

ORAL HISTORY

Last Days of the Soviet Troops in Afghanistan

I. P. Khosla was the Indian envoy in Kabul in 1985, and saw the last of the Soviet tanks pull out. He speaks of his impressions and experiences during his tenure of three and a half years about the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, their withdrawal eight years later and subsequent developments that drastically changed the strategic environment in the region.

Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ): Thank you, Sir, for agreeing to share the perspectives and memories of your important assignment during those tumultuous days in Afghanistan. Can you recall your initial impression after you settled down in Kabul?

I. P. Khosla (IPK): Before going to Afghanistan, I was in Bangladesh. One day, I was talking to the Foreign Secretary and he commented that I had served in three difficult postings, the three neighbours – Burma, Bhutan and Bangladesh. He suggested something easier. I asked if there was any other post in the neighbourhood, since that's where interesting things happen. He said, the only vacancy would be in Afghanistan and I immediately agreed, so that's how I went there.

Kabul then was a perfectly normal city. You did not have a daily sense of threat. But once or twice in a month, suddenly, you would find rocket attacks happening. That was the risk of living in Kabul; you had to stay out of the way of the rockets; but since they were of a rather ancient Scud type, not at all accurate, staying out of the way wasn't difficult. The other risk was, if you drove to the outskirts, you might be kidnapped. The Mujahideen or maybe the warlords would love to hold you for ransom. Two or three diplomats were actually kidnapped and their governments paid ransom; but no Indian was ever kidnapped. Only one thing happened that affected Indian security seriously: a car explosion. A Volkswagen 'beetle' was filled with explosives which were set off just outside our compound wall. The explosion was, I think, meant for the Afghan Home Ministry, opposite our Embassy. They could not park the car there but parked near our Embassy. Luckily, there was a thick wall between us and the bomb. The wall got completely destroyed. Most of the front windows on the ground floor were shattered and people got

injured by flying glass. Every building nearby had its windows in smithereens. Even the windows of the Indian Airlines office a mile away were smashed and some people there were similarly injured.

When I arrived in Afghanistan in July 1985, they had already had six years of war that went back and forth; there was no conclusive victory in sight for either side. The Mujahideen belonging to the Pashtun groups controlled the countryside – they had complete control of the South and East. Cities like Jalalabad, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, Mazar-e-Sharif, etc. were under control of the Soviet and Afghan forces. The Mujahideen belonging to the Tajik and Uzbek groups controlled the North and West, though perhaps not quite so completely. Once, innocently and within a few days of my arrival, I told my driver to drive towards Jalalabad. After about twenty kilometres we saw a guard with a gun. He asked where I was going. I said – and that was the new arrival speaking – I am the Ambassador of India. He replied that no one is allowed on that road, Ambassador or not; the road was permanently blocked because of the Mujahideen activities. Only armed escorted convoys were allowed.

Some of my happiest moments after joining the Embassy were the evening get-togethers with Afghan friends. It is very easy for an Indian to make friends in Afghanistan. They love Kebabs and Qawwali, Bollywood music and *Shairi* (*Urdu Poetry*). We used to sit till late evening, talk about the history of Afghanistan, gossip about people, and so forth. I realized in those get-togethers that the Afghans do not like to bow down to anybody. They are conscious of their history, conscious that they have defeated major powers like the British, who tried to invade and divide and occupy the country. This is a country already divided by ethnicity, language and religion; some outsiders would regard it as easy to divide and conquer. There is a very major Shia community on the West, bordering Iran, and in the East and North they are mostly Sunnis. Pashtuns constitute around 40 per cent of the population, mostly in the East and South; Tajiks constitute another 20 per cent or so, in the North; then the Hazaras in the West with around 10 per cent; then Uzbeks, also in the North, largely along the border with Uzbekistan, somewhat less; and there are also Turkmen, Nuristanis, and many more, having different languages. Pashtun is not understood in Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek areas, while the languages spoken in the latter, Uzbek and Tajik, a version of Persian, are not understood in the Pashtun areas. But after Afghanistan was united in the middle of the eighteenth century, they developed over the years a sense of their own nationhood. One cannot easily describe what kind of unity is there;

for example, the central government has hardly any strength and never has had real authority over the different tribes, but whenever any foreign power invaded, somehow all the Afghan communities and tribes and language groups got together to expel the invader. For most Afghans, Jihad is the struggle against the foreign invader, not the struggle of the believer against the unbeliever. It is really difficult to mobilize the Afghans for religious war, but all the disparate tribal and religious groups get together against the foreign invader. Most outsiders find that difficult to understand; actually they don't understand it, so they persist in their efforts to get the Afghans to divide into groups and then subordinate themselves; the British did that three times; then the Soviets couldn't believe there was that unity, so they, too, tried; and the only realistic way to look at what is happening now is the Americans trying yet again.

