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AFGHANISTAN CRISIS: SIGNS OF HOPE?

The 'dirty war' in Afghanistan, the 'soft underbelly' of the Soviet Union, drags on for the eighth year. The Soviet-backed Afghan regime in Kabul has not yet been able to effectively hold its grip over the whole of Afghanistan. The Afghan insurgency, funded, armed and inspired from outside, and operating from its sanctuaries in Pakistan and Iran, has been going on in Afghanistan with fluctuating intensity. With neither side ready to concede, the crisis continues to simmer.

Since the beginning of the crisis there have been numerous attempts towards its resolution. Efforts have been made at various forums and levels to settle the ever-deepening imbroglio. Since 1982 there have been several rounds of 'proximity talks' on Afghanistan in Geneva between Islamabad and Kabul under the United Nations auspices. These talks, although progressively facilitate to understand each other's viewpoints, have not achieved any breakthrough. Of late, nevertheless the situation in and around Afghanistan stands a bit changed. The intentions, perspectives and compulsion of the directly involved parties seem to have changed.

There has been a change of leadership in Kabul which appears to be pursuing a more conciliatory approach towards the rebels. The Afghan government under Najibullah has come up with a new year peace programme of national reconciliation. It included a proposal for the formation of a government of national unity embracing

all political forces in opposition, a general amnesty and a declaration of six-month ceasefire with the rebels.

With Mikhail Gorbachev as the General Secretary of CPSU of the Soviet perspective on the Afghan issue seems to have undergone a review. For the successful implementation of his domestic policies, especially for the revamping of the stagnant Soviet economy, and for upholding his image of a peacemaker, Gorbachev is in need of a peaceful international environment, particularly around its long borders. The withdrawal (although token) of about 8,000 Soviet troops from Afghanistan following Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech in July last year was a visible mark of flexible Soviet attitude towards the Afghan problem. During his India visit last year, Gorbachev made a follow-up in his Afghan policy by saying that Afghanistan could be a nonaligned and neutral country. During the visit Gorbachev also softened his attitude towards Pakistan, a party in the Afghan crisis which could really bail the Kremlin out of this quagmire.

Following the crisis in Afghanistan, a large number of Afghans have fled the country and found refuge mostly in Pakistan. Initially, Pakistan had exploited the refugee problem to her own advantage reaping benefits not only from the sympathy world over but also from the aid that was poured into Pakistan for the refugees. But as the years passed by and the number of refugees greatly increased, the violation of Pakistan territory and airspace by the Afghan forces became too frequent, the Pakistan government began to show signs of worries. The Afghan refugees are creating economic, social administrative and law and order problems bearing a potential threat to the integrity of Pakistan. An apparently flexible Kabul-Moscow attitude in such backdrop appears to tempt Pakistan to go for expediting the process of negotiated political settlement of the Afghanistan crisis.

The new year started with a flurry of diplomatic activity between Moscow, Kabul, Tehran, Islamabad and Washington involving the Foreign Ministers and other high-ranking diplomats. Diego Cordovez,

the UN mediator of the Geneva proximity talks has undertaken quite a bit of shuttle diplomacy between Moscow, Islamabad, Tehran and Kabul before the Pakistan and Afghan Foreign Ministers sat for the 8th round of Geneva talks on 25 February 1987. The talks, which continued for about two weeks, had brought the time-limit for a Soviet pullout (the most contentious point on the agenda) down to 11 months. The original Soviet proposal for a troop withdrawal was 4 years and later 2 years, and of Pakistan 4 to 6 months. The latest round of talks seems to have made some progress although it ended inconclusively with a hope to resume it within two months.

But the Mujahideen do not consider these talks seriously as they are not parties to them. The Mujahideen also hold the view that Moscow should open talks directly with them. ✓ As far as the Najibullah peace programme is concerned the Mujahideen have spunged the offer with a renewed vow to continue their fight against the Soviet-backed Kabul regime. On the other hand, the Reagan Administration, though embarrassingly embroiled in the Iran-Contra arms scandal, has reiterated not only to continue but also to step-up aid to the Mujahideen in their fight against the Marxist regime in Kabul.

