

The Afghanistan Problem

Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan

Apart from the importance that Pakistan gained from the development of its nuclear capability, Pakistan's geo-strategic importance came to the fore during the same period due to two important developments in the region. In Iran, the pro-West regime of the Shah was overthrown by Islamic radicals, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, who adopted a fiery anti-US posture and seemed ready to destabilize the other conservative regimes as well. A deadly war broke out between Iran and Iraq, which added to the uncertain security situation in the region. But the West was disconcerted more by the Soviet armed intervention in Afghanistan, which sent alarm bells ringing all over the world. Against this background, the importance of Pakistan acquired a new significance in the eyes of the West as well as the oil-rich Gulf states and indeed for most of the non-communist world.

The global concern regarding the Soviet entry in Afghanistan had in its background Imperial Russia's southward expansion in Central Asia which had been taking place for more than a century. The 1917 Communist Revolution did not change that trend. The Soviet Union's ambitions in the region were recorded in November 1940 in the secret agreement with Nazi Germany wherein Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov had proposed that 'the area south of Batum and Baku in the general direction of the Persian Gulf should be recognized as the *centre of the aspirations* of the Soviet Union.'¹ (my italics). At the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union had even tried to perpetuate its control over northern Iran. The geo-strategic

importance of the region further increased with the discovery of huge oil deposits in the Persian Gulf region in the last fifty years. In fact, by 1970, the dependence of the industrialized West and Japan on oil imports from the Gulf had become crucial for their economic welfare.

The communist coup in Afghanistan in April 1978, followed by the induction of the Red Army in Afghanistan in December 1979, revived fears of the long-dreaded Soviet (Russian) expansion towards the warm waters. The hard reality was that the uninterrupted flow of oil from the Gulf to the rest of the world was of vital strategic interest to the West. President Carter warned in January 1980 that the US would even use military force to keep the oil lanes open. The Carter Doctrine declared that 'an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.'² President Carter was clearly referring to the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan and the threat it posed to the Persian Gulf.

The global ambitions and the expansionist nature of Soviet Communism had for long caused deep apprehensions in the capitalist West as well as in Islamic countries and elsewhere. By the end of the Second World War, most of East Europe was firmly under Soviet control. In the case of each country occupied by them, the Soviets proceeded to install communist regimes, which basically acted as Moscow's puppets. In the east, Mongolia had become a Soviet satellite shortly after the communist revolution in Russia. North Korea came under communist control after the Second World War, more or less on the East European pattern. In 1949, communism had a notable success in Asia with the establishment of the People's Republic of China. However, China was too big to become another Soviet satellite although, for the first few years, it was firmly in the Soviet camp.

Alarmed by this pattern of communist expansion, the US adopted the policy of 'containment' in the early 1950s, which involved building military alliances including countries on the

periphery of the communist bloc. The 'containment' policy succeeded partially in holding back the tide of communism. However, North Vietnam fought successfully against French colonialism to establish a communist regime by 1955. It subsequently assisted the Vietcong militarily to establish communist rule in South Vietnam. Fearing a domino effect, the US decided now to directly intervene militarily in Vietnam to hold back the communists. After bitter warfare lasting nearly fifteen years, the US eventually had to withdraw in disarray from South Vietnam, as public opinion in the US itself turned against continued involvement there. Shortly thereafter, North Vietnam overran South Vietnam.

But the communist success in Vietnam was not an isolated affair. Cuba had turned communist in 1959 and South Yemen had a Marxist regime a few years later. The 1970s witnessed a gushing rise of communist regimes around the globe. Soon after the fall of South Vietnam, neighbouring Laos and Cambodia came under communist rule and the latter saw unprecedented cruelty under the Pol Pot regime. Next to join the communist camp were Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua.

The communist take-over in Afghanistan in 1978, followed by actual Soviet military intervention, was not an isolated development, but part of the chain wherein Soviet-inspired communism was seizing control in one country after another. Moreover, there were certain exceptional features in the case of Afghanistan. Although there were very few communists in this strongly conservative Islamic country, yet they had manoeuvred to seize power with the help of the Soviet military advisers. Faced with internal resistance to the communist rule, Soviet troops had become directly involved in Afghanistan, unlike the communist take-overs in other countries. Afghanistan had a common border with the Soviet Union. Because of this geographical proximity, it seemed that Afghanistan could even be annexed outright by the Soviet Union. It looked like a potential sixteenth Soviet Republic, similar to Uzbekistan and others. More ominously, Afghanistan was only about 500

kilometres away from the strategic Gulf region from where the Soviet Union could impede the flow of oil.