Another example. Over the centuries nobody seems to have paid taxes; the central government depended entirely on customs duties from trade. They have no respect for central laws; their conduct is governed by the rules of the community or tribe, by social custom and tradition. The average Afghan has no time for government; he is a nomad and distrusts government; he even distrusts other forms of authority such as some Mujahideen leaders tried to impose.

I'll give you an instance of the Afghan character. At the time I was there, there was a very strong man, a warlord if you will, called Abdul Rashid Dostum who was renowned as one of the best players of Buzkashi in the country. I had gone to Mazar-e-Sharif on a visit. It happened around that time a very important national Buzkashi game was due to be played.

The Governor told me that Dostum was going to play Buzkashi as part of his team, the Mazar-e-Sharif team, which was powerful, but a lot of other powerful teams were also due to play in that game; it's essential to have Dostum playing, he said. I was rather surprised and asked, since Dostum is a Mujahideen, how is he here playing with the officially sponsored team? He replied that Dostum belonged to Mazar-e-Sharif and his loyalty was to the Mazar-e-Sharif Buzkashi team, so he had to come and play. "We sent him a message that his team needed him for the match; and that he must come. The political leaders of the Mujahideen group might not like this, but then he would go back to join the Mujahideen after the game." And so it was; that was when I met Dostum, probably the only Mujahideen leader I met during my posting.

Another thing is, the Afghans do not forget that at the origins we let down the Pashtun. The Pashtun tradition is that, at the age of five, a boy

expects a full size rifle as a birthday present. At that age he learns to shoot. The Pashtuns love guns, love warfare and fighting; actually this is their life. However, Badshah Khan created a miracle in the Pashtun areas. You can say Badshah Khan's life stood at the crossroads of some of the great issues of the 1940s and 1950s: issues of peace and war; the unity of India; the secularism of the Congress Party; the geopolitical future of the North-West quadrant of the Indian subcontinent and, in this context, the relationship between India and Afghanistan. It is certainly possible to argue that if we had chosen the road he proposed, India would have been a better place. He actually managed to convert the whole of the frontier area into adopting non-violence and renouncing war as well as renouncing one of the fundamental traditions of the Pashtun, *Badla* (revenge); in fact, adopting Gandhian methods. But the Congress Party responded with indifference to Badshah Khan; nobody from the leadership went to the frontier areas to see just what he had accomplished. Mahatma Gandhi was exceptional in this; the two met in 1929 in Lucknow and that meeting led to the founding of the *Khudai Khidmatgar*, an organization which snowballed in membership from 1930 onwards. Then, of course, the Congress leadership sat up and took notice, praised the Congress culture adopted by the *Khidmatgar* and their firm adherence to non-violence and to the cause of freedom for India.

In the 1946 elections, held as the Muslim League was growing in strength, and where it made large gains in most Muslim-majority areas, the NWFP was the exception: with a 92 per cent Muslim population the Congress Party won a clear majority on a manifesto against partition: 32 seats out of 50. This decisively validated the acceptance among Muslims of the Congress policy of a united, secular India and the duly elected Cabinet then actually met and decided that when partition came the NWFP would go with India. Then Mountbatten entered the picture. One of the first things he did was to visit the NWFP and tell Dr. Khan, Badshah Khan's brother who was the Congress Chief Minister of NWFP, that he thought a fresh election was necessary. No reason was given. None could have been given since there was none for this exceptional treatment of the frontier. In every other province the duly elected government took the decision, but not here. Anyway, one by one, the Congress leaders fell in line with Mountbatten's idea: Sardar Patel, Rajagopalachari, Maulana Azad, all thought Badshah Khan's influence was on the wane and Maulana Azad even advised him to join the Muslim League. Finally, a referendum was held, a strange referendum, under the threat of the gun, since the Muslim League was out in arms, with the most popular party, the

ruling party, boycotting it, in which people were asked to vote for “Pakistan” or “Hindustan”. And the vote was decisively for Pakistan.

