

A United Nations Assessment Project Study

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THE U.N. AND AFGHANISTAN: STALEMATED PEACEMAKING

INTRODUCTION

United Nations credibility is not furthered when it makes claims of success that are false. No claim is more inflated than the U.N.'s boast that it is a peacemaker. Making and keeping the peace are extraordinarily difficult, and the U.N. should not be faulted for failing where so many others have failed. But the U.N. also cannot be credited with what it has not achieved. U.N. Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar himself admitted last year that:

The Security Council, the primary organ of the United Nations for the maintenance of international peace and security, all too often finds itself unable to take decisive action to resolve international conflicts, and its resolutions are increasingly defied or ignored by those that feel themselves strong enough to do so.¹

Yet this does not stop other prominent U.N. spokesmen from insisting that U.N. peacekeeping successes compensate for the organization's failures in other areas.

Typical of this is the U.N. role in Afghanistan. The U.N. Secretariat has been undertaking negotiations or discussions on the Afghanistan situation since April 1981. In February 1982, the Secretary-General appointed an Under Secretary-General for Special Political Affairs as his "Personal Representative" in an attempt to end the invasion and occupation by 105,000 Soviet troops through negotiations between Pakistan, the Soviet-controlled

¹ Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization, General Assembly, 37th Session, A/37/1, September 7, 1982, p. 3.

government in Afghanistan, and the Soviet Union itself. Despite a U.N. assertion that these talks have been making progress, U.S. and foreign diplomats, Afghan resistance sources, and Pakistani officials suggest that the negotiations remain as stalemated as the four-year-old Afghanistan war itself.²

The U.N. nevertheless already has begun to credit itself with success, claiming last April that a negotiated settlement was "ninety-five percent" complete. Once again, the U.N. is caught claiming success where no success exists, and where the prospects for success are bleak. The assertion of "ninety-five percent" completion echoes the U.N. claim in the spring of 1982 when U.N. diplomats were negotiating with Argentina and the United Kingdom to prevent an armed conflict over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas). As is well known, both countries subsequently went to war over these islands. This does not stop diplomats even now from speaking of a "ninety-five percent victory" during the Falklands "crisis." In any negotiations, as those experienced in the art explain, the first ninety-five percent is always much easier to achieve than the last five percent. In an attempt to claim a peacemaking victory, the U.N. makes such claims where victory does not yet exist and where they are unjustified.

In the Afghanistan situation, U.N. peace efforts have been particularly fruitless. For one thing, the Soviet Union shows no indication that it is prepared to withdraw its invading forces. For another, the U.N. has yet to declare that the Soviets have been invading and occupying Afghanistan since late 1979. The four U.N. General Assembly resolutions on Afghanistan³ deliberately avoid mentioning the Soviet Union by name and merely call for the "immediate termination of foreign armed intervention." If the U.N. cannot even identify the aggressor in Afghanistan, it is no wonder that its peacemaking efforts are failing. Indeed, while the U.N. Secretariat has been announcing progress toward peace, the Soviets have been adding to and improving their military infrastructure and base in Afghanistan. During the first year of U.N. negotiations, Soviet occupation forces increased from 85,000 to the current 105,000.⁴ In the negotiations themselves, the Soviets have consistently refused to establish a timetable for withdrawal of their forces, and they have refused to allow any leaders of the freedom fighter groups in Afghanistan to participate in the talks.

The inability of either the General Assembly or the Security Council to bring adequate pressure on the Soviet Union to force

² Paul A. Gigot, "Afghan Peace Negotiations Go Nowhere Despite U.N. Official's Optimistic Tone," The Wall Street Journal, August 17, 1983.

³ U.N. General Assembly, Sixth Emergency Special Session, Resolution ES-6/2, January 14, 1980; Resolution 35/37, November 20 1980, 35th General Assembly; Resolution 36/34, November 18, 1981, 36th General Assembly; Resolution 37/37, November 29, 1982, 37th General Assembly.

⁴ The Economist, January 8, 1983, p. 33.

an end to their aggression in Afghanistan and a withdrawal of their forces of occupation is not the only example of the U.N.'s inability to deal with Soviet lawlessness and disregard for human life and freedom. The U.N. has been silent in the face of the Soviet attack on Korean Airlines Flight 007 and the resulting 269 fatalities. To be sure, Moscow vetoed the Security Council resolution deploring "the destruction of the Korean airliner, and tragic loss of human life," that would have asked the Secretary-General to conduct an investigation of this incident. But the proposed resolution itself was so weak and diluted that it failed, in the main body of the text, to cite the Soviet Union by name. Even so, this feeble resolution was barely able to attract the nine votes necessary to force a Soviet veto in the Council.

