The war in Afghanistan attracts world attention primarily as a dangerous flashpoint of the superpower rivalry and secondarily as a human tragedy of enormous magnitude for the Afghan people. But there has been relatively little recognition of the profound impact of the war on the South Asian region. This impact has not been limited to the immediate social and political problems created for Pakistan by the influx of some 2.8 million Afghan refugees. The war has provided a rationale for the renewal of American military assistance to Islamabad, which has in turn prompted India to increase its own military spending in order to maintain what it considers an acceptable margin of military superiority. Against the background of an accelerated Indo-Pakistan conventional arms race, the pressures for a nuclear military capability in both countries have greatly intensified. Moreover, by poisoning the atmosphere of Indo-Pakistan relations, the Afghan conflict has impeded the hopeful effort led by Bangladesh to create a larger regional unity in the form of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Progress towards arms control in the Indian Ocean and toward the more ambitious goal of an Indian Ocean “Zone of Peace” has been directly undermined by the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the concomitant American support for the Afghan resistance. Other factors have also contributed to the escalation in the superpower military rivalry in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf since 1977. But it was the Soviet occupation that finally led the Carter Administration to break off the Soviet-American negotiations on Indian Ocean arms control initiated during 1977 and 1978, and it is the Soviet presence in Afghanistan that the Reagan Administration has invoked to justify its opposition to a “Zone of Peace” conference.

This paper proceeds from the premise that the de-escalation in Afgha-
nistan is an essential precondition for progress toward South Asian region unity and toward a reduction of superpower tensions in the Indian Ocean region. Accordingly, it will begin by analyzing the Afghan conflict in the context of Afghan history and will then discuss the principal issues involved in the continuing search for a negotiated settlement.

Politically as well as militarily, the ugly stalemate in Afghanistan deepens. On one side, the Soviet-subsidized communist regime is slowly but steadily building a stable Afghan city-state in Kabul and its environs, buttressed not only by Soviet forces but also by an elaborate Afghan military, paramilitary, and secret police apparatus. On the other, scattered groups of dedicated resistance fighters, while better coordinated militarily than in the past, continue to lack the political infrastructure that would be necessary to follow up their military successes by establishing secure liberated areas in the countryside.

The PE Prevailing Western image of the Afghan struggle is grossly distorted because it denies the reality of a political stalemate. In this simplistic imagery, there is a sharp dichotomy between an illegitimate Kabul regime, unable to establish its writ beyond the capital, and an alternative focus of legitimacy collectively provided by the resistance fighters, who are seen as controlling most of the country’s land area. It is true that the Kabul regime does not have a firm grip on much of the countryside, but neither does the resistance. In reality, most of Afghanistan, now as in past decades and centuries, is governed by free-wheeling local tribal and ethnic warlords.

Until its destruction in 1973, the monarchy had provided the sole focus of political legitimacy and authority in Afghanistan for more than three centuries. The Afghan state was just barely a state. It was loosely superimposed atop a decentralized polity in which separate ethnic and tribal communities paid obeisance to Kabul only so long as it accorded them substantial autonomy. The number of politicized Afghans who wanted to create a centralized state was miniscule in relation to the total population. This politicized elite consisted of three distinct groups: Western-oriented intellectuals, who made up the largest segment; Soviet-oriented communist factions; and Islamic fundamentalist elements with Moslem Brotherhood links in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. None of these groups had substantial independent organizational networks in the
countryside. They were all equally dependent on alliances with the local tribal and ethnic leaders who held the real power then and who continue to hold the real power in Afghanistan today.

Most of these local warlords would like to get Soviet forces out of their areas and out of Afghanistan, but this does not mean that they are firmly committed to the resistance. Some of them are opportunists who try to get what they can out of both sides. Others give intermittent help to one or another of the resistance groups but are constrained by fear of Soviet reprisals. Still others, smaller in number, are trying to come to terms with the Babrak Karmal regime but are afraid that helping Kabul would bring punishment from the resistance. For most villagers, trapped between increasingly efficient Soviet-cum-Afghan forces and increasingly well-equipped resistance fighters, the issue is simply how to survive.

