1789

**Institute for the Study of Diplomacy**
**Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service**
**GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY**

***Discourse, Dissent, and Strategic Surprise:***
***Formulating American Security in an Age of Uncertainty***

# The US and Soviet Proxy War in Afghanistan, 1989–1992: Prisoners of Our Preconceptions?

WORKING GROUP REPORT, NO. IV, NOVEMBER 15, 2005

WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE JOHN D. AND CATHERINE T. MACARTHUR FOUNDATION

*Co-Chairs:* DOUG MACEACHIN AND JANNE E. NOLAN
*Project Coordinator:* KRISTINE TOCKMAN

## Introduction

In May 1989, the mood in Washington was euphoric. After more than eight years of devastating war with outnumbered and more poorly equipped Muslim rebels, the mujahideen, the Soviets had finally withdrawn their demoralized forces from Afghanistan. This humiliating defeat for the Soviets was celebrated as a major Cold War victory for the US. President George Bush "hailed the withdrawal as a "watershed" in US-Soviet relations." Congressional champions of the mujahideen boasted that "the United States had learned in Afghanistan that it 'could reverse Soviet influence anywhere in the world.'"[1]

As the champagne bubbled in Washington, however, the war raged on in Afghanistan. The official Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was by no means the end of the internecine struggle for power between the US and Soviets in that country. Both superpowers would continue to arm and aid their proxies in the Afghan conflict until late 1991, even while the Soviet

---

[1] See *Volume II: Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War*, at the Digital National Security Archives: October 9, 2001: http://www.gwu.edu/~nsaarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/essay2.html.

Union itself was collapsing. After the US and the Soviet Union ended all military support to Afghanistan in 1992, the country was left to cope with groups of highly trained, organized and equipped factions who engaged in what rapidly devolved into civil war. This, in time, was to pose profound implications for US strategic and security interests, as well as for global security.

More than 16 years have passed since the last Soviet soldier crossed the "Friendship Bridge" out of Afghanistan back into Soviet territory, but once again, Afghanistan is a major national security challenge for the US. Because of Afghanistan's continued saliency to our national security policy, the working group held two separate discussions on strategic surprises relating to Afghanistan. This report is the second of those discussions. The first Afghan case focused on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. That report may also be found on ISD's website at http://isd.georgetown.edu.

In its November 2005 meeting, the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy (ISD) working group focused on events in Afghanistan during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the US and Soviets continued to arm and support Afghan factions in a proxy battle after the official Soviet withdrawal. The group also discussed policy decisions and consequences of completely withdrawing from engagement in Afghanistan in 1992. What was the conventional wisdom in the policymaking community during this period? What drove these prevailing views, and what systemic factors in US policy formation hindered or prevented alternative views from being expressed or examined? Should US policymakers, intent on supplying, arming and training Muslim rebels, have been able to anticipate the rise of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan? Given other national strategic objectives and the global political environment at the time, could US policymakers have pursued alternative courses of action than they did? If feasible alternative policies were expressed, why were they not pursued?

The case is part of a broader study in which the working group seeks to identify the systemic challenges the United States faces in adapting to a rapidly changing international security environment. By examining historical cases of intelligence failures and policy-making which produced adverse outcomes for American security, the study is investigating government-wide organizational or other weaknesses which played a part, and on this basis will draw lessons for the future. The ISD working group remains focused on conducting an inquiry that is objective and free of political bias. The goal is not to "lay blame," but to better understand the complex interactions between the intelligence and policy worlds in order to assess policy implications and to issue practical recommendations for improvement.

## Historical Background: Defeat Snatched from the Jaws of Victory

### *The Geneva Accords and 'Negative Symmetry': More Weapons and Cash to Afghanistan*

In April, 1988, after more than eight years of devastating conflict between Soviet military forces and insurrectionist groups in Afghanistan, and six years of politically entangled negotiations, the Soviet Union signed the Geneva Accords. The Accords officially ended direct Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, implementing a phased withdrawal of Soviet troops to be completed by February 1989. In reality, however, it would be much longer before the Soviets ended their military adventures in Afghanistan.

The US would also continue its proxy war against the Soviets in Afghanistan after the Accords were signed by continuing to arm the Afghan Muslim mujahideen, or "freedom fighters," as they were often called in the West. Direct military aid to the mujahideen was a multi-billion dollar project during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. After the Soviets pulled out, the US funneled hundreds of millions of dollars, arms and other aid to the mujahideen through the Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI.

