

## ORAL HISTORY

### *India's Response to the Soviet Military Intervention in Afghanistan*

I. K. Gujral

*Former Prime Minister, late Inder Kumar Gujral was India's Ambassador to the Soviet Union during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. He recalls how India responded to the intervention.*

**Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ):** Sir, there is a general impression that India endorsed the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979.

**I. K. Gujral (IKG):** It would not be correct to assume that India had at any stage endorsed the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. We had never checked our independent foreign policy. But before I come to that, it is necessary for us to understand the context of our Afghan policy in that phase.

You may recall that I was India's Ambassador in Moscow those days. It surprised the diplomatic community in Moscow, when in December 1979 the Soviets decided to militarily intervene. Of course it was an adjustment of the developments in Iran where the entire American Embassy staff had been captured by the young Iranian radicals making the international community and myself believe that it would be impossible for the US President (Jimmy) Carter and his government to tolerate this humiliation. The capture of an entire diplomatic staff of America was a big loss of face. I may recall that the Carter regime had made an aborted attempt to enter Tehran to whisk them away. This widely circulated failure added to Carter's mortification reducing the superpower's professed might to dispense with them. The Soviet Union's policy-makers were happy over this discomfort of the rival power.

I asked Deputy Foreign Minister, Firubin if he approved of this strange situation where the staff of any Embassy was thus locked-up. His reaction surprised me. He said, "Why should we react, let them be cooked in their own

juice. After all, it was America that had destroyed the Iranian oil revolution when they had ousted Mussadiq so unceremoniously. Now they are confronting the forces they had themselves unleashed.” While the Americans were thus caught in the Iranian mesh, the Afghan situation was causing matching discomforts to the Soviet Union where the Taraki regime had been ousted and Hafizullah Amin was viewed as an “adversary”. He had captured power in September 1979 causing immense distress to the USSR. I remember probing it with Kosygin at the Bombay airport. He was on his way back from Ethiopia and I had gone to meet him. The same day, before I flew him to Delhi, the news of Taraki’s fall had come. I had thought that Kosygin would be aware of it. But no, he did not have any idea of it since he was flying when this happened. I conveyed the news to him, he was surprised. His first reaction was, “What a bloody fellow” (for Amin). He quickly went to his aircraft to check its authenticity. His plane, I had assumed would have the communication facilities. He came back to join us for lunch. But he was benumbed. He confirmed to me the sad news but was worried all the while. The Soviet regime had never trusted Amin. Each time I referred to *apparatchik*, I got the message that they believed Amin was an “agent of the Americans”. They thought that the ongoing factional dissensions in Afghanistan were weakening them. The Taraki regime was weak but trustworthy. Moscow believed that the CIA was actively instigating the intra-party dissensions.

To assess this rapidly deteriorating situation, at one stage, the Soviet Army deputed a very senior Commander to Afghanistan to assess the impediments that obstructed their way. The distinguished Commander of the armed forces carried out a limited operation that was successful. This made the Soviet leadership believe that its armed forces could carry out a larger operation without much difficulty and despite all the USA’s protestations. In a way, it now seems, the CIA encouraged the Soviets in this belief. Later, after the end of the war, I learnt from some Soviet contacts that the Americans and their CIA had deliberately generated such an illusion to encourage the Soviets to undertake this misadventure. That indeed was a trap to entice them, planned to bog them down as was done to the Americans in Vietnam and to a degree in Iran.

Later, sometime after their monumental failure, I remember asking a senior scholar of the Soviet era about how they walked in without checking the ground realities. He was sad and also amused when he said that the enfeebled party

leadership had hardly any hand in making the fateful decision. The fact, however, remains that the decision to intervene was not seriously discussed or examined at any senior level.