In the immediate context it seemed that Pakistan, a strategically-located country, with a 2200 kilometre-long porous border with Afghanistan had become vulnerable to communist expansion. The communist take-over in Afghanistan was, therefore, viewed as an ominous development with strategic global implications and not merely a change of government in a remote country in Central Asia.

Some observers like Selig S. Harrison have argued that 'Moscow did not launch its invasion as the first step in a master plan to dominate the Persian Gulf, as most observers believed at the time. Rather, after stumbling into a morass of Afghan political factionalism, the Soviet Union resorted to military force in a last desperate effort to forestall what it perceived as the threat of an American-supported Afghan Tito on its borders.'³ (my italics). But Harrison himself has noted that Soviet military advisers in Afghanistan played a key role in the success of the coup on 27 April 1978 which brought the communists to power.⁴ Later on, when the rift grew between the two main factions of Afghan communists, and the anti-communist resistance gained momentum, the Soviet Politburo considered the possibility of a military intervention. The then KGB chief Andropov said in the meeting held on 17 March 1979, that '*we cannot afford to lose Afghanistan under any circumstances.*'⁵ (my italics). Similarly, Harrison has reported that Mikhail Suslov, the Politburo's ideologue, had argued in favour of Soviet military intervention saying that 'the collapse of the Afghan revolution would imperil Communist regimes everywhere.'⁶

It is difficult to sustain the argument that the Soviet Union 'stumbled' into Afghanistan. In fact, it had built up secret communist cells in the Afghan armed forces over a long period of time. Some of them had participated in the *coup d'état* of Daoud in 1973 and served as coalition partners in his regime. Five years later, alarmed by certain moves by Daoud to change his erstwhile pro-Moscow policies, the Afghan communists with Soviet blessings seized power in April 1978. Moscow was the

first to recognize the regime. Thus, there can be little doubt that Moscow had long entertained expansionist designs in Afghanistan. Since Afghanistan itself had hardly any resources, its importance lay in being the stepping stone to more attractive objectives lying beyond it. At any rate, whatever might have been Moscow's real motives for entering Afghanistan, there was a general perception in most countries around the world that this action showed that the Soviet Union was on an expansionist course.

To hold back the perceived Soviet expansion via Afghanistan towards the warm waters, the US and Saudi Arabia, supported by Japan and many other countries, decided to extend all-out support to Pakistan which alone seemed physically capable, across a mountainous terrain, to assist the growing popular resistance in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupation. Iran could not fill this role even though it too was strongly opposed to the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and was located next door to it. The reason, of course, was that since its Islamic Revolution in February 1979, there had been a serious deterioration in Iran's relations with the US. Pakistan thus became the main conduit for the flow of arms to the Afghan resistance and a 'front-line' state against the perceived Soviet expansionism. As a *quid pro quo*, Pakistan received strong financial and diplomatic support from the West and several Islamic countries.

In this process, Pakistan also took some fearsome risks, primarily by confronting the Soviet Union, a Super Power located in its immediate backyard. Moscow repeatedly warned Pakistan that it was playing with fire and threatened it with dire consequences. There were many strategists who advised caution and retreat. However, President Ziaul Haq saw the communist take-over in Kabul, and the later entry of the Red Army into Afghanistan, as a mortal threat to Pakistan itself and decided, as he put it, 'to fight the battle for Pakistan' inside Afghanistan. He held the view that for more than a century, Russia had been following a policy of relentless expansion in Central Asia as a result of which one Muslim state after another had been conquered and annexed. Imperial Russia's successor, the Soviet

Union, had shown itself to be even more expansionist. From this historical perspective the Soviet entry in Afghanistan could not be considered an isolated event. Afghanistan was to be the gateway to Pakistan and to the warm waters and control of the oil-rich Gulf states which were perceived to be the real Soviet agenda.

President Ziaul Haq clearly also had personal motives in following a policy of activism in Afghanistan, and that was to entrench himself more deeply in power in Pakistan by securing respectability and international aid for his military regime which had become relatively sequestered, in particular, after the execution of former Prime Minister Z.A. Bhutto in April 1979.