One important legacy of the Accord negotiations practically ensured continued Soviet and US military involvement in Afghanistan. In the mid-1980s, the US had begun to participating actively in the negotiations, conducted by a special UN emissary in Geneva. The major stumbling block for reaching agreement on the Accords involved the issue of "symmetry," in which the US would cease its military support to the insurgents if the Soviets withdrew all their military forces from Afghanistan. Moscow insisted that while it would withdraw its military forces, it could not accept a prohibition on providing military supplies to an "allied government" that was recognized by and held a seat in the UN General Assembly. The US Administration, on the other hand, would not commit to a formal agreement permitting the USSR to provide military assistance to a regime that it had installed through military intervention, while ceasing US assistance to the "freedom fighters" attempting to oust this installed regime.

This issue would not be fully energized in Washington until, as Secretary Shultz has described, Soviet intentions to withdraw their military forces "became increasingly real" and their "intent to continue supplying arms and other support to their allies in Kabul" were equally clear. After much stalemating, contradictory statements on both sides, and diplomatic tension, "negative symmetry," in which the Soviet Union and the US would both cease all military support to their preferred contestants, was rejected by both Moscow and key US congressional supporters of the Afghan arms aid programs.

Ultimately, negative symmetry did not hinder conclusion of the Accords negotiations because both sides implicitly agreed to ignore the issue. The Soviets proposed an 'internal understanding' that because the current draft of the accords contained no explicit mention of military supplies, the US would be legally free to make its own independent decisions regarding military assistance to the Afghan resistance, and the USSR would be free to do the same with regard to the Kabul regime. For the next three years, hundreds of millions of dollars, arms, equipment and other assistance from both countries flowed to Afghanistan.

### *Afghan Interim Government*

Just days before the accords were signed, the UN negotiator publicly read a carefully negotiated statement from the parties involved:

> ***It has been consistently recognized that . . . comprehensive settlement implies the broadest support and immediate participation of all segments of the Afghan people and that this can best be insured by a broad-based Afghan government. It is equally recognized that any questions relating to the Government of Afghanistan are matters within the exclusive jurisdiction of Afghanistan and can only be decided by the Afghan people themselves. The hope was therefore expressed that all elements of the Afghan nation, living inside and outside of Afghanistan, will respond to this historic opportunity."***[2]

In effect, the composition of a post-Soviet Afghan government would be left to be fought out among the Afghan factions, at the same time that both the USSR and the US were maintaining their rights to support their preferred contestants.

---

2. Cordovez, Diego and Selig Harrison. *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. p. 362.

This careful public statement did not accurately reflect the wishes of Moscow and the Najibullah regime in Kabul, however, both of which had been privately agitating for US support in forming a government of national unity in Kabul. While the Soviets politically could not be seen as allowing the Communist party to be barred from participating in a "national reconciliation" government, they were desperate to end the costly aid pipeline to Kabul. Najibullah had also offered to step down if the US and the Pakistanis would be willing to support a government of national unity which included the Communists. The US and Pakistan rejected these proposals.

Meanwhile, the Pakistantis had set up a coalition of seven diverse Afghan resistance parties into what would be presented as a unified "Afghan Interim Government" (AIG). The seven parties that made of the AIG were a mixture of what have been commonly described as "fundamentalists" and "traditionalists," according to their Islamic outlook and modus operandi. Most—if not all—of these groups had engaged in internal insurrectionist activities well before the Soviet invasion of 1979, as part of what one scholar described as a "nascent underground Islamic Fundamentalist movement." The leaders of these groups spent time in exile in Pakistan during the 1970s, and several became primary recipients of the Pakistani distribution of US military aid supplies.

Another prominent leader of one of the factions, Abdul Sayyaf, was a key player in acquiring aid from Saudi Arabia. He became a point man for the flow of recruits from the Saudi-supported campaign to recruit Muslims from the around the globe. Sayyaf has been described as having been one of the chief architects of the "internationalization" of the Jihad—an effort that contributed greatly to the pool of "Afghan Arabs" later drawn on by al-Qaeda. The Pakistanis appointed Sayyaf as Prime Minister of the AIG, perhaps in part as a signal to the Saudi aid pipeline, and because of his broad Islamist connections.