Several years later in 2001 after the fall of the USSR, I was attending a conference in Madrid. I casually mentioned the events to Mr. Gorbachev. I asked him that though I was Ambassador of a friendly country in Moscow when this ill advised operation was launched (in Afghanistan), we did not know about this momentous move even though it concerned us so intimately. Gorbachev's answer was: "Yes, it would be so, I too was unaware of it. I read about it in the newspaper the next day". This was a surprising revelation. By chance, Mr. Vornstov, who had been the Soviet Ambassador in India for a long time before shifting to the UN, came to meet me. I asked him about Gorbachev's statement to me regarding the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. His reaction was intriguing: "Yes he told you the truth since the entire Politbureau was not taken into confidence". An inner junta of the four or five members of the Politbureau took such vital decisions. Even Brezhnev – because of his health, only partially grasped it. According to him the powerful Junta comprised Andropov, Chernenko, Ustinov and Gromyko and they decided.

The Soviets when they decided to make a massive armed re-entry into Afghanistan, had grossly underestimated the situation. They did not learn any lesson from the American intervention in Vietnam and the 'whys' and 'hows' of the American hardships in Iran. The Soviets had misperceived the Afghanistan situation as a minor local incident that they could smoothly overcome. Only after the events did they realize that they were confronted with a mighty mobilisation of the Jihadis and the armed forces of Pakistan. The Soviets would occasionally blame Pakistan but that did not cause any ripples in the diplomatic community. The Soviets themselves had failed to assess the degree of Pakistani penetrations in Afghanistan to bog down the Soviet forces.

The Soviets' entry into Afghanistan came on a day when the election process in India was in full swing and hence the Government of India was in a way focused in a different direction. The election results re-installed Indira Gandhi in January 1980. The Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko came here

(India) to brief her soon thereafter. I was still India's Ambassador in Moscow and came to New Delhi to participate in the talks. The Soviet diplomacy was trying to persuade Indira Gandhi to appreciate its intervention in Afghanistan. There was a small meeting convened in the Prime Minister's office in South Block.

Initially, it was to be a one-to-one meeting between Gromyko and Mrs. Gandhi. So Foreign Minister, Narasimha Rao and I waited in her private secretary's office. But soon we were called in since Gromyko had included the Soviet Ambassador in New Delhi, Vornstov from his side. So, Indira Gandhi called in Narasimha Rao and myself. The meeting included Gromyko, Ambassador Vornstov and of course the two interpreters.

Gromyko was very articulate. He spoke mostly in English, so there was not much loss of time in *inter se* interpretations. Gromyko gave Mrs. Gandhi lengthy details of the history and the prevailing situation in Afghanistan. He also gave details of the American and Pakistani mechanisations and the military deployments of the Americans in Afghanistan and the Pakistani role in supporting these subversive activities. That had made the situation in Afghanistan very delicate and hazardous for the Soviets as well as the Kabul regime. This he said endangered the security of India and the rest of the subcontinent. Indira Gandhi did not say a word, she kept doodling, while listening to Gromyko. After an hour and a half or so, Gromyko ultimately concluded his remarks. He asked her if she appreciated this position. He briefly looked for her reaction. Her posture was interesting. She said only two words "You mean your entry in Afghanistan?" He said "Yes Madam". Mrs. Gandhi said, "I am sorry I can't appreciate it". Gromyko was stunned. He was a very accomplished diplomat and I had never seen him in such a predicament during my stay in Moscow. He was taken aback and did not know how to respond. The meeting was adjourned. She formally shook his hand and the meeting concluded. Even the scheduled delegation-to-delegation meeting was cancelled since the Prime Minister had said the last word.

The same evening Ambassador Vornstov telephoned and came to meet me at my brother's residence. He told me that Gromyko had received an urgent message from Brezhnev that he must personally convey to the Prime Minister. He wanted me to request the PM for another meeting. I was hesitant since it was late in the evening and Gromyko was due to leave early next morning.

Ambassador Vornstov insisted that I must help in organising this, what he said was an “urgent meeting” and for this, Gromyko was willing to readjust his departure. I conveyed this request to the Prime Minister soon after the Ambassador left my residence. She wanted me to guess the purpose for this request. Mine was a leap in the dark. I thought they would make some tempting offer – “Most probably, concessions regarding arms supplies.”