It thus appears worthwhile to explore, under the obtaining circumstances, whether any resolution of the Afghanistan crisis is in sight. In doing so, the perspectives, interests and compulsions of the Afghan Government, Afghan resistance, the Soviet Union, Pakistan and the United States will be analysed and the possibility of a negotiated political settlement will be explored.

Afghan-Soviet Overtures

In May 1986, Babrak Karmal was replaced by the head of his secret police, Najibullah, who is seen as Moscow's new choice to build the kind of political stability in Afghanistan that would allow the Soviet military force of about 115,000 troops to withdraw. Since he came to power, the new Afghan leader has been talking 'soft'. He talked about a new constitution and a more representative

government, offering amnesty to an anti-government guerrilla who would switch sides. Najib flew around the country praying at mosques to demonstrate his tolerance of religion. There were even hints that King Mohammad Zahir Shah, who was deposed in 1983, would be invited to return home from exile in Italy.¹

Since the beginning of 1987 there have been some notable developments in Kabul. Following the party plenum in December, 1986, at which Najib offered a ceasefire as the first step in his peace programme for Afghanistan, on 3 January the Revolutionary Council approved the creation of a Supreme Extraordinary Commission for National Reconciliation, plus statements on its duties and on the main features of the reconciliation scheme. The Commission is headed by Abdul Hatif, Chairman of the National Fatherland Front (NFF) a political body intended to broaden the party's popular appeal and now renamed the National Front.² The Afghan leader spelt out the principles of reconciliation which covered a ceasefire, a general amnesty, protections, of historical, national and cultural traditions, and respect for Islam. Its aim included peace and security and consolidation of a regime friendly to the Soviet Union. Najib also said that a government of national unity could embrace the political forces in opposition who are ready for compromise with the people's power, outstanding personalities of the past regime and the Islamic parties who are inclined to pursue an independent policy. Cooperation should also be sought with neutral people, even those belonging to armed rebels, with tribal elders, and with those "tired" of war.³ The amnesty would apply to prisoners who would refrain from hostility against the revolution. The truce would last for six months, but could be extended. In return, the regime required reciprocal measures from the other side, notably an end to the launching of any type of weapon, an end to the deployment of arms

1. *Newsweek*, 12 January 1987, p. 13,

2. *Background Brief*, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, January 1987.

3. *Ibid.*

and ammunition within Afghanistan, an end to the mining of road, etc.⁴

These declared measures apparently give a semblance of a commitment for national reconciliation embracing a just representation for all in the political structure and economic life. Najib said that the new government of national reconciliation would mean the participation of broad political forces to the extent of imparting a coalition nature to it.⁵ This offer of a national government, made to monarchists as well as Mujahideen, might be a breakthrough for Kabul and Moscow if it finds accommodation with the concerned quarters.⁶ The Afghan leader also offered to talk with his opponents on the composition of a coalition government. He said that his government was ready to talk to the representatives of what he called "opposition groups" in Kabul or in any neutral country. The Afghan Foreign Minister, Mr. Abdul Wakil is reported to have said that talks were in progress between the Kabul government and innumerable groups of Mujahideen forces. He also said that 25,000 Afghan refugees had returned since then and that 15,000 rebels had handed over their weapons.⁷

To make his offer and his regime acceptable to his opponents both at home and abroad the Afghan leader Najibullah has said that

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the goal of his regime is national democratic revolution and not socialism. He added that the Afghan party documents speak of a national democratic revolution for Afghanistan. It is also reported

4. *Ibid.*

5. *The Guardian*, 11 January 1987.

6. *South*, February 1987, p. 14.