So the Congress Party handed over that province to Pakistan for no really good reason; and Pakistan, of course, was and is opposed to everything that Badshah Khan stood for, Pashtun unity above all. They soon showed that by putting him in jail, where he spent most of his remaining years. The Afghans have not forgotten that. They say that here was a man who modelled himself on you, but you let him down so badly. After all, what happened in the frontier they ask? There was no doubt in anybody’s mind that had Badshah Khan’s brother been fairly dealt with, the NWFP would have acceded to India. No other province that joined either side, had any referendum. Geographic contiguity was a factor, but East Pakistan was not contiguous to West Pakistan. The Afghans remember that. However, they don’t talk about all these things openly. Once, a friend of mine, who was then the Minister of Transport, over a few drinks said that the Afghans don’t like to talk about these things, “but you need to understand basically the nationalism of the Afghans is Pashtun nationalism, and we believe India has never been fair to the Pashtun.”

IFAJ: What was India’s policy broadly?

IPK: We should remember that at the very heart of this matter was the question of Pashtunistan or Pathanistan; this is the issue that determined the state of Afghanistan’s relations with India and Pakistan before as well as after independence. And Badshah Khan was in favour of it, as, I think, was Mahatma Gandhi.

After 1947 also there were repeated pleas from different Pashtun groups to India for help in pushing forward the Pashtunistan movement; these were always rather curtly refused.

That feeling among Afghans was reinforced by post-independence developments. Historically, we have never supported the Afghans on key issues and they have never supported us. We sign declarations, proclaim ample goodwill, highlight our traditional and historical and ancient cultural ties, convene summit meetings and other meetings. But on the key issues we have differed. There were two key issues for Afghanistan. The first is the Durand Line. I would certainly have supported Afghanistan on this but the official position was against, presumably as it would affect our position of support for traditionally established borders and we would then have a problem with the Chinese on the McMohan Line. Second, they wanted our support for their landlocked status. The Pakistanis used to blockade them every now

and then and the Afghan government wanted us to condemn Pakistan, which we didn't. The reason was perhaps that we believed somebody might criticize us if ever we had to do the same thing to Nepal.

In the same way, the Afghans never supported us. In 1962, on the China issue they didn't support us. During the 1965 war with Pakistan they didn't support us. They didn't make a single statement of support of any kind. And throughout 1971 they never once condemned Pakistani atrocities in the East, as everybody was doing by the end of the year. So in 1971 and 1972, the crucial years of Bangladesh, they never supported us; rather they were the last to recognize Bangladesh. Those days we used to judge who recognized Bangladesh how soon. The Bhutanese recognized on the second day itself. Indeed Bhutto went to Kabul in January 1972 to thank the Afghans for not supporting India. One needs to look at India-Afghanistan relations in that light. It is fine, we have very good cultural relations; we have a Cultural Centre there where Indian teachers teach classical music, lots of Afghans used to come. They really love us very much, they are very hospitable people. When you are an Indian Ambassador, you are among friends. They will invite you to their homes, be very hospitable, lay on lavish meals, be very culturally alive, fond of Sufi songs, watch Indian films, etc. but that's where it stops. You can be sure that if, God forbid, we face any serious kind of security crisis, the Afghans will not be on our side.

The result is, India has never been a factor in their relationship with Pakistan. We have never nurtured a relationship with Afghanistan which would help us in dealing with Pakistan. What I sometimes have felt is that strategic thinking obviously was missing.

The example of the way we handled Sardar Daoud, who ousted Zahir Shah and became President in July 1973, is apt. Daoud had a long record of supporting the Pashtun movement for unity; he was very impressed by the capability of Indira Gandhi, the way she managed the East Pakistan crisis. He thought that since she had broken up Pakistan once, why would she not help him to do something in the frontier areas – help Afghanistan to merge the Pashtuns and create the kind of Pashtunistan on which Badshah Khan was working. So he came to Delhi in March 1975 and pleaded with Indira Gandhi for support on the Pashtun issue, which Mrs Gandhi refused. Then he went back and struck a deal with Bhutto. This created suspicion as to why the head of the Afghan government was striking a deal with the head of the Pakistan government.

You might recall that there was mutually agreed division of areas of influence during the 1970s between the Soviet Union and the US: divide the responsibility of aid programmes into Southern and Northern Afghanistan, one for the US, the other for the Soviets, to develop the infrastructure, schools, roads, etc. Southern Afghanistan borders Pakistan and the northern part borders three former Soviet Republics – Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Though that division was there, there was certain dissatisfaction within the Afghan Army that the Americans were far away and very close, had this alliance with Pakistan; therefore, they should not be trusted. Afghanistan has always had a dispute with Pakistan over the Durand Line. So they felt that they should not trust the Americans because one of these days when it comes to the crunch vis-à-vis Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, they are going to side with the Pakistanis. The Afghan Army was generally sympathetic to the Soviet Union.