In any event, Pakistan was taking great risks by confronting the Soviet Union. It seemed almost like a desperate gamble at the time. Even amongst Ziaul Haq's closest advisers, both in the armed forces as well as in the Foreign Office, there was a sharp division of opinion. The majority view probably was that it would not be wise to further alienate the Soviets who had already done so much harm to Pakistan especially in the 1971 War, and generally, ever since the mid-1950s. There were senior Pakistani diplomats who were convinced that nothing could dislodge the Soviets from Afghanistan, and Pakistan had no option but to accept the *fait accompli* and come to terms with the Soviet Union. It was even argued that Pakistan should opt to become a neutral state on the model of Finland or Austria so as to escape eventual occupation by the Soviet Union. There were some who warned that the Soviet Union was the Super Power located in Pakistan's backyard, with the capacity to do grievous harm to Pakistan; and that it made little sense to depend on the other Super Power, the US, which was located 10000 miles away, who, despite being a military ally, had not come to Pakistan's rescue in the previous two wars with India.

President Ziaul Haq stood firm in the view that it made more sense to try to hold back the Soviets in Afghanistan, since Pakistan's turn would inexorably come next, whether or not it acquiesced in the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. Moreover, he calculated that the Afghans had a proud history of resisting

foreign occupiers and the country's terrain was well suited for guerrilla resistance. Ziaul Haq and his military associates—particularly General Akhtar Abdur Rahman Khan, the head of ISI (Pakistan's military intelligence) who was to play a key role in the military planning—were probably also encouraged by the recent example of Vietnam where guerrilla resistance had successfully thwarted the colonial power, France, and then a Super Power, the USA.

The fighting in Afghanistan continued for nearly a decade. In spite of the strong support world-wide for the Afghan cause, there was little optimism anywhere that the Soviets would eventually withdraw. The Soviets were known for their ruthlessness and tenacity. Besides, the Soviet Union was a Super Power with seemingly unlimited resources. As things turned out, Ziaul Haq's gamble did pay off and, in his words, 'the miracle of the twentieth century' did take place. Afghanistan's rugged terrain, fanatical resistance by the Afghan Mujahideen, the strong support extended to them by the West and China, as also by key Islamic countries—above all by Pakistan—forced a reassessment in Moscow. Most importantly, though it was not generally known at the time, it was the precarious nature of the Soviet economy, making it imperative to improve relations with the West by cutting down on the Soviet Union's military expenditure, which made the Soviet stay in Afghanistan untenable.

The Soviet Union looked from the outside like a monolith and it was difficult for outsiders to know that there were rifts inside. By 1980 a reformist group had emerged in the Communist Party, which included Andropov and his protégé, Gorbachev. Andropov, then head of the KGB, had some reservations about the wisdom of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, but had gone along with the decision. When he became General Secretary in 1982, Andropov broadly hinted in a meeting with President Ziaul Haq that the original decision to intervene 'might or might not have been right.' However, Andropov was generally ill during his brief tenure, and the material fact on the ground was that he did not change the

Soviet policy towards Afghanistan. His successor Chernenko, a Brezhnev loyalist, followed the hard line in Afghanistan.

It was not until Gorbachev came to power in Moscow in March 1985 that there was a material change in the situation. He was willing to take a fresh look on all Soviet policies — internal and external—in the spirit of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. To begin with, Gorbachev had persisted with Moscow's hard-line posture vis-à-vis Pakistan due to its 'interference' in Afghanistan. Gorbachev was tough and even menacing in a meeting with Ziaul Haq which took place immediately after he took over in Moscow. TASS reported that Gorbachev had told Ziaul Haq that the 'aggressive actions' of the Pakistan Government 'cannot but affect in the most negative way Soviet-Pakistani relations'.⁷ Indeed, there was a stepping up of Soviet military activities in Afghanistan during the summer of 1985.⁸ There were also open threats of punitive strikes against Pakistan itself in the exercise of the right of 'hot pursuit.' Islamabad was warned that it was playing with fire; officially, the Soviets at times described Pakistan as an 'enemy country.' In fact in this period Pakistan was receiving far more abuse in the Soviet media than the US and the West, which were the principal enemies.