The concept of legitimacy has little meaning against the backdrop of recent Afghan political history. The destruction of the monarchy left a political vacuum in which no consensus existed concerning the future of the Afghan policy, and no one group could make a clear-cut claim of greater legitimacy than another. If former King Zahir Shah’s democratic experience in the 1960s provided a test of political acceptance at that time, Karmal could claim at least a marginal place in the Afghan political constellation, since he was elected to parliament from Kabul twice during this period. Neither the communists nor the Islamic fundamentalists claimed more than a few thousand members each in 1973. But even a few thousand disciplined, highly motivated members loomed large in what was such a limited political universe.

In addition to posing ideological challenges to the Western-oriented elite, the communist and fundamentalist movements were vehicles of social protest by disadvantaged elements of the Afghan populace. Karmal’s Parcham (Flag) communist faction represented many of those in the detribalized Kabul intelligentsia and bureaucracy who felt shut out of power by the narrow dynastic in-group that dominated both the monarchy and the republic set up by Zahir Shah’s jealous cousin, the late Mohammed Daud. The rival Khalq (Masses) faction had more of a tribal base, drawing largely on out-groups within the Pushtuns, Afghanistan’s largest ethnic bloc. As American anthropologist Jon Anderson has observed, the Khalqi leaders consisted largely of politicized “second sons and younger brothers” from the weaker Pushtun tribes, searching for channels of social ascent in the face of the monopoly on military, bureaucratic, and professional jobs enjoyed by the Pushtun in-group centered in the royal family. By contrast, the strongest fundamentalist
cadres were organized in ethnic minority areas, such as the pre-
dominantly Tajik Pansjer Valley. The current resistance hero, Ahmad
Shah Massoud, and his mentor, Jamaat Islami leader Burhanuddin
Rabbani, built their organizational base in the Pansjer long before the
Soviet occupation, preaching not only the Jamaat brand of funda-
mentalism but also the cause of Tajik liberation from Pushtun exploita-
tion.

The intractability of the political stalemate in Afghanistan today can
only be understood if one recognizes that the present conflict began as a
civil war. To be sure, many Afghans who welcomed the communist take-
over in 1978 were alienated by the brutality and overzealous reforms of
the late Hafizullah Amin, and many Afghans today feel that Karmal has
lost all patriotic credentials as a result of his collaboration with the
Russians. In the eyes of Afghan communists, however, Karmal has
aligned himself with the Russians temporarily and unavoidably in order
to get the foreign help needed to consolidate a revolution and to moder-
nize Afghanistan.

On a visit to Kabul in 1984, I was reminded forcibly that dedication and a
patriotic self-image are not a monopoly of the resistance fighters. The
Afghans communists see themselves as carrying forward the abortive
modernization effort launched by King Amanullah in the 1920s. The
communist organization is clearly much stronger now than it was in 1978
even if one assumes that many of the new party recruits are mere job-
seekers. In particular, I found widespread evidence that Karmal is making
progress in moderating Khalq-Parcham factional tensions and in building
a new communist leadership network drawn from the 10,000 or more
young Afghans being trained in the Soviet Union. The communist regime
is no longer incapacitated by factionalism as it was during the initial years
of the Soviet occupation.

Despite popular distaste for the Soviet presence, there is a grudging
tolerance of Karmal as a “moderate” communist who is trying to live
down Amin’s extremist mistakes. The communist regime now avoids
direct assaults on the property and prerogatives of Islamic dignitaries,
merchants, and small and moderate landowners, permitting peasants to
own up to 15 acres. In contrast to Amin, who sought to centralize the
country overnight, Karmal promises to respect the traditional tribal
power structure.

Far from offering an alternative focus of legitimacy to the Kabul
regime, the resistance groups are themselves divided on ethnic, tribal,
and sectarian lines. Repeatedly during the past five years, they have
failed to establish a collective identity despite intense pressure from
Washington and Arab capitals. Moreover, since they are organized primarily to conduct military operations, most of them do not have disciplined political cadres capable of building an underground political and administrative infrastructure at the local level. The Pansjer Valley, Kandahar and Herat cities, and parts of Ghazni district are conspicuous exceptions to this generalization. In these areas one or more resistance groups have relatively solid political foundations that could conceivably become the basis for liberated zones similar to those established in China, Vietnam, Guinea-Bissau, and other third world countries where guerrilla armies have been successful. Kabul is likely to face significant resistance in the Pansjer indefinitely despite the relentless onslaught of the Soviet military juggernaut in offensive after offensive. But the fact that the Pansjer is an ethnic minority Tajik area, and a stronghold of the fundamentalist groups, limits its potential as a rallying point for the resistance in the Pushtun areas and other parts of the country where the fundamentalist appeal is weak.