During this time, the US embassy in Islamabad began reporting on what it described as increasing numbers of foreign Islamists using training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Embassy reporting described them as "well-financed Arab fanatics, extolling a virulent anti-American line, in contrast to the Embassy perception of the groups that have been supported by the US during the conflict with the Soviet military forces." Additional reporting from the US consulate in Peshawar describes the new inflow as "Arab radicals out of control."

In the months following the Soviet withdrawal, there was substantial debate in Washington on the issue of continued US assistance to the Afghan resistance groups—but mainly on "how" and "with what" rather than on "whether." A major attack by the mujahideen on a key city in March 1989 had failed. Reports from the field claimed the Soviets had left behind "massive" amounts of weapons and combat support materials, and were sending in major new shipments. In Congressional hearings held at the time, central concerns included whether the resistance was sufficiently cohesive to carry out the kind of organized effort required to militarily defeat the Najibullah army, and what would be the result if and when the fractious coalition did succeed in bringing down Najibullah.

While these debates were taking place, the warlords of the resistance were reinforcing many of these concerns. Their actions demonstrated two operational facts:

- While the fiefdoms of warlords rooted in their ethnic and tribal area could do an excellent job of hit and run attacks and create the "death of a thousand cuts" to persuade a foreign occupier to quit and go home, this was not sufficient to win a more conventional war against a regime that—however much foreign material it employed—had its own indigenous roots. In effect, the warlords were well suited to guerilla war but not conventional war.

- The rule of "uniting against a common enemy" worked well to cause diverse groups—Tajiks, Pushtuns and Shi'ites—to unite against the Soviet invader. However, once that common enemy left, the factions started fighting for their own ambitions.

### *Disintegration into Civil War: 1991–1992*

While the US and Soviet Union were in initial discussions to end the supply of military aid to Afghanistan, other major priorities arose, including the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and heightened urgency to conclude the major arms control treaties (especially START) in the light of the uncertain future of the USSR. Finally, however, both governments formally agreed to end arms support to the combating factions in Afghanistan, effective January 1, 1992. With the Soviets completely out of Afghanistan, the US no longer had an incentive to arm the mujahideen. What was seen just a few years before as a major battlefield of the Cold War was now a messy entanglement in a backwater country with little strategic importance. An article in the *Times* of London captured the sentiment well: “The world has no business in that country’s tribal disputes and blood feuds.”[3]

Four months later, Najibullah’s communist regime in Kabul was finally ousted. The Afghan Interim Government was dissolved by the Pakistanis shortly thereafter. For the next two years, the various warlords who had fought the Soviets turned against each other, and spent the next two years bouncing back in forth in alliances to advance their own power status in a continuing round of battles. Kabul was almost destroyed from the constant attacks, and the civilian population suffered from large numbers of causalities.

The subsequent total lack of a functioning government created a void of order and authority. As the country descended further into chaos and warfare in the mid-1990s, the Taliban became increasingly powerful. Taliban forces captured Khandahar in November, 1994, seized Kabul in September 1996, by which time Osama bin Laden had arrived, and by August 1998 effectively controlled the majority of Afghan territory.

## Key Themes of the Working Group Discussion

Ahmed Rashid, internationally known journalist and author of several best-selling books on the region, the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia and the Taliban, presented his views on key events during the period immediately following the official Soviet withdrawal in 1989 to the beginning of civil war in Afghanistan in 1992. He led a provocative discussion of how policy decisions surrounding these events affected US national strategic objectives in the entire region at the time, its relationship with the Soviet Union, and how those decisions still impact US national security today.

Rashid’s presentation highlighted several major themes discussed by the working group:

- The persistence of a Cold war mindset which dominated US policy discussions, options and action in the United States’ involvement in Afghanistan;
- The US abandonment of Afghanistan, and the region generally, with attendant consequences for long-term US national security;

---

3. Cordovez, Diego and Selig Harrison. *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. p. 387.

- Whether or not the US could have pursued alternative courses of action in Afghanistan which may have resulted in a better outcome;
- How various factions in the US government shaped the nature of policy debates on Afghanistan
- Issues of competing policy or security priorities and distractions during the period 1989–1992.
- How the compartmentalization of information and intelligence critical for sound policy decision-making and the limited access of most policymakers to that information affected policy discourse, dissenting views and potential alternative courses of action