The United Nations has negotiated with the Soviets for removal of their forces from Afghanistan as though they were members of the world community of nations, whose behavior and values were basically the same as other nations in that community. It should not be surprising that the U.N. has made little real progress in negotiations with a nation that lives far beyond the borders of that community. What should be surprising, however, is that the U.N. has attempted to portray these negotiations as successful, when there has been little or no discussion of the truly substantive issues in the conflict and few signs of success.

INITIAL SETTLEMENT ATTEMPTS

Perez de Cuellar went to Pakistan and Afghanistan twice in 1981 in his capacity as Under Secretary-General. The following year, after he became Secretary-General, he appointed Diego Cordovez, Under Secretary-General for Special Political Affairs, as his personal representative. After a visit to the region in April 1982, Cordovez began what have been described as "never-quite-face-to-face" talks between Pakistan and Afghanistan--and, unofficially, the Soviet Union. The first set of talks in Geneva focused on four items:

- withdrawal of "foreign troops";
- non-interference in the internal affairs of States;
- international guarantees of non-interference;
- voluntary return of refugees.⁵

The U.N. reported that progress had been made in the development of ideas as to the structure and contents of the comprehensive settlement and in the identification of "areas of agreement."⁶

⁵ U.N. Press Release, Department of Public Information, SG/819, June 10, 1982.

⁶ U.N. Press Release, Department of Public Information, SG/1822, June 25, 1982.

The U.N. indicated that its "ninety-five percent" completion milestone was not far off. After Cordovez visited Afghanistan and Pakistan again in January and February 1983, U.N. Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar traveled to Moscow in March to discuss foreign policy issues including the situation in Afghanistan. At a press conference in Moscow, the Secretary-General denied knowing anything about the Soviet condition that there be a pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops.⁷ Yet several reports indicated that the Soviets would not leave unless they received assurances that a regime at least similar to that of their puppet, Babrak Karmal, would remain in place.⁸

Cordovez conducted the first part of the "second round" of discussions on the Afghanistan "situation" in April 1983, at which time he asserted that the negotiations were "ninety-five percent complete." Yet no further information was provided by Mr. Cordovez or the U.N. Department of Public Information indicating why such optimism was justified.

While a certain amount of secrecy or confidentiality in sensitive negotiations is understandable,⁹ the United Nations was trumpeting a success while failing to indicate anything on which such claims conceivably could be based.

Another round of discussions was completed in Geneva from June 16-24 between Cordovez, Pakistani foreign minister Sanabzada Yaqub Khan, and Shah Mohammed Dost, foreign minister of the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. From these talks emerged a U.N. formula for settlement.

THE U.N. PROPOSED SETTLEMENT

The proposed settlement is in two parts: the principal agreement to be signed by Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the U.N.; and a separate endorsement of the agreement by the U.S., the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China (PRC). The main points of the package are:

- 1) Soviet soldiers would leave Afghan soil.
- 2) Weapons traffic through Pakistan to the resistance forces would be stopped, and there would be a de facto ceasefire while the Soviets withdrew.

⁷ U.N. Press Release, Transcript of Press Conference by Secretary-General held in Moscow on March 29, 1983, SG/SM/3399, March 31, 1983, p. 9.

⁸ The Economist, June 18, 1983, p. 12.

⁹ Mr. Cordovez refused to speak to The Heritage Foundation on the subject of his mission when queried on August 30, 1983, and emphasized that he had forbidden anyone on his staff to speak to the Foundation at that time.

3) A regime at least similar to the Karmal regime (i.e., pro-Soviet) would remain in place in Afghanistan, but would remain "separate" from Soviet military advisors.

4) The Afghan refugees--more than three million in Pakistan and one million in Iran--would return home.

5) There would be no attempt by the Afghans to stir up trouble among the Pathans and Baluchis in Pakistan's northwest frontier province which borders Afghanistan.¹⁰

The main issues that were to have been settled--but were not--at the most recent round of talks were:

- 1) the timetable for Soviet troop withdrawal; and
- 2) a timetable for the cessation of arms traffic into Afghanistan.

SOVIET INTENTIONS IN NEGOTIATIONS

The Soviet Union's continued refusal to discuss any timetable for the removal of their forces is totally inconsistent with the optimistic views of the U.N. for a solution to this problem. So long as the Soviets refuse to establish a timetable, moreover, Pakistan cannot make guarantees for stopping arms flows into Afghanistan. If the assurances of the schedule by which the Soviets eventually will leave Afghanistan are in the last five percent of the agreement, the first ninety-five percent is hardly significant. There is, moreover, strong evidence that the Soviets have no intention at all of leaving Afghanistan.