Islamic fundamentalism is not as strong in Afghanistan as it is often assumed. It is arrayed against the entire traditional Islamic leadership as well as against Western-oriented and communist modernizers alike. More important, with their pan-Islamic ideology, the fundamentalist groups have alienated the powerful tribal hierarchy in the Pushtun areas by calling for the abolition of tribalism as incompatible with their conception of a centralized Islamic state.

Except in the Pansjer Valley and several urban areas, the fundamentalist groups have never had significant locally-based organizations, but the advent of a communist Afghanistan in 1978 gave their exiled leaders a golden opportunity to build cadres among the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Since 1978 they have received support from fundamentalist elements in the Middle East and the Gulf. Most of the American and Chinese aid to the resistance channeled through Pakistani authorities has also gone to the fundamentalists rather than to tribally-based Pushtun elements of the resistance. One reason for this is that the Zia Ul-Haq regime in Islamabad is dependent on political support from the Pakistani fundamentalist groups. Another is the legacy of Pushtun irredentism. The Pushtuns in Afghanistan have periodically demanded the return of Pushtun areas annexed by the British Raj a century ago and later bequeathed to Pakistan when it was created in 1947. Pakistani leaders fear that Pushtun refugees from Afghanistan might now combine with Pakistan Pushtuns to demand the creation of a separate "Pushtunistan" in the Pakistani-Afghan borderlands. Islamabad has
consciously sought to prevent Pashtun groups from using the present conflict to coalesce politically and to strengthen themselves militarily.

II

The basic issue in the stalemated U.N. negotiations continues to be the nature of the regime that would be left behind following a Soviet withdrawal. The U.N. negotiations are nominally between Pakistan and the Soviet-sponsored Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, and the keystone of the U.N. approach is that it would legitimize the D.R.A., while leaving the door open for the removal of Babrak Karmal as President and for other changes in the makeup of the Communist regime. Two of the key draft agreements that would give formal legal effect to the settlement would be between Islamabad and the Kabul regime. Much to the distress of Washington, Pakistan has recently gone along with language in these draft agreements specifically naming the D.R.A.

The Reagan Administration gives lip service to the goal of an Afghan settlement in accordance with U.N. General Assembly resolutions, based on "a Soviet withdrawal, a return to the independent and non-aligned status of Afghanistan, self-determination for the Afghan people and the return of the refugees with dignity and honor." However, the Administration objects to the premise of U.N. mediators that a Soviet withdrawal, per se, would satisfy the self-determination criterion of the General Assembly resolutions. Under the U.N. scenario, the D.R.A. would be left in place at the outset of the withdrawal process and would have a chance to survive, if it could, either through a political accommodation with its opponents or internecine military struggle, or both. The D.R.A. argues that it could, in fact, survive without a Soviet force presence if U.S. and other aid to the resistance were stopped in accordance with the terms of the draft settlement. Administration officials ridicule this claim, but in any event, the American position has consistently been that the replacement of the D.R.A. by a more representative regime should by agreed upon as a precondition for concluding the U.N. agreement.

At first, Pakistan adopted a more flexible posture than the United States during the hopeful interlude from April to June of 1983 when the U.N. negotiations showed promise. However, losing its heart for diplomatic brinkmanship in the face of American, Saudi Arabian and Chinese disapproval, Islamabad backed off at the eleventh hour. In the
April round of the 1983 negotiations, Moscow indicated that it was ready to accede to Islamabad’s demand for the replacement of Karmal as a prerequisite for concluding an agreement. Pakistan’s president, Zia Ul-Haq, had firmly declared that he would “never deal with the man who rode to power on Soviet tanks,” and the late Yuri Andropov’s “observer” at Geneva, Stanislav Gabrilov, promised that Moscow would replace Karmal with Prime Minister Sultan Ali Keshtmand in time for the conclusion of the settlement. Pakistan agreed to proceed on this basis, thus signalling its willingness to legitimize the D.R.A. regime. Islamabad also agreed to categorical language in the U.N. draft text that would have required cutting off support for the resistance coincident with the start of a Soviet force withdrawal. These Pakistani concessions had produced Soviet assurances in April that Moscow would propose a specific timeframe for the projected withdrawal at the next round. By the time negotiations resumed in June, however, Islamabad had become equivocal on both key concessions, and Moscow’s pledge was never put to the test.