While talking to the Pakistani Ambassador in Moscow in November 1985, Gorbachev sent a conciliatory message for the first time expressing his keenness to improve ties with Pakistan. From 1986 onwards, signs began to appear that a reappraisal of the Afghan policy was taking place in the Kremlin. In a major speech on 25 February 1986, Gorbachev described Afghanistan as having become a 'bleeding wound' for the Soviet Union. It thus began to appear that, in some respects, Afghanistan had become as much of a problem for the Soviets as Vietnam had for the Americans.

The reasons for this change in thinking were multi-dimensional. As the war in Afghanistan went on interminably, it became highly unpopular in the Soviet Union. The average Soviet family simply could not understand as to why its son, brother, or husband should fight, die, or be wounded in fighting a fierce guerrilla resistance movement to make a remote and

impoverished country safe for communism. Moscow could not generate any patriotic feelings in favour of a war being fought in a small country, which hardly posed any threat to the security of the Soviet Union itself. The prevalent system of rotating Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan for short spells of duty meant that a very large number of young men had to endure military service in Afghanistan. Millions of Soviet families suffered the trauma over a period of ten years of having their dear ones face the hazards of fighting the fanatical Afghans, whom many in the Soviet Union regarded as little better than savages. At the international level, the Soviet Union was facing strong criticism, even ostracism, because of its military occupation of Afghanistan. It seemed that due to this problem, the tensions with the US would continue unabated, imposing severe financial burdens on Moscow. Probably the last straw which broke the camel's back was the 'Star Wars' project launched by President Reagan in the mid-1980s which forced the Soviet Union to divert ever more funds to the armament programme.

Nonetheless, in the tradition of totalitarian rule in the Soviet Union, in which decisions were imposed by the supreme leader, these factors might not have made a difference. But Gorbachev was not a traditional Soviet leader and he was acutely conscious that the Afghan war was imposing a severe financial burden on an economy already at the verge of collapse because of the arms race. Moreover, as the then Foreign Minister Shevardnadze was to recall, the policies of *perestroika* 'would have lost heavily' if the Afghan conflict were not resolved.⁹

The logic finally prevailed in the Kremlin that the losses involved in continuing the war in Afghanistan were more than the gains. In the intensified discussions on Afghanistan, the main interlocutor with the Soviet Union was Pakistan, which had so far also borne the brunt of Soviet displeasure. The status of Pakistan thus changed in Moscow's eyes from that of a despised enemy into one of an earnestly sought dialogue partner. Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and his deputy Yuli Vorontsov brought a new look to the negotiations on the Afghan issue. Georgi Arbatov, a key adviser of Gorbachev, who

Maintained a channel of communications with the Pakistan Ambassador in Moscow between 1985 to 1988, played a significant role in establishing an earnest dialogue with Pakistan. Discussions were also taking place with Professor Yuri Gankovski of the Institute of Oriental Studies, a key Soviet expert on Afghanistan, whose superior during 1985-1987 was Yevgeni Primakov, later Prime Minister, who was also involved in the deliberations on Afghanistan.

So far the Soviets had proceeded on the logic that through a combination of brutal suppression and shrewd local compromises they would be able to succeed in stamping out the pockets of resistance in Afghanistan. They drew a parallel between the Afghan situation and that of the 'Basmachi' revolt in Bukhara in the 1920s where the Uzbek Muslims, despite putting up a fierce resistance for nearly a decade, had been eventually subdued. The Pakistani Ambassador countered this reasoning by pointing out that there was a vast difference between Afghanistan of 1985 and Bukhara of 1925. The terrain in Afghanistan, unlike Bukhara, was mountainous and suitable for guerrilla warfare. The Afghans had a long tradition of fighting, with considerable success, all foreign invaders in their country. The Afghans were also known for their fierce devotion to Islam and had a strong motivation to fight against what they considered the un-Islamic ideas of the communist regime in Kabul and, in particular, the occupation of their country by a non-Muslim power. Afghanistan had a long porous border that made it accessible to help from outside which was not the case with the Basmachi. Also, the international opinion was solidly against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and external assistance was forthcoming for the Afghan guerrillas on a scale which the Uzbeks, in the 1920s, had never received.