Once the Soviets stabilized their presence in Afghanistan in 1980, they started a massive buildup of the military infrastructure capable of supporting augmented combat forces. Example: after upgrading six main airbases in Afghanistan--Bagram, Kabul, Qandahar, Herat, Shindand, and Farah--to all-weather operational capability for long-distance jet aircraft, the Soviets began in mid-1981 to double the runway and parking service spaces of these bases. This doubled their capabilities for interdiction and for the delivery of airborne ordnance beyond Afghanistan's borders--potentially into Iran and the strategic Straits of Hormuz chokepoint in the Persian Gulf.¹¹ The deployment of Soviet ground forces in the area enhances the flexibility and war-waging capabilities of the Soviet forces in Central Asia. The current organization of the rear echelons of Soviet forces in the region indicates that the Soviet deployments in Afghanistan can be maintained

¹⁰ The Economist, June 18, 1983, p. 12.

¹¹ Conversation with Yossef Bodansky, Special Correspondent to Business Week. The Soviets also started to upgrade six dirt runways in the Badakhshan Province to handle fighter-bombers of the Soviet air force.

almost indefinitely, and demonstrates an "increased capability to wage a protracted 'local war' independently, without augmentation and reinforcements from other military districts."¹² Even apart from war-fighting potential, Soviet presence in Afghanistan provides the Soviet Union with valuable strategic leverage in the region. Such arguments refute the assertions of some Afghanistan observers that the improved Soviet infrastructure "appears related almost entirely to fighting the war against the mujahidin."¹³

Most significantly, the improvements to the Soviet infrastructure in Afghanistan, the use of illegal chemical and toxin weapons in remote areas of the country,¹⁴ and the indiscriminate bombing and shooting of defenseless civilians in heavily populated areas have not abated during the period of intense negotiations between the U.N. representatives and the Soviet Union.

Moscow has used the U.N. negotiations to defuse internal outrage and head off diplomatic opposition to its continuing occupation of Afghanistan. U.S. diplomats in New York and Washington maintain that the U.N. is now "beginning to refuse" to hold a "fig leaf" over Soviet aggression in Afghanistan through the U.N.-sponsored negotiations. If this is true, it is about time. This cannot, however, undo the damage already done in allowing the Soviets to use the negotiations as a "smoke screen" for the prosecution of their war in Afghanistan.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTIONS

Before and during the negotiations, the U.N. General Assembly passed four resolutions on the "situation in Afghanistan." All were carefully worded to attract the greatest possible support from U.N. members without causing objections among the various regional and political groups within the Assembly and to avoid offending the Soviet Union and its satellites.¹⁵ Despite omitting any mention of the Soviet Union as the invading country or aggressor, between 20 and 24 nations (for the most part, eastern bloc states in Europe and Asia) voted against the resolution or abstained (mainly developing countries that did not wish to offend Moscow).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Selig Harrison, "A Breakthrough in Afghanistan?" Foreign Policy, No. 51, Summer 1983, p. 8.

¹⁴ The U.N. has demonstrated shortcomings as a peacemaking organization by failing to adequately investigate the use of chemical and biological weapons by Soviet forces. When the U.N. Secretary-General rightly ordered an investigation into the use of biochemical weapons by Soviet-backed regimes in Laos, Cambodia, and Afghanistan, Soviets at every level of the Secretariat threw up bureaucratic and procedural roadblocks, thus preventing any decisive U.N. action on "yellow rain," despite extensive evidence unearthed by journalists and U.S. officials.

¹⁵ See Note 2.

If the only documents available to future historians on the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan are those of the U.N. General Assembly and Security Council, they will not know the identity of the invading country, or the extent and nature of the invasion.