7. *The Bangladesh Observer*, 27 February 1987.

that some progress has been made toward coopting non-party elements in the Revolutionary Council and the Afghan Presidium.⁸ There are also other Najibullah measures which have had a more telling effect on the Mujahideen. His policy of offering land to tribesmen along the Mujahideen traditional routes has produced some food shortages and a drain on support for the rebels. Sometime the rebels have to go hungry for days together, eat grass or anything they can find and thus are forced to retreat. In the mountain areas the government's political strategy is to persuade tribal or religious leaders by means of financial inducements or promises of local autonomy to support it or at least stay aloof from the counter-revolution.⁹

Now, what does the latest of the Kabul government's moves mean? It speaks of several things at a time. It shows that the Afghan regime has come to a realization that without a national reconciliation and a broad-based coalition government, it can not survive the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. It, perhaps, also shows the influence of the Soviet government on the Kabul regime, because it is reported that such a conciliatory approach by the Afghan government was prompted by the Kremlin. Indeed, the shift in strategy was first spelt out in articles in Pravda a year ago when the former Karmal Government was accused of using too much zeal and giving insufficient regard to Afghan traditions in its promotion of the revolution.¹⁰

As a matter of fact, on the Afghan count Moscow's drains have already turned to be high. Moscow has paid heavily for its adventure in Afghanistan. According to Western estimates the war has taken some 30,000 Soviet casualties and has cost Moscow more than 5 billion dollars. As acknowledged by the Soviet media the war has

8. *Holiday*, 12 December 1986 ; *The Bangladesh Observer*, 28 February 1987.

9. *South*, January 1987, p. 23; *The Guardian*, 30 March 1986.

10. *The Guardian*, 11 January 1987.

had its social cost, including problems of war veterans and drug addiction caused by free availability of drugs in Afghanistan.¹¹ The continuing crisis in Afghanistan has compelled Moscow to retrace her steps, and Moscow appears to be doing so.

Kremlin's views about Afghanistan are shaped primarily by two factors. First, Afghanistan is an area adjacent to the USSR which is important to an extended Soviet defensive perimeter. It is also a vulnerable area bordering potential Soviet adversaries. Second, the involvement of an estimated 115,000 Soviet troops is a drain on Soviet resources, an international embarrassment, and a mote in the eye of the Soviet people, whose awareness of the struggle is increasingly heightened by the expanded coverage of the Soviet media. And that is why in his report to the 27th Congress of CPSU, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev dealt with Afghanistan quite conspicuously, although he paid only a cursory attention to the situation in the Third World in general. He stated in his speech that "our vital national interests lie in unfailingly good and peaceful relations with all states bordering on the Soviet Union. This is an essentially important aim of our foreign policy."¹²

The homefront tops the priority list of Mikhail Gorbachev. It requires him in turn to have a peaceful international environment particularly around its long borders. Afghanistan poses obvious limitations to Gorbachev's plans for economic reconstruction in the Soviet Union. The Soviet loss in men and material in Afghanistan and its impact back home prompt the Kremlin authorities to make possible concessions to the Afghan rebels and other interested parties designed to protect Kabul's Marxist regime and facilitate a Soviet pullout from Afghanistan as soon as possible. Gorbachev has talked

11. *The Muslim*, 6 February 1987.

12. Alvin Z. Rubinstein, "A Third World Policy Waits For Gorbachev", in *Orbis*, Summer 1986, pp.356-357; James B. Curren and Phillip A. Karber, "Afghanistan's Ordeal puts a Region at Risk" in *Strategic Digest*, June 1985, p. 698

more forcefully than his predecessors about the need to end the conflict. In December last Gorbachev summoned Najib to Moscow to discuss the tactics of peace diplomacy. Afterward, the Kremlin leader hinted again that Soviet troops would not stay long in Afghanistan and the country would be pushed toward an independent, nonaligned status.¹³ Clearly Moscow wants to find some way out of its quagmire in Afghanistan and possibly that prompted the Kremlin to have Najibullah embarked on a new year peace offensive.