Pakistan argued persuasively that the Soviet policy in Afghanistan was based on a false analogy and could not succeed. As a Super Power the Soviet Union certainly had the physical capability to prolong the bloodshed for a very long time but, at the end of the exercise, the situation would remain unchanged. Thus it made better sense for Moscow to cut its losses by ending

this futile campaign in Afghanistan. In so doing, the Soviet Union stood to gain important diplomatic and material dividends. The allegation that Pakistan was hostile to the Soviet Union or was playing the American game had no basis. It was clearly in Pakistan's national interest to have a friendly relationship with the Soviet Union, its neighbour and a Super Power as well. So far as Afghanistan was concerned, even after the Soviet withdrawal, it should be beyond doubt that any successive Afghan regime would wish to have friendly relations with Moscow, as had been the case for more than a century.

Eventually, the Soviet policy-makers came around to accepting this logic. (Declassified Soviet records show that at a meeting of the Politburo held on 13 November 1986, Gorbachev declared that 'we have been fighting for six years. If we don't change our approach we will fight for another twenty to thirty years! Are we going to fight forever, knowing that our military can't handle the situation?')¹⁰

The decisive factor behind Moscow's decision to withdraw might well have been the precarious nature of the Soviet economy, though this factor was not really known to the outside world at that time. At any rate, whatever might have been the persuasive consideration for Moscow, the fact was that the Soviet Union did finally agree to leave Afghanistan. This was the first time that, as a result of military pressure the Soviet Union had agreed to quit a country occupied by it. The Soviets had in the past withdrawn from some other places (northern Iran, Manchuria, Finland, and Austria), but for non-military reasons.

The formal negotiations to secure peace in Afghanistan had started as early as 1981 under UN auspices, but were making little headway till Gorbachev came to power. No doubt, the UN mediator (since February 1982) Diego Cordovez as also some Pakistani officials had, at times, sounded optimistic about the progress being made in the 'proximity talks' in Geneva when actually only ancillary details had been settled. For instance, in May 1983, Cordovez had reportedly said that '95 per cent of the settlement was ready.' This was far from the truth since the

actual issue all along was when, if ever, the Soviet forces would withdraw from Afghanistan. On this there had been no real change in Moscow's thinking until a year after Gorbachev took over. For instance, 'the widespread assessment in Washington (in December 1985) was that there was no prospect of a Soviet withdrawal'.¹¹ Prior to that, it seemed that the Soviets were using these talks to merely ward off international pressure by pretending to hold serious talks to resolve the problem 'around' Afghanistan, as Moscow and Kabul used to describe it. They claimed that the real issue to be addressed was 'foreign interference,' notably by Pakistan, supported by the US and others. Indeed, it was more plausible that the Soviets were using the UN-sponsored talks to buy time to crush the Afghan resistance and convert the country into another Uzbekistan. Thus Karnal, the head of the communist regime in Kabul, said in a talk with Harrison on 13 March 1984 that the UN negotiations would continue to be a 'charade' until Pakistan agreed to deal with him as a legitimate government.¹²

In the end Afghanistan turned out to be a different story. The times were different and the terrain was different. This time it was the mighty Soviet Union itself, which had to yield. Thus, the Geneva Accords signed in April 1988 were, above all, a great victory for the heroic Afghan people. At the same time, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was also a high watermark of Pakistani diplomacy and military strategy.

In the penultimate negotiations before the signing of the Geneva Accords—which secured what had been Pakistan's main demand from the outset, viz. the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan—President Ziaul Haq made a bid to obtain an agreement with Moscow to set up an interim government in Afghanistan, dominated by non-communists, to replace the existing regime of Najibullah. To achieve this Ziaul Haq was prepared even for a delay in the Soviet withdrawal.