As the U.N. dialogue has dragged on, the Soviet Union has grown more confident that it cannot be dislodged from Afghanistan and has progressively hardened its terms for a settlement. In 1982 and early 1983, Moscow was worried about factionalism in Afghan Communist ranks. Soviet negotiators did not rule out a restructuring of the D.R.A. regime through negotiations with moderate elements of the resistance to be conducted in parallel with the U.N. dialogue. But Soviet staying power has progressively solidified since then as the regime has settled down in its Kabul enclave and as efforts to unify the resistance have repeatedly failed.

Moscow is more reluctant now to replace Karmal or to negotiate major changes in the D.R.A. structure that would weaken Communist control. Another key example of the hardened Soviet stance in the U.N. negotiations has been Soviet insistence on a basic change in the form of the settlement. What was originally to have been an agreement between the United Nations and the contending parties is now to be a set of bilateral treaties that would commit Pakistan more explicitly to recognition of the D.R.A.: one between Pakistan and the D.R.A., barring aid to the Afghan resistance through Pakistani territory; another between Islamabad and Kabul, governing the return of the Afghan refugees now in Pakistan, and a third between Moscow and Kabul, defining the time-frame and other modalities of the Soviet withdrawal.

In 1983, Moscow and Kabul were negotiating on the basis of a U.N. draft text expressly providing for a Soviet withdrawal within a defined
time period, though the length of this time frame was never settled. By contrast, in the August, 1985, round of U.N. negotiations, D.R.A. spokesmen refused to present their version of the treaty provisions governing Soviet force withdrawals until Islamabad agrees to replace the present U.N. mediation process with a direct, face-to-face dialogue.

The United States opposes direct talks at any stage of the negotiations and has refused to take a position on any aspect of the draft agreements until the entire package has been negotiated. In June, Islamabad and Kabul agreed on the draft of the proposed endorsement of the settlement by Moscow and Washington, and the U.N. presented this text to both governments for their approval. Moscow responded in the August round with detailed proposals for revision, but Washington has remained silent.

The Administration makes no pretense that the Russians are on the run. As Pentagon intelligence specialist Elie D. Krakowski has observed, despite improvements in the combat effectiveness of the resistance, "the central factor is not absolute but relative performance, and in the latter, experts agree, the Soviets have widened the gap in their favor."3 Krakowski and like-minded observers argue that more and better weaponry for the resistance will in time force Moscow to abandon the D.R.A. regime. But this roseate assessment ignores the depth of the historically-rooted cleavages between resistance groups that make it so difficult for them to follow up their military victories by establishing secure liberated areas. Moreover, experience suggests that for every improvement in American-supplied weapons, Moscow would be likely to counter with its own escalation as it has done for the past five years.

The stated reason for American coolness toward the U.N. scenario is that the D.R.A. could not survive in the absence of Soviet forces and that chaos would result, compelling the Russians to return. But behind this rationale lies an unstated concern that the Communist regime just might survive. It should be remembered that the U.N. concept would permit the D.R.A. to continue receiving Soviet economic and military aid while precluding further outside aid to the resistance. It is inherently asymmetrical. While intermittent fighting would no doubt continue between D.R.A. forces and some resistance factions, the level of conflict in the countryside would be likely to subside, over time, as tribal and ethnic warlord make their uneasy peace with Kabul in return for local autonomy. The U.S. and other non-Communist countries should not prejudge whether the Russians could, or would, withdraw under this scenario but should focus instead on the quid pro quos that would make such a scenario acceptable.
The governing criterion for support of the U.N. settlement should be whether it assures that Moscow would not add strategic bases in Afghanistan to its other military capabilities adjacent to the Gulf and southwest Asia. At present, the Soviet air bases at Bagram, Kabul, Kandahar, and Shindand have runways long enough to receive a limited number of Bisons and other longrange strategic aircraft, but most Western intelligence sources agree that Moscow has not yet attempted a full-scale conversion of these facilities into strategic or offensive tactical bases. The U.N. settlement should be accompanied by a bilateral Soviet-American agreement providing for U.N.-inspected limitations on the future development of the military facilities in Afghanistan and their use as Soviet bases. Such an agreement could be added to the Pakistan-D.R.A. non-intervention treaty but would have to be reinforced, in any case, by a superpower agreement to make the U.N. settlement an enduring one.