Gorbachev said in New Delhi that Afghanistan might be a peaceful, free and non-aligned country, were it not for the malicious stubbornness of America. In fact, Gorbachev's friendly references about Pakistan during his visit to India appear to have brightened the peace prospects. And his categorical declaration that the Soviet Union was in favour of an "independent, nonaligned and neutral" government in Afghanistan was too reassuring and created a profound impact on the people of the region.¹⁴ Gorbachev's strategy in Afghanistan seems to have changed. It has become much more of a political ploy than to fight a war.

To win over the populace, the Soviets and the Afghan government have tried to dampen the Afghan community's initial fervour for radical socialization of the economy and among other things, have striven to maintain the country's commercial ties with the noncommunist world. Kabul's radical land reform measures which were unenforceable in most parts of the country, have been in considerable measure dismantled, so that landlord and clerical interests in the country side may be preserved in return for a measure of acceptance of the regime.¹⁵ In more material terms, the regime has offered substantial financial inducements to those who opt to cooperate with it by joining the army or militia. The Afghan authorities have also sought to keep the country's merchant class profitably engaged in

13. *Newsweek*, 12 January 1987, p. 13.

14. *Holiday*, 12 December 1986, 30 January 1987.

15. A Nearby Observer, "The Afghan-Soviet War: Stalemate or Evolution?" in *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 2, Spring 1982, p. 159.

trade both with the USSR and other parts of the world.¹⁶ These practical measures appear to have proved more effective in broadening political support than forceful indoctrination. Apparently prompted by the Kremlin the Kabul regime has also taken some measures to promote broadcasting and education in Afghanistan's many local languages than any previous government. Resources are being directed toward investment for much-needed development in health services, literacy and irrigation.¹⁷

The High Council of the Mujahideen Alliance representing the major resistance groups have responded with a flat rejection of the programme of "national reconciliation" put forward by Najibullah. Branding it as a "plot" and a "meaningless overture", the High Council's communique considered that the offer of a ceasefire with the Afghan-Soviet forces will only be considered when the Soviets withdraw from their country. They told that they would continue to fight until Najibullah is thrown out and a complete Islamic government is established in Muslim Afghanistan.¹⁸ The replacement of Babrak Karmal by Najibullah has changed nothing, say the Mujahideen. They also claim that attempts to broaden the base of the Afghan government by appointing non-party members has not brought any significant change in regime character. The rebels maintain that an Afghan government with token inclusion of resistance members would be ineffectual and would imply little more than a propaganda victory for the Soviet Union. Politically, resistance leaders had stuck to their position that any ceasefire would have to follow direct negotiations with the Soviets on the question of Moscow's military withdrawal from Afghanistan.¹⁹

The rebels attach little significance to UN mediator Diego Cordovez's efforts who claimed forward movement after having had talks

16. *Ibid.*

17. *South*, January 1987, p. 23, *The Guardian*, 30 March 1985.

18. *The Guardian*, 25 January 1987; *Newsweek*, 12 January 1987, p. 13.

19. *Asiaweek*, 22 February 1987, p. 15.

with Pakistan and the authorities in Kabul. They challenge the validity of the talks, dismiss the talk in Moscow as a public relations exercise and now question US intentions.²⁰ The Peshawar-based resistance parties have grown restless over the distribution of US aid through Pakistan, which, the Mujahideen say, remains vulnerable to massive seepage on its way to the battlefield. A pressing problem for the Mujahideen is the loss of sympathy in Pakistan. The government-controlled press there has attacked the Mujahiddeen for rejecting Najibullah's offer. Mujahideen office in Peshawar has been ransacked. Students chanting anti-Afghan refugee slogans poured into the streets and clashed with police as emotions ran high over allegation that the presence of more than 3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan was creating law and order problems in the country.²¹

From the very beginning of the resistance, the movement has been sharply divided along ethnic, tribal, political and personal lines. Although they share a commitment to topple the Soviet-backed Kabul regime, they find cooperation extremely difficult. As a people, Afghans are individualistic, proud, stoic and possess fiercely clannish

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commendable traits on a personal level, characteristics that frustrate efforts to mount an effective resistance struggle.²² And that is why, despite the creation of a seven-party alliance last year, coordination between the political parties and the commanders in the field is often

20. *South*, January 1987, p. 23.