There was some doubt about Daoud coming too close to Pakistan and whether he would let down Afghan interests as Bhutto was pressing Daoud to sign on the dotted line and agree on the Durand Line. But Daoud was ambiguous about this. His general inclination was towards the US but not towards Pakistan, since he had been championing Pashtun rights to self-determination for years. The Soviet Union got suspicious about this. I am certain that they knew about it and maybe encouraged the coup of 1978 that brought the PDPA to power.

IFAJ: How do you see India's role in those troubled waters?

IPK: Once the Soviet troops entered, India had only a small role to play in that situation. We had, as we generally do, followed a policy of dealing with the government in power. We were not supportive of the Soviet Union being militarily in Afghanistan. Of course, Indira Gandhi was sympathetic towards the Soviet Union but she was very critical of Soviet troops inside Afghanistan. She made it very clear early on that the Soviet Union should withdraw from Afghanistan. We supported Afghanistan as a neighbour and friend, but this was a rather limited exercise, dealing with whatever government came to power, extending help which benefited the people as directly as possible. That's how we dealt with relations when Najibullah fell and the Mujahideen government came to power. Rabbani was very friendly with India but Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was not, because he was a complete Pakistani agent. One has to ask one question and that is, did we do everything possible to ensure that Afghanistan was on our side, against the Pakistanis? The answer

is, No. Did we do a fair amount? Yes we did, though, as I said, in all honesty, strategic thinking was missing. Most of all, we built friendship with the people. Till today, the Afghans feel that the country most friendly towards them and most inclined to support the Afghan people is India. India is the highest in popular ratings.

IFAJ: Any important dignitary visited Afghanistan during that time?

IPK: In 1988, our Vice President Shankar Dayal Sharma visited Afghanistan. He represented the Government of India at the burial of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan in the garden of his old house in Jalalabad. He arrived in the daytime but it was extremely difficult to fly to Jalalabad during the day because the Mujahideen, who by then had the Stinger shoulder-fired heat-seeking missile, had already used it to good effect; you may remember that it was given to them in 1986. Well, as the war between the Mujahideen groups and the Soviet and Afghan government forces continued into its ninth year, the former had acquired weapons of increasing sophistication, especially anti-aircraft weapons. In this progression 1986 was a turning point. On 25 September that year the first Stinger missiles had been used by the Mujahideen against a formation of eight Soviet Hind helicopter gunships flying into the airfield at Jalalabad: three were destroyed. In the following year, 1987, 270 Soviet aircraft and helicopters were brought down. Now the hills on either side of the flight corridor from Kabul to Jalalabad were occupied by the Mujahideen, and they looked for the cabin lights of any aircraft.

So on the night of 21 January 1988 the Antonov-24 aircraft of the Afghan Air Force VIP squadron carrying the Vice President of India accomplished its entire trajectory from takeoff at Kabul airport less than an hour earlier, in total darkness; and it came down from its cruising altitude in a tight spiral towards Jalalabad airfield. That was certainly necessary for the security of the passengers, of whom I was one, keeping the aircraft interior in darkness throughout the flight and descending in that tight spiral; it was a sort of minimum precaution but it did add to the sense of disorientation of all the passengers. Anyway, this was not what one would expect of a VIP flight. Apart from one small cabin with an easy chair for the Vice President, the seating configuration had not been changed: everybody had to sit on wooden benches bolted along the length of the interior. Reinforcing this, Jalalabad airfield was also in total darkness. No landing lights came on as the aircraft spiralled down; and there were no street lights, maybe there was a blackout, but not even such lights from houses and offices around the airfield as one

normally sees everywhere when the aircraft descends: total blackness below. The hills around the airfield were also occupied by the Mujahideen who, we were told, needed only ten minutes to rouse themselves, get to the ammunition store, set, aim and fire their mortars (rather than missiles) at the airfield as soon as they could pinpoint a target. The Vice President was told that the landing lights would be switched on three minutes before the actual landing, allowing just enough time to land, taxi to the terminal and disembark passengers before the mortars began raining down. So down we came in the blackness as the aircraft continued on its descending spiral; all we could do was fervently hope that something was working, that the altimeter was working, that there was some radar beam which the pilot could bounce off the tarmac.

In the event, the runway lights did come on before we got there, the landing, taxiing and disembarkation occurred without mishap. The Vice President and party were whisked off in waiting cars long before the ten minutes were over and the mortars came down as we looked back and heard the crump, crump and saw the flashes of their impact.

