is going to predominate. To say all this in what is an election year in the U.S. (and in Germany) is perhaps to whistle into the wind, yet I think in some ways an election period may be the best time to get our political leaders to speak up and meet their responsibilities to the public. Unless we proceed along some such course and do so rapidly and with clarity and leadership, the Afghan crisis is going to be the beginning of even more perilous times than those we have already known. **WV**