The question about the composition of the future government in Kabul at the time of Soviet withdrawal was actually first raised by Moscow during 1987. It wanted to install a broad-based government led by the PDDPA (Afghan Communist Party)

at the time of Soviet withdrawal. With this in view, the Soviets echoed the arguments of the Kabul regime in favour of 'national reconciliation.' The main motive, as Shevardnadze put it in the internal debate in the Kremlin, was 'to avoid a bloodbath in which our friends would be slaughtered.'¹³ His deputy, Vorontsov, was later to reveal that 'our real concern was to make sure that everything did not fall apart the minute we left, which would have humiliated us.'¹⁴

Pakistan and the US were, at first, opposed to the linkage of a future government to the issue of Soviet withdrawal. Pakistan later enthusiastically joined in the discussion on this issue. However, under the pressure of the Mujahideen leaders, it insisted on a minimal or no role for the PDDPA in such a government. During the course of hard bargaining on this issue, Pakistan even indicated that it could accept a delay in the Soviet withdrawal. In early 1988, Ziaul Haq took the position that 'Pakistan would not sign the Geneva accords unless Moscow removed Najibullah and agreed to an interim government to be chosen through processes dominated by the Pakistan-based resistance groups.'¹⁵ This was an astonishing reversal of Pakistan's position. As Cordovez put it:

I was dumbfounded. Pakistan had pressed me for a whole year to persuade the Soviets to drop the link between the withdrawal of the troops and the formation of a new government. Soviet arguments in support of such a linkage had been dismissed and laughed at as meaningless and unjustified. Zia and Yaqub had assured me a hundred times that Pakistan would be ready to sign with anybody but Karnal—even with his brother or with a clone. Islamabad, like Washington, had consistently maintained that once a withdrawal was agreed upon all other matters would 'fall into place.' In Moscow the Soviets had promised to consider a withdrawal time frame of less than a year. What should I tell them? That the withdrawal was no longer needed?¹⁶

The Soviets refused to accept the sidelining of the PDDPA in any interim government, and now dropped their insistence on linkage of withdrawal with the formation of such a government.

They further pointed out that the main demand of Pakistan, the US and its supporters from the beginning of the Afghan crisis was that the Soviet Union should withdraw its forces from Afghanistan. Moscow was now willing to do so: but to expect it also to install a regime of Pakistan's choice in Kabul was out of the question. The Soviet contention was that there had been no surrender of their forces in Afghanistan and it was absurd to expect Moscow to sign the terms of capitulation by installing a Mujahideen-dominated regime in Kabul. They further reminded Pakistan that it had been saying all along that without Soviet military support, the communist regime in Kabul would not last more than a few days. Now that the Soviet forces were withdrawing Pakistan could, by its own previous logic, expect Najibullah to fall. Thus, it made no sense to ask Moscow to install a non-communist regime in Kabul.

President Ziaul Haq's last-minute insistence that an interim government should replace Najibullah before Pakistan would sign the Geneva Accords imperilled the entire agreement. His stance also split the Pakistan Government between those who supported the President's ambitious reasoning and those, led by Prime Minister Junejo, who argued that securing Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan had always been the great objective and now that its realization was within Pakistan's grasp nothing ought to be done to upset it. The latter also pointed out that, in any event, there was nothing to stop the Soviets from unilaterally withdrawing from Afghanistan, with or without the Geneva Accords. They noted further that the Soviet Union had not been militarily defeated in Afghanistan and was withdrawing more for political reasons. Therefore, it was a case of being over-ambitious, as also being altogether unrealistic, to expect the Soviet Union not only to quit Afghanistan but also to hand it over to Pakistan on a silver platter by installing a pro-Pakistan regime there. Moreover, when the general view in Pakistan had been that the communist regime in Kabul would not last more than a few days after the Soviet withdrawal, it made no sense to imperil the Geneva Accords by insisting on Najibullah's eviction as a precondition. The US held the same view and urged that

the historic opportunity to sign a mutually-advantageous treaty should not be missed. Finally, Ziaul Haq had to accept this reasoning and thus the final hitch in the negotiations was overcome.

Yet another last-minute hitch occurred in the negotiations when the Soviets made it known that even after signing the Geneva Accords and withdrawing their forces from Afghanistan, they would yet continue to extend whatever military assistance might be needed by the Najibullah regime. This would have created an asymmetrical situation as the Kabul regime would have continued to receive Soviet arms and supplies whereas the Afghan Mujahideen would have been denied such help under the provisions of the Geneva Accords regarding 'non-interference' from outside, the coded euphemism for arms supplies via Pakistan reaching the Mujahideen. This dispute was resolved with an exchange of letters between the US Secretary of State and the Soviet Foreign Minister confirming 'positive symmetry' namely, that if the Soviet Union should, after the signing of the Geneva Accords, continue its military assistance to the pro-Moscow regime in Afghanistan, the US would also retain the right to provide military assistance (to the other factions). The Soviets eventually gave their approval in writing of this understanding.