### *Mindsets and Assumptions*

The working group widely agreed that US strategy, negotiations, policy discussions and actions were driven almost exclusively by the exigencies of the US-Soviet relationship. This relationship dominated policy debates to the extent that Afghanistan's strategic importance to the US was not considered on its own merits, but rather how it could be best exploited as a platform to "stick it to the Soviets." One observer of the Accord negotiations noted his impression that the US was determined to "maintain the decorum of the relationship between the two big superpowers," not to "humiliate" the Soviets during the negotiations. Consequently, the participant said, they "completely ignored everyone else: the Pakistanis, the Afghans, the UN. They had absolutely no interest in what anybody else was saying. . . . They treated this as a typical Soviet-US kind of deal that had to be struck." The participant also argued that the Cold War mindset held over in US policy towards Afghanistan for a very long time, through 1992 and 1993. "Until that mindset disappeared, there was no way the [US] was going to change its mind about Afghanistan. And by then, of course, it was too late."

Others agreed that the Cold War dominated the Washington policymaking mindset. One participant said, "The US was totally fixated with using Afghanistan to weaken the Soviet Union. . . . Our approach was to take the fight to the Soviets." Another participant, a high raking official at the State Department, echoed that view: "It really was a bleeding action to keep the Soviets engaged." The US preoccupation with Soviet maneuvers in Afghanistan, driven by a Cold War mindset, excluded any real examination of what Afghanistan's future was likely to be if the Soviets actually did withdraw.

This also meant Washington was predisposed to reject out-of-hand a UN plan for an inter-Afghan dialogue to reach agreement between all the warring factions, as well as to reject pleas from both Moscow and Najibullah to help form new government of national unity. Since the primary—and in fact, sole—goal for US engagement in Afghanistan was to defeat the Soviets, any armed resistance to the Communist regime in Kabul was to be welcomed: peace did not figure into that plan. The warring factions were left to their own devices as the US and Soviets finally end military aid to Afghanistan. The Pakistanis, the Saudis, the Iranians, and other key regional players who had been supporting and arming various factions since the Soviet invasion then become the de facto controllers of Afghanistan.

Conventional wisdom in Washington also held that "if the Soviets withdrew, the Najibullah government would fall, the Afghan mujadideen would march into Kabul in a victory parade, and they would take care of it in an Afghan manner," in the words of one participant. The few cables from the field questioning the assumption that Najibullah would immediately collapse "were not pursued," said the participant. Also, US policymakers did not question how all the different warring Afghan factions would actually form a unified government, especially after ten years of economic, institutional and structural devastation. One participant, at the time a high-ranking State Department official, recalled an Afghan minister asking, "If you want us to be a government, why don't you give us any resources?' The participant felt that question was "basically the bottom line: that we wanted them to come together, but there was no thought and mechanism for helping them really function as a government, which meant resources and jobs and certain goodies. . . . We really fell down in that period of trying to help the Afghan Interim Government (AIG) get started." Another participant felt the assumption that the mujadideen would form a viable coalition was driven by a "will to believe:" "We wanted it to be so, and we deluded ourselves into thinking that it was more so than was actually the case."

Another prevailing view painted the mujahideen in a romantic light—the heroic, rag-tag band of "freedom fighters" who were beating a world superpower with fewer men and less weaponry. Said one participant, "It was almost like caravans out of James Michener. . . . Here were these guys who were beating up on the Soviets. This was phenomenal. Nobody had been beating up on the Soviets. . . . We saw them first and foremost as nationalists. The religious thing was a great vehicle. But they were nationalists. They were Ho Chi Min in reverse. I mean, that was what we were hearing." The dangers of giving sophisticated weaponry, training and other support to religious factions in a country known for its extremely conservative Islamic population was not discussed at top decision-making levels in Washington.

## The Policy Protagonists: Bleeders, Dealers and Disengagers

Much of the discussion focused on the policy process at the time—the various policymaking 'factions' in Washington and their respective agendas, competing global events which distracted attention from Afghanistan, and the compartmentalization of information on our Afghan policies. These process issues profoundly shaped US discourse on and actions in Afghanistan.