21. *South*, January 1987, p. 23; *South*, February 1987, p. 14; *The Bangladesh Observer*, 21 February 1987,

22. Alvin Z. Rubinstein, "Afghanistan at War", in *Current History*, March 1986, 119; *South*, January 1987, p. 24.

strained. Personalities are more important than politics among the rebels. Islam is the central philosophy guiding each party, but its interpretation varies and ranges from the conservatives to the revolutionary.

All these seem to have combined with Kabul's peace offensive to create a demoralising impact on the resistance movement which has already been shattered by disunity and intra-group feuding. Kabul's offer of a ceasefire, a new constitution and a government of reconciliation, including non-communist Afghans, could lead to defections and split in the exiled opposition parties. It can be said that despite the Mujahideen's rejection of Najibullah's offer, many of their leaders feel that they have been outmanoeuvred. Many of the rebel groups have started talking peace with the Afghan government and refugees have started to return to their homeland.²³ However, while the talking goes on as neither side seems able to win the war, none is yet ready to concede defeat.

Pakistan-US Interests and Compulsions

With the Soviet troops and war alive in Afghanistan, Pakistan has become a frontline state vis-a-vis a superpower. The presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and the Mujahideen headquarters in Peshawar have made the Pakistan territory a frequent target of attacks by the forces of the Afghan government. Islamabad considers it a security threat to Pakistan and common man is increasingly worried by the continuing crisis in which he is also somehow involved. Islamabad is under pressure from several quarters to appropriately utilize the flexible attitude of Kabul and Moscow. The Pakistan opposition has urged the government to deal even directly with Kabul and pave the way for the return of the refugees, and not to wedge Pakistan between the superpowers.²⁴

23. *South*, February 1987, p. 14,

24. *Ibid.*

By playing host to the Afghan refugees and offering sanctuaries for Mujahideen's operations, Pakistan is making its people pay a high price. Pakistan had no doubt been getting considerable economic and military benefits in the wake of the Afghan events. Such benefits are not however costless, particularly in terms of the socio-economic and political strains caused by the presence of a large number of Afghans on its territory.

The Afghan refugees are mostly located in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) the inhabitants of which are ethnically akin to Afghans. The irredentist Afghan claims over the territory and the frequent dissensions of the NWFP people with the Pakistan federal authority are a potential, though apparently remote, threat to the integrity of Pakistan. The Pakistani authorities are also aware that even the Mujahideen have never spoken against such irredentism.²⁵

The influx of Afghan refugees has telling impact upon the social fabric of the Pakistan society. The very presence of these refugees in a vast number has caused demographic changes with the refugees outnumbering the local inhabitants in a number of areas.²⁶ It has created many social and administrative problems. As long as the Afghanistan crisis persists Pakistani social fabric is being eroded far more effectively by the rapid rise of heroin addiction in Pakistan itself.²⁷ The Afghans filtering down to Sind have reportedly indulged in drug smuggling and drug trafficking and have contributed to aggravating ethnic conflicts every now and then.

At times, there is serious friction between the Afghan leaders and the Pakistan authorities. On the issue of the 'leakage' of weapons (the illegal selling off in Pakistan by party officials of arms intended

25. *Ibid* ; *Strategic Digest*, March 1984, p. 220.

26. *Strategic Digest*, March 1984, p. 221.