Once we reached Jalalabad, we were secure. In fact on Friday, 22 January 1988, the day of Badshah Khan's burial, there was, for the first time in years, peace on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

The Mujahideen's radical Islamic ideology could not have been further from the openly proclaimed secularism of Badshah Khan. But now, out of sheer respect for what he had achieved, all the groups declared a ceasefire. The Soviet and Afghan forces reciprocated so that the tens of thousands of mourners from both sides of the border who wanted to attend the ceremonies in Jalalabad could do so without fear.

And they did, not just from Kabul and Kandahar and other parts of Afghanistan but also from Peshawar and other parts of Pakistan. Anticipating this, the Afghan authorities announced that for that day no visas would be required for those crossing the border; then both the Afghan and Pakistan authorities announced that all restrictions on border crossing would be lifted. Over 20,000 came across the Khyber Pass, thrown open for a day, riding in 2000 vehicles – trucks, buses, cars, vans, three-wheelers, two-wheelers. It was a phenomenon that came to be better known after the revolutions in Eastern Europe that overthrew the socialist regimes there. The multitude, all the exploited and the subjugated, all those opposed to the war and violence for which that frontier was known over the centuries, just wanted peace and proclaimed their wish this way. For at least that one day the Durand Line, so

long and fiercely opposed by all the Pashtun, did not exist. No passports or legal documents, no security check-ups regulated movement across that border that day.

There was, in fact, no violence. The procession to the site of the grave was led by President Najibullah, who first went up and put a scarf on the coffin; then our Vice President put a scarf on it and others followed. We then returned to Kabul at night with the same rather scary flying arrangements.

Madhavsinh Solanki, the Foreign Minister, also visited Afghanistan during my time. He came on a bilateral visit on the invitation of the Afghan government. We had a Joint Commission which was operating quite successfully, doing things like offering scholarships, running health facilities, educational schemes, a cultural exchange programme, etc. but no major projects like we are running now. The Indira Gandhi Hospital for Children in Kabul was very popular and crowded. People used to come for treatment from faraway places. Whenever I went round it I was somewhat surprised that people from such faraway places in Afghanistan took all the trouble to get there because they had heard that that was the place to go to if your child was sick.

IFAJ: Were you there when Najibullah became President?

IPK: Yes, we had gone to congratulate him. His attitude towards India was extremely positive. He received first the Russian Ambassador, of course, and I was the second to be received by him. Then he received the other East Europeans. As far as the West Europeans were concerned, they would not go to meet him at all. They had nothing to do with the regime, they were just parking there. What Najib was looking for was support and, in fact, he got it. Because soon after he became President, we had decided, I think in 1988, to invite him as a State guest. He visited India and was put up in the Rashtrapati Bhavan, if I remember correctly. They were in fact very happy. But my opinion was contrary, as I sensed that this government would not last. It miraculously lasted much longer than I expected: first, because he was a strong man; second, there was a lot of help from the Soviet Union; and third, the Army maintained its loyalty to him. Within the Army there were ethnic groups – Uzbeks, Pashtuns, Taziks, Turkmens, etc. who were very loyal to each other and he managed to retain their loyalty.

IFAJ: Was there at all an ideological angle?

IPK: I don't think that the Soviets ever believed that the Afghans would be good communists. In fact, the Soviets themselves were not good communists;

they should not have been communists at all. When you trace it back to Karl Marx, the last country which should have had a communist revolution was Russia. The revolution should have been the outcome of the contradiction, if Marx is to be believed, between the mode of production and the relations of production which develop at an advanced stage of industrialization. It was basically Germany which should have had a revolution first as it was a highly industrialized country. Russia was a completely peasant economy. They should not have had a revolution at all. The weakest link in the whole chain of Western countries as far as revolution was concerned, as I see it, was Russia. For them to think that Afghanistan, which is even more rural and traditional, could have had anything like that is impossible. But they had cultivated over the years a very strong force in the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which played a major role in the overthrow of Mohammed Daoud in 1978. After that they came to power because they had a lot of strength in the Army. The Afghans had the tradition of getting their army officers trained in the Soviet Union. Those army officers were of course duly indoctrinated and they came back with great sympathy for the communist cause and for closer relations with the Soviet Union, in general.