THE UNNAMED AGGRESSORS

Afghanistan is not the only example of Soviet disregard for international law, national borders, and human life. Nor is it the only example of U.N. failure to condemn Soviet aggression. In the Security Council, the Soviet Union, in attempts to avoid condemnation of their activities, cast over 100 vetoes in the U.N.'s first two decades alone. Some of those include:

- the veto on May 24, 1948, of a U.N. probe into the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia;
- the veto on October 25, 1948, of U.N. efforts calling for action to resolve the Soviet-imposed Berlin blockade;
- vetoes of resolutions on Korea on September 6, 12, and November 30, 1950, where U.N. action against Communist aggression was originally undertaken only because the Soviet Union had been absent from the Security Council on June 25, 1950;
- the veto of a Security Council resolution on November 4, 1956, calling upon the USSR to desist from the use of force in Hungary.¹⁶

More recently, the U.N. has failed to condemn Soviet-directed Vietnamese aggression against Cambodia (1977 to the present); Soviet-directed Cuban aggression, particularly in Ethiopia (1977 to the present); and Soviet-directed and supplied military aggression by the forces of Libya, under the leadership of Colonel Mu'ammur Qadhafi, against Chad (1981 and 1983). The destruction of KAL Flight 007 is but the latest in a long list of Soviet aggressions that the United Nations has failed to condemn or even note.

In peacekeeping as well, the record of the U.N. has been poor at best. In cases where the U.N. has actually intervened with peacekeeping missions, it has often fueled the existing violence by supporting wars of national liberation and by failing to control international terrorism. This was particularly true in the Congo operation (ONUC) from 1960 to 1964, and in Lebanon

¹⁶ Juliana G. Pilon, "The United States and the United Nations: A Balance Sheet," Heritage Foundation Background No. 162, January 21, 1982.

(UNIFIL), beginning in 1978.¹⁷ It should thus not be surprising that the U.N. has not yet been able to bring about a withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

The U.N. seems far from a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan. This casts serious doubts on the efficacy of the U.N. in the current negotiations. There remain many unresolved issues and unanswered questions, and the U.N. provides little information as to whether the questions ever will be addressed. Would the Soviets, for instance, have the right to re-invade if a non-communist government came to power in Afghanistan? Would all Afghan refugees be allowed to return, or only those to whom Moscow did not object? Would Moscow tolerate evolution toward a more popular government in Afghanistan?¹⁸

No one should underestimate the difficulty that any negotiating team would encounter in attempting to resolve these issues, and the U.N. cannot be faulted if it does not provide clear answers. The U.N. should be faulted, however, for making claims of success in peacemaking in Afghanistan, when the peace is far from being achieved, and when U.N. optimism appears unwarranted. The U.N. should likewise be faulted when, behind the curtain of U.N. optimism and "ninety-five percent" success stories, the Soviet Union continues waging its devastating war against the population of Afghanistan.

What is worse is the fact that the nonbinding General Assembly resolutions on Soviet and Soviet-surrogate aggression in Kampuchea (Cambodia) and Afghanistan fail to name the Soviets as aggressors. Moscow's intimidation of key members of the nonaligned bloc at the U.N. has helped to achieve this. The continuing ability of the Soviet Union to avoid direct condemnation at the U.N. for acts of aggression serves Soviet propaganda efforts outside the U.N., particularly in their bilateral relationships with various developing states.

In the next few weeks, the 38th General Assembly will most likely discuss the Soviet destruction of KAL Flight 007, and may even produce a resolution condemning the "unfortunate events" that led to the destruction of the Korean airliner. The nonbinding resolution most likely will not implicate the Soviet Union. The inability of the U.N. to condemn the Soviet Union for its aggression in these and other instances refutes the contention that the U.N. succeeds as a peacemaker.

¹⁷ See Roger A. Brooks, "U.N. Peacekeeping: An Empty Mandate," Heritage Foundation Background No. 262, April 20, 1983, p. 2.

¹⁸ The Economist, June 18, 1983, p. 13.

The Soviets have used the U.N. negotiations and the U.N.'s inability to condemn their activities as a handsome cloak of dignity to cover their unlawful invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. The Soviets knew that they could not easily be criticized for their actions while they were negotiating with the U.N. over future troop withdrawals. Indications that the U.N. is now prepared to stop providing the Soviets with the "fig leaf" for their continued aggression in Afghanistan are indeed promising. The apparent willingness of the U.N. to remove this cover for Soviet activities in Afghanistan indicates an interesting U.N. acknowledgement of having provided such protection for the past twenty months.

Ensuring peace is by no means easy. There should be little surprise, therefore, that U.N.-initiated negotiations become stalemated, and that the U.N. is reluctant to provide any substantive information on the progress of the talks up to this point and the true reasons for the stalemate. The U.N. has undertaken a Herculean task in these negotiations, and no one should underestimate the difficulties which that organization has encountered in the current talks. The United Nations cannot, however, take credit for peacemaking when it has not made the peace; it cannot take credit for peacekeeping when it has not kept the peace. Those seeking evidence of achievements to justify the U.N.'s existence and cost must look elsewhere.

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