27. *Ibid*; *Holiday*, 30 January 1987,

for guerrillas inside Afghanistan), there have been serious disagreements. Pakistan authority has also been deeply embarrassed by the use of its territory by the Afghans in transiting their Soviet prisoners of war to hand them over to the International Red Cross or simply to gain foreign publicity.²⁸

The refugees also impose a heavy burden on Pakistani social services and general developmental infrastructure. Scarce resources have to be diverted from development projects and potential exports for refugee relief and rehabilitation. For every Afghan refugee that is allowed to stay indefinitely in Pakistan, one additional Pakistani child or adult will die from malnutrition or lack of health facilities, one additional Pakistani child will go without adequate education.²⁹ Another invisible cost for Pakistan is labour displacement by refugees competing for employment at lower wages. The ecological effect of refugee deforestation and over grazing has been considered significantly adverse for Pakistan's present and future ecosystem.³⁰

Pakistan seems to have a deep concern about the Afghan resistance emerging as something comparable to the PLO in Jordan and Lebanon in the 1960s.³¹ This fear is not without foundation if viewed in the

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lingering nature of the Afghan crisis. Pakistan also takes into account the fact that it cannot totally antagonize its mighty neighbour, the Soviet Union, whose troops are stationed at its doorstep. And that is among reasons why Pakistan favourably considers any Soviet gesture

28. Anthony Hyman, "The Afghan Politics of Exile", in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol, 9, No. 1, January 1987, p. 75,

29. *Strategic Digest*, March 1984, pp. 220-222,

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Third World Quarterly*, *op. cit.*

in Pakistan's economic development efforts. Unconfirmed reports suggest that the Soviet Union has offered Pakistan an unprecedented package, including a sizeable economic assistance and the possibility of a no-war-pact with India.³² The public opinion in Pakistan is overwhelmingly in favour of a settlement of the Afghan problem and return of the Afghan refugees to their own country. Prominent political parties also do not want the present opportunity to be missed.

All these factors and compulsions taken together seem to have made Pakistan softer towards the Afgan-Soviet initiative to end the crisis in Afghanistan, and facilitate a Soviet pullout. The Zia government seems to be getting more eager for a settlement in Afghanistan. In this context, there was a flurry of diplomatic activity between Islamabad, Moscow, Washington and Kabul. The Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Kovalyev planned his visit to Pakistan with that of US Under Secretary of State Armacost in Islamabad. The UN mediator Diego Cordovez shuttled between Islamabad, Moscow and Kabul. Pakistan Foreign Minister Sahabzada Yakub Khan visited Moscow twice in February alone, prior to the 8th round of UN-sponsored proximity talks on Afghanistan in Geneva which began on 25 February 1987. Not only that, far from dismissing the Moscow-Kabul initiatives, Pakistan has sent out its Foreign Minister on visits in quick succession, to China, Iran and Saudi Arabia to inform them of the latest moves and to discuss their import and implications. In the backdrop of all these developments and despite their likely positive implications, a big question hangs: whether Pakistan's soft pedalling with Kabul and Moscow would earn Washington's displeasure and whether Pakistan could afford it? Pakistan's Afghan policy has so far been largely propped up by its American connection and it is thus no accident that whenever Pakistan has expressed a desire to seek a political settlement in Afghanistan, the United States has been largely unenthusiastic. After all, what are US interests in and policy towards Afghan issue?

32. *The Bangladesh Observer*, 17 February 1987.

The formal US position continues to be that it is in favour of a negotiated settlement of the Afghan problem. But it is widely understood that the US really does not wish the resolution of the problem, which could pave the way for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. The US intention, in fact, is to keep the Soviets bogged down in Afghanistan with all the consequent adverse publicity and material losses involved in it for the Kremlin. Moreover, Soviet involvement in Afghanistan acts as an effective counterweight to the US role in the Third World, particularly in Central America.