She agreed to receive Gromyko at 11 a.m. the following day. The second meeting took place at her Wellington Avenue residence. She had not yet moved to Safdarjung Road. The same groups, Indira Gandhi, Narasimha Rao and myself from our side and Gromyko, Vornstov for the other side. Gromyko, as was his style, spun a long story: “Madam, I am sorry, you know Brezhnev holds you in special personal regard. As a token of this special esteem for you, he is willing to extend the credit terms for supply of a large quantity of arms from ten to thirteen years.” This was a “special gesture” of friendship since such terms were not given even to “fraternal socialist countries”.

It may be recalled here that during Kosygin’s visit to India an offer was made to Morarji Desai for sizeable arms supplies but the terms of credit remained at ‘ten years’. This was very hard for India. We wanted the arms but on more relaxed terms. The Secretary of Economic Affairs, Dr. Manmohan Singh had asked me to persuade the Soviet authorities to revise the period of repayment to twenty years. I exerted myself a great deal. But neither the officials nor the CPSU would agree since, as they said, they had not done so for any country, not even for their closest Socialist allies. This issue was still under discussion when the government in India changed and Indira Gandhi returned to the helm.

Mrs. Gandhi once again gave a patient hearing to Gromyko without saying a word. The talks concluded only once again making Gromyko a picture of misery. He left Delhi, in a way, empty handed. This issue of credits remained under discussion and ultimately the Soviets offered me seventeen years with two years of freeze of interests. This was an unprecedented concession.

**IFAJ:** Sir, but there is an allegation that Mrs. Gandhi took a soft approach towards the Soviet Union, in general and on its intervention in Afghanistan, in particular. There are these Mitrokhin documents to allege that almost the entire Indian political establishment was sold out to the Soviet Union through its intelligence establishment, the KGB.

**IKG:** No, Indira Gandhi was not soft, certainly not on this issue. Her difficulties in publicly disapproving the Soviet intervention were two. One was that we, in India, knew well that Pakistan was deeply involved in mobilisation of the *Jihadis* in Afghanistan and also that Pakistan was getting substantial arms supplies from the US in return for its anti-Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. These were matters of deep concern for our security and stability. Therefore, while we could tell the Soviets that they had committed a grave mistake by getting involved in the Afghani quagmire; we could not strain our relationships with them and be left alone in the midst of a deep regional crisis. Let us remember that the Soviet Union was a vital source, for our arms purchases. Indira Gandhi had at one stage sent Narasimha Rao to Pakistan to make General Zia understand that his policies would harm the security of the region, but to no effect. The Foreign Minister Rao had visited Moscow on two occasions and in my presence he advised the leadership to work their way out and be released from the trap. Brezhnev and his colleagues gave him a patient hearing but without any respite.

All the same, the Indian message was clear though friendly. Indira Gandhi's line conformed to our traditional policy of independence. We did not side either with the Soviets or with the Americans regarding Afghanistan. You remember every time the issue came before the Security Council, India abstained and did not vote on either side.

There was some confusion initially when the Soviet intervention took place. Ch. Charan Singh was the Prime Minister. He did not give clear instructions to me in Moscow or to India's UN Mission. In this brief interregnum, our envoy in the UN voted with USA. But Ch. Charan Singh's tenure in power lasted only for a few days. Indira Gandhi returned to power in the first week of January 1980. She gave clear instructions to our Mission in New York. We "abstained" from voting in the Security Council. We also did not approve of the American mobilisations of the militant *Mujahideens* with the support of China and Pakistan. This left us the only option of 'abstention'. We did not wish to harm our abiding friendship with the Soviets even on this issue. But we were not supportive of their Afghani adventures, in no way could we have opposed them. I had to take such a tight rope posture as India's Ambassador.

**IFAJ:** This must have made the Soviets very unhappy with her.

**IKG:** No, they appreciated our difficulties. On no issue did our cooperation with them or their support to us get diluted. Indira Gandhi continued to support the

Soviet position in Indo-China, you would recall the situations in Cambodia, Vietnam, and on the other international issues. The Soviet Union's cooperation with us was wholesome. They never put any pressure on us. At no stage, either formally or informally did I receive any signal to the contrary till I demitted my office in the last week of 1980.