It is not entirely clear that the Russians are prepared to make such a deal. My impression during a visit to Kabul in 1984 was that they would like to alter the projected terms of the settlement in order to keep a reduced force of 15,000 to 30,000 troops in the country for an indefinite period. Such a caveat would reduce the risks of the U.N. scenario for Moscow by fortifying the D.R.A. politically as well as militarily during the withdrawal process. But the U.S. and Pakistan cannot compromise on the principle of a complete withdrawal within a specific time frame. No significant section of the resistance is likely to stop fighting unless the Russians commit themselves to this principle. At the very least, Moscow would have to accept a withdrawal in clearly-defined stages, with the bulk of Soviet forces removed within a short-term period and final withdrawals left to a later terminal date.

Even at this late hour, the containment of Soviet military expansion in Afghanistan might still be possible and should be pursued through a combination of stepped-up military pressure and a more realistic diplomacy. The price for achieving this goal would be initial acceptance of the significant political inroads made by Moscow during the past three decades in building an Afghan Communist Party. Once Soviet forces left, however, Afghan nationalism would gradually reassert itself, shaping the character of Afghan Communism as well as the larger future of the overwhelmingly non-Communist Afghan majority.
If the present escalation of the Afghan conflict should continue, together with a growing polarization of Afghan political forces, Moscow would be likely to intensify its efforts to make Afghanistan a South Asian Mongolia governed by a monolithic Communist elite. This would necessitate an indefinite military occupation, which would no doubt be accompanied, in time, by the development of strategic bases. The security interests of non-Communist countries would be better served by a negotiated settlement based on acceptance of a Finland-style security relationship between the Soviet Union and a less monolithic client regime in Kabul.

Strictly speaking, the experience of Finland is not comparable to the tragedy in Afghanistan, since the Finns had a degree of political and military unity that the Afghans lack. But the parallel does suggest the type of security relationship with Afghanistan that the Russians would be likely to expect as part of a settlement. Moscow withdrew its forces from Finland only after Helsinki agreed to a treaty proviso that in effect permitted the return of Soviet troops "in the event of Finland, or the Soviet Union through the territory of Finland, becoming the object of military aggression." To be sure, Article I of the 1948 Finnish-Soviet treaty did not give Moscow the unqualified *de jure* right to reoccupy Finland, but it provided for Soviet assistance to Finland "in case of necessity ... on the granting of which the parties will reach agreement with one another." Similarly, Article Four of the 1978 treaty concluded between the Soviet Union and the Kabul Communist regime provides that "the High Contracting Parties shall consult with each other and shall, by agreement, take the necessary steps to safeguard the security, independence and territorial integrity of the two countries."

An agreement on continuation of the 1978 treaty is likely to be a sine qua non for Soviet acceptance of a political settlement in Afghanistan. While the U.N. settlement does not address this issue directly, it would leave in place a regime committed to continuation of the treaty. The U.N. agreement would provide for the complete withdrawal of Soviet combat forces, but it pointedly omits any reference to Soviet advisers. So long as Moscow continued to have a client regime in Afghanistan, Soviet military advisers could remain there, maintaining airfields, military communications and other military facilities in a state of readiness. Moscow would thus be in a position to reintroduce its forces on short notice even if operational bases were foreclosed as suggested earlier. Nevertheless, in the event of a future military crisis involving the movement of Soviet
forces through Afghanistan, the United States and its allies would have much more warning time than at present. A Soviet combat force withdrawal would clearly serve non-Communist security interests in the Gulf and Southwest Asia by relieving the immediate military pressure resulting from ongoing Soviet force deployments and from the ongoing operational use of Soviet bases.

With respect to Soviet advisers, it should be kept in mind that Moscow had some 6,000 military advisers in Afghanistan during the non-Communist Mohammed Daud regime. The fact that the U.N. scenario would not preclude the presence of advisers should not in itself be a barrier to support of the projected agreement. But non-Communist countries could properly make their support conditional on Soviet readiness to conclude credible ancillary agreements prohibiting the development of strategic bases in Afghanistan as well as any expansion or upgrading of tactical air bases that could pose an offensive threat to neighboring states.

Notes

2. Ibid., pp. 73.