President Reagan renewed his call for stepped-up aid to the Afghan people fighting the Soviet-backed government in Kabul. He is recorded to have said that the Soviets must be made to understand that they will continue to pay a higher and higher price until they accept the necessity for political solution involving prompt withdrawal of their forces from Afghanistan and self-determination for the Afghan people. Washington has been conspicuously slow to respond to the Kabul initiative and there is no indication that it is ready to bail General Zia out by letting Moscow off the Afghan hook. Aid to the Mujahideen, now Washington's biggest covert operation since Vietnam is set to rise this year.³³ Ziaul Haq's optimism, following a new year peace initiative by the Afghan government, was not shared by the US Ambassador in Pakistan who said that Washington was more sceptical than Islamabad about how soon Soviet troops would leave.³⁴

The United States appears to have doubts about whether the Soviet Union is really ready to reach an agreement on troop withdrawal from Afghanistan on terms acceptable to other parties. Perhaps the Soviet-prompted new year peace programme by Najibullah is also aimed at dispelling this doubt. So Washington appears to have been put on the defensive, because it can not brush aside the offer as exclusively propaganda and public relations overture.

33. *South*, February 1987, p. 14; *Holiday*, 2 January 1987.

34. *The Bangladesh Observer*, February 1987.

The Reagan Administration is suspicious of the Geneva process because it feels the process has already gone too far towards helping Moscow to withdraw with honour. The Congress is thus willing to approve money for the rebels on the simple basis that they were "freedom fighters" and without closely scrutinizing their goals, methods, targets, legitimacy or effectiveness. Annual funding is ticked through Congress without question. The presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan gives the war popular appeal and no questions are asked. From about US \$ 50 million in 1983, the quantum of aid has now reached US \$ 250 million. The real figures are much higher and doubled by matching funds from Saudi Arabia.³⁵

US media reports provide evidences suggesting that Washington would not like to see the Soviet adventure in Afghanistan end in the near future. By stalling the settlement of the issue, Washington hopes to exploit it politically to her own benefit.³⁶ It is, therefore, no surprise that Moscow's bid for negotiated settlement and Kabul's unilateral ceasefire aimed at a national coalition have been greeted with cynicism in the US. They have been commented as theatrical

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performance and empty gestures. However, Washington's response has been cautious, avoiding overt negativism. In the face of the Iran-Contra scandal, the Israeli-US tensions, Washington's controversial Central American policy and setbacks in US Middle East policy the Reagan Administration hopes to remain "clean" on the Afghan count. It does not like to go down in history as being responsible for the perpetuation of a war that could have been avoided by adopting a more constructive diplomatic approach. The US would

35. South, January 1987, p. 33; *The Guardian*, 30 March 1986.

36. See for details, *The Muslim*, 6 February 1987.

also prefer not to antagonise Moscow directly and would thus like to keep an option open for exploring possibilities for a break-through in SALT talks with Moscow.

There is more to Washington's game. There is the political leverage that Washington hopes to gain over Moscow through Afghanistan. The Afghan adventure has caused embarrassment to Moscow at the international, regional and even at the domestic level. The continuation of the crisis reduces Soviet chances of successfully implementing Gorbachev's foreign policy initiative, especially in the Asian region. Washington would like to see Moscow's Asian initiatives fail, thereby increasing Washington's chances of rapprochement with Iran, furthering ties with India and China and counting on Islamabad's absolute loyalty.³⁷ Tactically, therefore, it is desirable for the Reagan Administration to continue to spearhead the cause of freedom and democracy in Afghanistan, for it may make her external posture, particularly Central American policy appear less imperialistic.

But the changed circumstances are pushing all the other parties that are closely concerned with the Afghan problem, to a more flexible stance on the issue. Given the compulsions of Pakistan and Gorbachev's friendly articulations about Pakistan, and Najibullah's peace programme, it may be much more than Pakistan's toying with the Soviet option in its relation with Washington.