**IFAJ:** Was there any pressure from the Americans to take India more on the American side on Afghanistan?

**IKG:** Well, I may not be aware of this since I was not in Delhi and so I would not know if the Americans exerted any pressure on us here, though it was clear that the Western diplomacy was never reconciled to our close friendship with the Soviet Union.

All the same, India's relationship with the Soviet Union never got diluted, not even when the non-Congress governments were in power. It was built on the solid ground of national consensus. Therefore, the Morarji government's relationship with the Soviets was equally warm. In the two years or more, when he was in power, he visited Moscow twice. Kosygin also visited India. Morarji's relationship with the Soviets was initially doubted by the Leftists and the Congressites. The Soviets and some others had initially misperceived his policies, but soon, both Morarji from our side and the Moscow leadership developed a warm personalised relationship.

**IFAJ:** Soon after becoming Prime Minister, Morarji Desai claimed that he would make India's non-alignment more balanced by removing the pro-Soviet tilt in it.

**IKG:** Oh, no. He had such predilections before the elections. But soon after acquiring power he revised his disposition. My reappointment as Ambassador would be a relevant instance worth quoting. I had told him. "Sir I am not a career diplomat, I was involved in political life and it so happened that I was on the other side of the fence and was not with you". His response is worth recalling. He said, "so what?" And then he asked me to elucidate for him what should be India's Soviet policy? I took time to elaborate the contours of our interests. He asked me a pertinent question; "What you are suggesting to me is that there should be continuity of our policy regarding the Indo-Soviet relations". In response to it I said; "it should be so". He caught me unguarded to say, "If what you are suggesting is to be my policy, what would be the message. If you don't go, continuity or discontinuity?" I could not reply except to nod my assent.

In fact, during Morarji Desai's government in India, the Soviet Union continued to appreciate the importance of this relationship. The arms supply to India was substantially increased during Kosygin's visit to India. There was some difficulty about the repayments. Dr. Manmohan Singh was a Secretary of Economic Affairs. He asked me to persuade Moscow to further stagger the repayments beyond ten years. But the Soviets would not agree till Indira Gandhi came to power. The credit terms more or less doubled.

The allegation of the Indian political class being bought over by the Soviets is a motivated myth. One aspect persists that despite our political diversities a cross-party consensus on the Indo-Soviet relationships was abiding all the time.

**IFAJ:** ...and generally we have followed consensus on national interests.

**IKG:** Undoubtedly. That is India's strength. We have sustained a very broad consensus in India on our foreign policy. From Nehru's time there has been a continuity in this regard. Changes are sometimes made in response to the happenings in the world but not in Indo-Soviet relations. It is worth mentioning that the Indo-Soviet relations sustained their warmth even during the 1980s, when the USSR was involved in Afghanistan. Rajiv Gandhi's era coincided with the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan at the end of the Cold War. This caused some disarray. The end of the Cold War was indeed confusing for the whole world. It goes to Rajiv's credit that he was able to reinvigorate our bilateral relationship with Russia. His personal relationship with the leadership was very good. All the Prime Ministers who came after him sustained this approach. I was Foreign Minister for the first time in 1989-90. The Soviet leadership was pleased to see me as a Foreign Minister. I carried forward the same policy. Yes, on a personal level, I was fortunate with all the senior echelons of Russia. My relation with the Moscow leaders was always friendly. The Communist Parties of India had cordial relations with the CPSU and I personally knew the Indian party leaders who dealt with the CPSU. I had served in Moscow as Ambassador for nearly five years. I went there in May 1976 and returned in December 1980. I had served four Prime Ministers of India while in the USSR, Indira Gandhi, Morarji Desai, Charan Singh and once again, it was Indira Gandhi in the end.

To our satisfaction the Soviets were always reliable friends. I had warm personal relations with them, they sustained close friendships with our leaders in India to our benefit.

The post-Cold War world has radically changed though the importance of the neighbourhood and the importance of historical relationships are abiding. The Indo-Russian relations are important for us particularly for India's security and strategic interests. Rightly we continue to believe in the Nehruvian addicts of not joining any military blocks and also to strengthen our friendships with the near and also not so distant neighbours such as the countries of Central Asia and the trans-Caucasia who till the other day were the constituent parts of the Soviet Union.

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