The working group broke the main policymaking factions in government into "bleeders," "dealers," and "disengagers." The bleeders were the staunch anti-Communists who believed the Soviets had to be punished for Vietnam, that we "owe it to the Soviets to kick them in the teeth." They felt strongly that the entire government in Kabul had to be demolished. The dealers, on the other hand, argued that something of the ten-year Soviet presence in Afghanistan could be salvaged by forming a kind of government which would somehow involve the Afghan communists. The dealers also pointed out the risks inherent in backing the most extreme elements of the Afghan mujahideen through the ISI (the Pakistani security service), especially given the fact that many hundreds of the Stingers and other US-supplied weapons to the rebels were unaccounted for.

The few policymakers or State Department personnel who warned against the riskiness of arming Muslim guerilla groups were effectively silenced by the overwhelming priority to beat the Soviets and, consequently, the lack of political will to consider alternative courses of action. One participant noted that there was some unhappiness in the State Department about supplying the different mujahideen groups, and "becoming the tools, in a wa,y of the ISI in doing so. But the . . . argument was, this was the strongest force. And besides, they were winning. You don't really try to break up a winning team, or you can't do it without much conviction or ability to bring people along." The necessary "conviction" didn't exist at the time.

Other participants felt that while the "bleeders" and "dealers" struggled for dominance over Afghan policy, it was the "disengagers" who won: those who "had a policy of systematic disengagement from wars that were seen as unattractive, unpopular, unsellable, expensive, messy, entangling." One participant noted that the Afghan war was just one of the five or six 'Reagan doctrine wars' which the new Bush Administration was eager to shut down. These wars were "past history," lacked public support and were costly. The administration was further motivated by a need to negotiate out of the wars while the Soviet Union still existed. Another participant agreed that particularly after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, disengagement was the preferred option: "There was quite a willingness to say, to hell with it, let's get out of this mess. We no longer have a dog in this fight."

Furthermore, the split over US policy in Afghanistan between various factions within the US government was heavily weighted between the more senior decision-makers on one side, and "a few individuals at the middle levels who wrote a paper which never got past their boss's boss." Dissenting or alternative views therefore did not play much of a role in top decision-makers' policy discussions.

## Global Distractions

Many participants noted that several major global events during this time distracted policymakers' time and attention away from the problems festering in Afghanistan. These included the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the first Gulf War, and several Reagan doctrine wars. These major policy and security issues often took priority over the Afghan conflict, which was widely regarded as winding down as far as the US and the Soviets were concerned. Getting senior policy makers to focus on several major events at once is "really pushing the envelope," said one participant. The top decision makers are looking at issues in a global way, and they're covering all the regions. And whereas the specialists may be at each other's threats, it's just not going to filter up, or it won't overturn these larger concerns."

While other major global events were occurring, US policy on Afghanistan was on automatic pilot, argued some participants. Policy momentum and inertia in the face of competing priorities might have been responsible for a great deal of outcome on the ground in Afghanistan. US policy, said one participant, "doesn't operate in a sophisticated, subtle manner. It doesn't have an accelerator and a break. It had an on and off switch, and you can turn [US support to the mujahideen] on and off. What we did was turn on a supply chain. Then we attempted to modulate it as we could."

The incentives to be actively involved in Afghanistan and closely monitor events evaporated in most of the US policymaking community by 1991. As US policy in Afghanistan drifted, other key regional players were more than willing to take the initiative.

## Compartmentalization of Information

Several participants noted that discourse on Afghanistan policy, particularly during the period after Soviet withdrawal when the US was continuing to arm the mujahideen, was constrained and compartmentalized. Information was tightly restricted to an extremely small group of people in Congress and the Executive Branch, frustrating those who wished to play a role in a larger debate about our policy and actions in Afghanistan. One participant noted the contrast with staff support for the Persian Gulf War: "When we didn't like what we were hearing from the intelligence community, because it sounded biased . . . we could get good information from the experts at the National War College on the region." The options available to policymakers on Afghanistan "weren't there because debate was constrained."

The situation points to a broader, systemic problem in governmental decision-making. Those who have access to information tend to become the policy drivers on that particular topic. Policymakers who lack information feel constrained from making decisions or questioning the prevailing policy because, said one participant, "they feel they are missing the information needed to make judgment calls . . . and so they tend to back off." Also, when intelligence or information is highly compartmentalized, policymakers who want to examine the larger issues, such as what the consequences of complete withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1991 might be, they are also constrained, because "members engaged on one level on specific programs and compartments don't have a mechanism for going large."