Anyway, the Soviets sent in troops on request and also as a means to control the situation that was getting out of hand; they thought it would be a walkover, because Afghanistan was still very much in the initial stages of development. They didn't have much of an army; the Army they did have was trained by the Soviet Union. All things considered, the Soviet Union thought they should not have much of a problem getting the situation in hand, not realizing that the Afghans have fought the foreigners many times. They like to fight the foreigner. They spend a lot of the time fighting among themselves anyway, and if foreigners come, they are very happy to abandon all that infighting, to get together and to fight against them.

Coming back to my own experiences, there was no one in the diplomatic corps to say that the Soviet Union was winning this war, except the Soviet and the East European diplomats; of course. Mr. Tabeev, the Soviet Ambassador, was really very optimistic. Since he was the most important Ambassador in Kabul, one of the first things I did after presenting my credentials was to call on him. He said, we have them on the run and we are getting some special forces to finish the job. We can recall that in 1986, the Soviet forces in Afghanistan were at a peak. Earlier they had 80–85 thousand but later they built up to about 110,000 – very reminiscent of what the Americans are doing now, the so-called surge.

I said to him, your roads are yet to be cleared. He replied, yes Ambassador, the roads have been blocked, the convoys are ambushed, but all this is temporary, do not worry about that. In a year the roads will be completely cleared. But this didn't happen; rather in 1986 the reverse happened. They mounted a major offensive and claimed victory but in reality they lost. The Soviet forces launched an offensive in the mountain caves along the Pakistan border, the Tora Bora region, where, many years later, Osama bin Laden would be hiding, but they lost that offensive; the caves are too deep and have too many passages to control. That is the place where insurgents keep their stocks of arms and ammunition; the Taliban still do, I think. We learnt at that time from the reports coming from the field, from various sources including from our Consulates at Kandahar and Jalalabad, that the Mujahideen had not lost much but the Soviets faced a large number of casualties and had retreated.

The Americans had the same experience when they mounted a major offensive in November 2001 in those same caves to capture Omar and they suffered major casualties. They didn't realize how difficult it is to penetrate them.

That was the signal. In 1986, Gorbachev decided that this was not going to work. Then we saw the new thinking in Soviet foreign policy as encapsulated in *Perestroika*. Though this development was not a direct result of the loss in the offensive, it was caused by how badly the war in general was going. As Gorbachev put it at the time, Afghanistan had turned into a whirlpool, sucking in and crushing Soviet manpower as well as causing a huge and unbearable expenditure. So, all these factors were linked up. You will recall that at the time Soviet Foreign Minister Edward Shevardnadze even linked the whole of the new thinking with Afghanistan.

So in 1986, the Soviet Union took a decision to pull out but was interested in negotiating for a peaceful withdrawal of troops. The reasons were: (a) there might be military actions by the Mujahideen while the troops were pulling out, and at that late stage the Soviets wanted to avoid casualties; (b) that Najibullah, who was a very tough man, should take charge of this initiative of pullout, so he could get credit for it and perhaps his hands would be strengthened. The Soviets not only wanted Najibullah to take over the government but ensure that he could survive for a while at least. At that time, Babrak Karmal was still the President and Najibullah was the head of intelligence. So, by 1986, there was a clear message that the Soviets were going to leave and that Najibullah would be there as President, replacing Karmal.

In public, by the way, at that time there was no suspicion that the Soviets had lost the war: that was still an internal assessment. For the public, including the West, the assessment was that the Soviets were not doing very well but that they had not lost the war.

IFAJ: How did Pakistan utilize the Soviet debacle?

IPK: You need to look into the whole thing as a complex phenomenon. When the Soviets came in, they had three different types of strategies to defeat the Mujahideen. One was to infiltrate the Mujahideen groups through Najibullah's intelligence organization. He was the head of KHAD, the Afghan intelligence agency. Another one was to create defections among the Mujahideen; and every now and then a small Mujahideen leader did defect. In fact, when Najibullah came into prominence in 1986 and became President in November that year, he called for a national reconciliation policy, the kind of thing Hamid Karzai is doing now. Some Mujahideen leaders actually went over to the side of the government and they were given safe passage and assured that they would not be attacked. But the major strategy adopted by the Soviets was the third, the destruction of villages in a scorched-earth policy, because the Mujahideen got support from those villages. That resulted in about three million refugees in Pakistan. Though the Pakistanis complained about the refugees, very intelligently they used them as assets. They created organizations, started religious schools, and that culminated in the group called Taliban. When the Mujahideen government that was first established in Kabul proved not to be pro-Pakistani enough and even wanted good relations with India, they brought these Taliban as an instrument for establishing their control on Kabul.