The Geneva Accords were signed on 14 April 1988 in a historic ceremony. The withdrawal of Soviet forces commenced accordingly and was completed on schedule early in 1989. The Soviet Union was thus compelled, against its previous record, to withdraw from a country, which had been under its occupation for nearly a decade. According to Moscow, 13310 Soviet soldiers had lost their lives and 35,478 were wounded in Afghanistan. The actual figure was probably higher. Even more significantly—although it was not foreseen at the time—the Afghan misadventure evidently hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union itself just three years later. That epoch-making unexpected development, of course, entirely changed the geo-strategic realities of global politics by ending the Cold War between the two Super Powers which had kept the whole world

under the threat of a nuclear holocaust for half a century, apart from causing international tensions all over the globe due to the hostility between the two. The key role played by Pakistan in the Afghan *Jihad* against the Soviet Union, thus, seems to have produced more far-reaching consequences than was realized at the time. For these reasons, it is arguable that Islamabad's support of the Afghan resistance (between 1978 to 1989) perhaps represents the only occasion in Pakistan's 50-year existence when it has been able to directly influence global history.

This historic achievement could not have been possible without the determination and clairvoyance of President Ziaul Haq. He had on several occasions said frankly that he did not expect to see Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan during his lifetime and that if this happened, it would constitute 'the miracle of the twentieth century.' Nonetheless, he had held on to Pakistan's risky role in Afghanistan in the belief that any other option would be still worse. In the end, Pakistan managed to come out successfully through this critical test lasting over a decade. However, Ziaul Haq himself was killed four months after signing the Geneva Accords in a mysterious air crash. The Soviets had always been highly critical of him: but his supply of covert arms assistance to the Mujahideen, even after the signing of the Geneva Accords and the commencement of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, angered Moscow to a point that warnings of dire consequences were being issued to Pakistan right up to the time of the air crash.

The circumstantial evidence seemed to point to a Soviet hand in the air disaster, which also killed the American Ambassador to Pakistan. Ordinarily, this should have brought a very sharp reaction from Washington which always made a big outcry even in the case of the death of an ordinary American citizen, more so where Moscow's hand was suspected. However, Secretary of State Shultz was quick to rule out any Soviet complicity even before the American enquiry team had arrived in Pakistan. Evidently, the US was quite content to have the Soviets retreat from Afghanistan in disgrace and did not wish to imperil the implementation of the Geneva Accords. Nor did it want to

aggravate relations with Moscow when Gorbachev was co-operating in major arms reduction deals. Even more importantly, he had set in motion reformist policies in the Soviet Union, which could only lead to the loosening of the Soviet totalitarian system. This was highly welcomed by the US.

President Ziaul Haq had probably out-lived his utility to the Americans once the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was agreed upon. His Islamic fundamentalist views as also his efforts to develop Pakistan's nuclear capability, apart from his non-democratic credentials, had not endeared him to the Americans. His exit at this particular time suited US global interests. This reasoning has led to the increasing belief in some quarters that the US itself might have engineered the air crash that killed Ziaul Haq. This seems much too Machiavellian and something which, in the American system, could not for long have been kept a secret. At any rate, the fact of the matter is that the US hardly showed any keenness to unearth the causes for the mysterious air crash.¹⁸

Not long after Ziaul Haq's death, the US went ahead to apply sanctions against Pakistan under the Pressler Amendment on the grounds that Pakistan was developing nuclear capability. Interestingly, while the Afghan crisis lasted, the US Presidents had been annually certifying to the Congress that Pakistan was not doing so. Had Ziaul Haq lived, it would have been more embarrassing for the US Administration to stage a volte-face of this nature with a leader to whom the US was indebted for his role in confronting the Soviet Union. On the other hand, it was simpler to apply sanctions against the succeeding regime in Pakistan. This cynical behaviour is characteristic of the policies of *realpolitik* pursued by the US and indeed by most other self-interest which matters. Sentiments of friendship and gratitude usually mean little, if anything, in global politics.

There have always been many observers in Pakistan, including bitter critics of Ziaul Haq, who have questioned the very wisdom of Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan fighting against the Soviet occupation forces. They argue that, in