However, to allay Washington's possible displeasure Islamabad is reported to have hinted, as a measure of 'compensation', to Washington that Pakistan is willing to assume a greater and more active role in the US Central Command in the Gulf if Washington allows it to go in from Afghan settlement without the risk of losing the American aid.³⁸ Whether that would serve the US interests in the region is not yet known. However, if the recent report on Pakistan's going nuclear is a reality Pakistan will be in a much stronger position to bargain with the Americans. The US Administration

37. *Ibid.*

38. *The Bangladesh Observer*, 17 February 1987.

can not deny Pakistan its promised economic and military aid (reiteration of this aid by US officials even if Pakistan goes nuclear is clear from recent press reports), because that would antagonize Pakistan drawing it closer to the Soviets, a price that the Washington would be hardly prepared to pay. Further, the Americans cannot antagonize Pakistan, because it is feared that an 'Islamic Bomb' might eventually be used against Israel — the US bastion in the region. It should, however, be mentioned that Pakistan will need the USA in pursuing the former's interests both in South Asia and West Asia. The 'US Card' at Pakistani hands will also be a bargaining chip for Islamabad in its dealing with the Soviets.

Prospect for Settlement

It appears from the preceding discussion that the compulsion of the main parties to the Afghanistan crisis in favour of its early settlement are substantial. But the parties are faced with dilemmas in their interests and compulsions which continue to block a negotiated settlement. Pakistan seems to be in a dilemma as reports go that the US Congress may block aid package to Pakistan, although US compulsions to bail out Zia are quite heavy. In the context of the Afghan crisis, a situation has arisen where Pakistani national interest is often in conflict with the American designs in the region. Keeping pressure on the Soviets in Afghanistan serves the American purpose, but the presence of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan is creating tensions in Pakistani society that the regime in Islamabad can sustain only at its peril. Gorbachev for his part has indicated Moscow's interest in favour of a settlement. Moscow's dilemma lies in the fact that in return for a Soviet withdrawal Kremlin wants that the armed foreign intervention ceases and the government the Kremlin installed in Kabul in 1979 against which the guerrillas have been fighting, be not dislodged. The Mujahideen in turn have spunged the Najibullah offer with a renewed vow and stepped-up US support to fight the Kabul regime,

But they are yet to demonstrate the capability of any assertive victory.

Despite all these apparent irreconcilables the 8th round of the Geneva proximity talks resumed on 25 February 1987 and continued for about two weeks. The talks mostly centered round the timeframe of the Soviet pullout from Afghanistan. The two sides are reported to have narrowed down the gap. The Kabul government had shortened its proposed period for a Soviet troops withdrawal from 4 years to 18 months, but Pakistan wanted the Soviet troops out within 7 months. However, both sides reached a compromise point at 11 months. It may be considered a major Kabul-Moscow concession which made a significant progress possible. The talks have been postponed with a hope of resuming within two months.

However, certain questions remain even if an understanding is reached between the two sides. For example, what would be the possible impact of the agreement on Soviet withdrawal on the resistance movement? Will the Mujahideen be able to continue their

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warfare once withdrawal becomes effective? It may be pointed out that the Kremlin tends to believe that time is on the side of the Soviet Union and the Kabul regime. This view is also shared by the rebels.³⁹ Moreover, the Afghan-Soviet side would go for a Soviet withdrawal only when it is ensured that rebel activities are ceased.

There are certain other questions which should find answer before a comprehensive solution to the Afghan crisis is reached. It is

39. *South*, January 1987, pp. 23-24; *The Bangladesh Observer*, 11 March 1987.

worth noting that an agreement is being negotiated between Islamabad and Kabul without the two sides sitting face to face. More importantly, the intended settlement, in all practicality would affect other parties who are directly involved, particularly the Mujahideen. It appears imperative that all the concerned parties including the Mujahideen should be involved and represented at any talks, be it multilateral or bilateral, for a peaceful and lasting solution to the Afghan issue. Another vexing question involves the nature and status of the Afghan government after a Soviet troop withdrawal.

✓ With the flexible attitude of the concerned parties and the progress made at the latest round of the Geneva talks, it may be hoped that a comprehensive solution of the crisis can be hammered out for an end to the miseries of a displaced people as well as for peace and security in the countries concerned, in the region and the whole world at large. The most obvious and pertinent precondition now for that is the political will and commitment of all those involved, in favour of a negotiated settlement.