IFAJ: The withdrawal of the Soviets could have been caused by many factors, both internal and external. One factor that the West was frequently reporting was casualties, body bags coming, Soviet conscripts coming back, *Perestroika*, *Glasnost*, etc. But internally it was becoming a no-play situation.

IPK: As far as casualties were concerned, it is very difficult to judge. Look at the American effort in Vietnam. The Americans basically went in during President Johnson's time in 1965 and they completely pulled out by 1973. So it was all over in about eight years. They had some 53,000 military personnel killed in all, nearly 7000 every year dead, and some 200,000 to 300,000 wounded. The Soviets were in Afghanistan from December 1979 till February 1989, almost ten years, and they had a toll of 40,000 killed, that is only around 4000 a year, say almost half the rate at which the Americans were killed in Vietnam, and only 50,000 wounded. Now the Americans who went

into Afghanistan in November 2001 and have been there for almost ten years have had even fewer casualties – the total number wounded is around 11,000 and total number killed is not even 5000, the figure is around 2500, meaning 250 a year, less than a tenth of what the Soviets suffered. Still there is an uproar inside the US which makes an impact; so one should beware of numbers: they don't necessarily tell a story.

IFAJ: During your time the last Soviet tank left, and there was a lot of fanfare. What about the Western Embassies?

IPK: I think, ten days or a couple of weeks before the Soviet forces withdrew, all Western embassies, the Charges d'Affaires and their staff, left with bag and baggage. I asked: why are you leaving? With all the support that you have given to the Mujahideen and now that you are sure their government is going to be in power, surely you should be celebrating and staying. They said, there will be a very difficult situation from now onwards. I said, it looks like you were here because the Soviet Union was here: your leaving gives an impression that you have confidence in the Soviet Union.

I left Kabul a few months after the last Soviet troops had gone, but of course the Embassy remained and in due course there was a successor as Ambassador. Several others also continued to be there – the Pakistanis, the Iraqis, the Turks, the Iranians, among others. Of course, the Soviet Embassy was there and I think all the East Europeans were also there.

IFAJ: Something more about the Mujahideen who were active in the countryside?

IPK: In fact, you didn't see them at all. I met Dostum by chance. They were in the hills around Kabul, along the air route from Kabul to Jalalabad and, of course, in the Panjsher Valley in considerable strength. That was Ahmed Shah Masoud's stronghold and we were always regaled with stories about his daring, his military skills and superb strategy, by the Afghans, of course; the Soviet diplomats and official Afghans just said he was not a threat, that it was only a matter of time before he was ousted from his stronghold. The other operations against the Mujahideen that the Soviets mounted were in the border areas. Anyway, the short point is that diplomats accredited to Afghanistan didn't meet the Mujahideen unless they were kidnapped or had that kind of encounter.

From a broader perspective, basically the picture involving Pakistanis, Americans and Mujahideen was complicated because of several factors. The

Americans were very clear that the Pakistanis should control the Mujahideen. Pakistan said: no money and no weapons go to any Mujahideen group except through the Pakistan government. The Americans agreed, the Saudis agreed, everybody agreed with that condition. So the Pakistanis controlled the Mujahideen completely. But the Pakistanis had a bit of a problem. The Afghans are, above all, nationalists. Supposing they chose the most effective way of opposing the Soviet Union, then they would have to set up one central command of Mujahideen. But that central command would be so powerful that they would not listen to Pakistan. So, they deliberately divided them into seven groups. Whenever any group became too powerful, they would pull back money and arms from it and give more to somebody else.

In the course of that whole exercise, they were testing the loyalties of various groups and finally Gulbuddin Hekmatyar became their most loyal hireling. In another sense, the Mujahideen were pro-Pakistanis. They were staying inside Pakistan and were supplied arms by Pakistan. The Iranians did not give much. Some Mujahideen groups were loyal to the Iranians but the Iranians helped them only to a very limited extent. Sipah-i-Pasdaran was one such group, but it was not really very powerful. Also, the Iranians did not want to antagonize the Pakistanis. The Americans were happy with the Pakistani control of the Mujahideen. In fact, they did not want the Soviets to lose the war, but wanted them to go on bleeding there. They were quite happy with the Pakistanis keeping the Mujahideen divided and not allowing them to achieve their full potential.

Another aspect was the fighting among the Mujahideen groups which the journalists used to report frequently. This of course significantly weakened the Mujahideen also.