## Alternative Courses of Action

There was much debate among working group members whether the US could have done anything differently than it did to achieve a better outcome in Afghanistan. In particular, were there alternatives that addressed an anticipation of or concern about the potential deterioration of conditions inside Afghanistan and the outward spread of the multinational nature of the war?

Several participants believed alternative course of action were not possible for the US at the time, citing the prevailing US-Soviet mindset, wide-spread assumptions about internal Afghan politics, and lack of leverage over key regional players as factors. Others argued that a few key moments in the relevant time frame were opportunities to change course. One such moment was right after the Accords are signed, when the Soviets signal their desperation to get out of Afghanistan by front-loading their exit: within three months, the Soviets had already pulled, one to two-thirds of their troops out of Afghanistan. One participant said, "It was a completely new ballgame for the US government. There were Americans in various parts of the government who were aware that we had better be looking ahead to what the hell is going to happen six months down the road." Another point was in 1988 when the Soviets pressed the US to help form a tripartite coalition government. "That," said one participant who was present for the Accord negotiations, "was a wake up call that should have aroused some great interest in the US government to help the Soviets out of this quagmire." The UN-led initiative was not only rejected, but not even seriously considered at the time, the participant said. The participant disagreed that US policy was "operating in remote control" or was totally one-sided. Another critical moment to change policy course could have been during the Peshawar Accords, which led to the mujahideen government in Kabul. One participant theorized that if there had been "even a distant US public involvement" in forming an interim government, it might have helped mitigate Afghanistan's growing internal chaos.

Another participant said it wasn't "convenient" to question the assumption that the Najibullah government would immediately collapse upon Soviet withdrawal because that would interfere with the decision to disengage from Afghanistan. If US policymakers had allowed for the possibility that Najibullah had some staying power, the participant noted, "he (Najibullah) would then be positioned to cut deals with various commanders and end up with something like a coalition government." Even so, several participants disagreed whether challenging that assumption at the time would have led to a more fruitful consideration of policy alternatives.

## Leverage

The group's discussion on possible US policy alternatives centered largely on the issue of leverage. Participants vigorously debated how much leverage the US had with key regional players at the time, and how that affected policy outcomes. Many participants felt that US political influence over Pakistan, Saudi Arabia was exaggerated, and that the US could not have persuaded these countries to help form an interim government in Kabul or decrease arms supplies to the mujahideen. By 1989, said one participants, “The ISI and the Saudis had become very, very strong—in essence, somewhat beyond our control. And particularly so after October 1990, when we applied sanctions to Pakistan on the nuclear issue. The US was . . . out of the game [by then] because our influence went way, way down. The attitude was that the US used us like a piece of Kleenex. Once the Cold War was over, you had blown your nose, and you threw it away.” As the Pakistani nuclear program became an increasingly irritating thorn in US-Pakistani relations (after years of the US turning a blind eye to that program), US leverage over Pakistan evaporated, argued many participants.

Other participants noted US financial leverage over the enormous amounts of money flowing from the Pakistanis and especially the Saudis was nonexistent. One participant familiar with the Saudi banking system noted the Saudi’s own inability to modulate unofficial resource flows, which were as large, if not larger, than official resources from the government. Once the Saudi population had been sufficiently mobilized by media reports of civilian Afghan suffering and the mujahideen’s jihad against the Soviets, charity donations took on a life of their own. Said one participant, “There’s an inertia that takes place. The money starts to flow and it continues to flow, and people don’t focus on it. They get diverted to other things. Meanwhile, the money is just flowing.”

Others participants felt that the US, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was the dominant political player in the region, and still had necessary influence over key allies to change policy outcomes. One questioned the view of the US as a “poor, helpless, third-rate player” in the conflict. Some participants felt leverage was not the main issue; rather, US policymakers knowingly abandoned Afghanistan to the Pakistanis and Saudis to “sort out” Afghanistan’s future. However, the participant said, “The Pak-Saudi agenda for Afghanistan was totally ruinous . . . it was [that] agenda which leads to Al Qaeda and all the rest of it. . . . Did you not see this in 1992, as it emerges?”