Unfortunately for the Pakistani game plan, when a Mujahideen government did come to power in 1992, under Rabbani, he was not inclined to be a Pakistani puppet. In fact, one of the first things he did was to contact the Indians to expand relations, saying that his government would be happy to start a new friendship with India. He was asking us to forget the past and that he was willing to forgive, well, almost everything – I just said the Afghans have long memories. He urged the re-establishment of good India-Afghanistan relations, the resumption of economic cooperation, and so on. The Pakistanis didn't like that. So they instructed Hekmatyar, the Deputy Prime Minister who was in the hillsides around Kabul and never emerged into the light of day or entered Kabul, staying always outside with his forces, to do something.

And they would help him, give him arms and ammunition and funds and even manpower. He started firing rockets into Kabul. In 1992–1994, there was absolute chaos because his forces and the Pakistani forces did whatever they could to destabilize the government. People say Afghanistan was in the midst of a civil war but that was not actually the case. That was a war generated by the Pakistanis through Hekmatyar. The Pakistanis did not want a peaceful Mujahideen government which was not inclined to be a puppet of Pakistan.

IFAJ: Did the word Taliban figure at that time?

IPK: No, the Taliban were unheard of in my time. We used to hear in Kabul and in Delhi as well that there was an occasional Arab or Tajik deserter and occasionally a Bangladeshi or an Indonesian. The total Mujahideen count was about 100,000 and many of them were not active. Only around 40,000 or even fewer were active, and out of them, around 200 may have been non-Afghan.

IFAJ: Then when did the Arabs move into Afghanistan?

IPK: During my time, al Qaeda and Osama were nowhere in sight. Al Qaeda moved into that area through occasional visits, starting 1992. The same year, two things happened: one was the fall of the Najib government and his replacement by Burhanuddin Rabbani; secondly, the Mujahideen groups' infighting reached a new high and, as I pointed out, this was led by Hekmatyar at the behest of Pakistan.

IFAJ: How did the Government of India react to these momentous changes happening there?

IPK: Not strategically. I am referring to the years I was there, say up to around mid-1989. Here was a case of a government installed by a Soviet military presence and that government wasn't going to last for very long and then, I remember, we invited Najib to India and Rajiv Gandhi sent his Principal Secretary Gopi Arora to Kabul to convey the invitation. I had some reservations on this and asked why we were inviting Najib, when his government was clearly not going to last. I suggested that in the long run it might be better to cultivate relations with the other groups instead of boosting him. But it was probably too late to get into strategic mode after half a century of something else, so, as I mentioned he did come to Delhi. And probably I was wrong anyway, because he did last quite some time and, moreover, the Mujahideen government that replaced him didn't seem to mind that invitation to Delhi: they wanted good relations with India anyway.

IFAJ: Where is Afghanistan heading today?

IPK: The trends are very clear. The Afghans don't lose wars, they love fighting ... they may win or may not but they won't stop fighting. The Afghans have that characteristic. The Americans have to decide how many casualties they can take. In my assessment, they are not going to take much time to decide, so here we have a replay of what the British went through twice (the third Anglo-Afghan war was of a very different kind) and the Soviet Union once. By the way, I do not believe – and I never met an Afghan who could take and did take an independent position – and did believe, that the Soviet withdrawal had anything to do with their, so to speak, losing the Cold War.

Another thing is, the Taliban are probably the best organized group inside Afghanistan and they are going to have a major share of power once the post-American transition takes place. It is difficult now to predict whether there is going to be a sharing of power with people like Karzai and his group, and to what extent they are going to share with other groups. The Tajiks are very strong and fully armed in case the Taliban comes. I believe the Uzbeks also are prepared. Where I differ from the usual assessment is in thinking that the Taliban of yesterday and today are not identical and entirely Pakistani puppets. Of course, they will be more sympathetic to Pakistan than India. So our position to that extent will be eroded. But I would not rule out altogether some kind of *modus vivendi* with them.

Anyway, the Americans are not going to continue beyond 2014, and they may even have left much before that. The elections are coming in America next year and Obama doesn't want that election to be fought on the issue of casualties in Afghanistan because people in America are now asking why they are fighting a war in Afghanistan at all; now that Osama is dead, for what purpose are they fighting? Obama has to answer that big question. More importantly, while pulling out of Afghanistan, I think, America will have the same major concern as the Soviets about how to ensure that there are no major casualties while the withdrawal is actually underway.

IFAJ: Thank you very much, Sir, once again, for your insightful narration on the unfolding of events during those tumultuous years in Afghanistan. This would definitely throw some light on the current happenings in that part of the world.

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