## Consequences

One important consequence from the case was the effect of a dominant Cold War mindset on policy and actions which affect the US even today. That mindset prevented the US from seeing Afghanistan as anything more than a battlefield in the war against the Soviets. Despite the fact that the conflict and events in Afghanistan affected an extremely important region and strategic allies, these issues were not examined in Washington in their own context, as security challenges separate from US-Soviet rivalry. Said one participant involved in Afghanistan policy at the time, "It was a case of, 'The Cold War is over, so who needs this battlefield anymore, and why should I spend money on it?" No one debated the larger security issues relating to Afghanistan, the participant remembered. Another participant agreed, noting there was little attention given to concepts as enemies as anything other than states. Our learning curve as extremely steep. If there is no adequate comprehension of what it means to have failed state, this can have global consequences. . . . It's not that it was impossible to understand that."

Another participant wondered why, by the mid-1990s, when major events such as the war in Bosnia took on a very different character than traditional state-to-state conflict, US policymakers were not having a strategic debate about a new paradigm for US national security interests.

Another strategic consequence of the Afghan case was the US support of the mujahideen. While the US promoted the idea of the "good Jihadist" as essentially a nationalist movement which would be contained within Afghanistan's borders, "we would have been completely blind not to see the tremendously motivating influence of religion," noted one participant. Making assumptions based on state-centric notions of security challenges blinded policymakers to conceps of transnational threats, institutions and movements, including well-armed religious movements, and the potential consequences of those kind of threats. The lack of broader thinking and the confines of conventional widsom precluded an essential debate about the wisdom of supporting several multi-national groups of armed, trained and religiously-motivated Jihadists, questioning whether such groups would really disburse or form a government together after the Soviet withdrawal, or whether or how such groups might affect US national security or interests at some point.

The related consequence of foreign resource mobilization to the mujahideen during the war with the Soviets was to help create a new kind of transnational economic capacity outside the purview or control of governments. Said one participant, "I don't blame us [the US] for not noticing this, because it's an entire paradigm shift, in terms of how organizations or how agencies run." Ahmed Rashid agreed, highlighting the role Saudi Arabian charities played in the process: "The unofficial aid, which was being given by [some Saudi] families, the princes, the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi charities . . . all these charities grew up in the Afghan war. Many became the funders of Al Qaeda ten years down the road, but they grew up and developed their funding capabilities [during the war in Afghanistan.]"

---

**Institute for the Study of Diplomacy**
1316 36th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007
*Tel* 202-965-5735 *Fax* 202-965-5652
*Web* http://isd.georgetown.edu
Copyright 2006. Institute for the Study of Diplomacy. All Rights Reserved.

The Institute for the Study of Diplomacy (ISD), founded in 1978, is part of Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and is the School's primary window on the world of the foreign affairs practitioner.

ISD studies the practitioner's craft : how diplomats and other foreign affairs professionals succeed and the lessons to be learned from their successes and failures. Institute programs focus on the foreign policy process: how decisions are made and implemented.

ISD conducts its programs through a small staff and resident and nonresident "associates." Associates, primarily U.S. and foreign government officials, are detailed to or affiliated with the Institute for a year or more. The Institute seeks to build academic-practitioner collaborations around issues using associates and Georgetown faculty. ISD staff and associates teach courses, organize lectures and discussions, mentor students, and participate on university committees.

In addition, ISD's Pew Case Studies in International Affairs are used in over 1,000 courses across the country and around the world.

**Discourse, Dissent, and Strategic Surprise**

With generous support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy has established a Working Group of senior experts to examine how the U.S. national security establishment at critical junctures has ignored information or analysis that challenged prevailing policy assumptions—to the detriment of American security interests

Given the many urgent security challenges on the horizon, the project seeks to identify ways American officials might learn contemporary lessons from past experience. What lessons can be learned for future policy from historical cases of "intelligence failures" which were actually failures to take that information into account?

Drawing on several key case studies, this new project seeks to provide insights into the dynamics among national security and intelligence agencies, the president and key advisers, the Congress, the media, various interest groups and experts in evaluating intelligence and defining national security priorities and policy choices. This project complements ISD's ongoing Schlesinger Working Group on Strategic Surprise, which seeks to anticipate future challenges to U.S. national security interests.

This work was made possible through a grant by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

The views expressed in this monograph do not necessarily reflect the views of any of the organizations, governmental or private, with which the individual participants in the discussion group are affiliated.