

Mourning in America

*The Assassination of Ambassador Adolph Dubs and the Deterioration
of U.S.-Soviet-Afghan Relations*

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INTRODUCTION

Adolph “Spike” Dubs sat in the back of a yellow Oldsmobile at a downtown intersection in Kabul, Afghanistan.¹ It was a Wednesday morning in February 1979, just before 9 a.m., and Dubs needed to get to his job at the U.S. Embassy. A World War II Marine Corps veteran, career Foreign Service officer and Soviet specialist, he had barely settled into his role as the American ambassador to Afghanistan, having been appointed on June 27, 1978 to replace Theodore Lyman Eliot, who became Inspector General of the U.S. Department of State and the Foreign Service in July.² Dubs was one of a small number of American specialists wary of the potential for a major shift in his country’s relationship with Afghanistan. Ever since a pro-Moscow political faction had come to power following the bloody coup of Mohammed Daoud’s Afghan civilian government in April 1978, the administration of the 39th American President Jimmy Carter had been questioning the strength of its diplomatic relationship with the new regime. Although President Carter and his advisers had decided to continue normal relations with the new Afghan government, they had been monitoring the situation closely. Still, Dubs believed the situation should have raised more red flags in Washington. In fact, he warned of the possibility for an eventual Soviet invasion – a notion that the State Department refused to take seriously.³

A man dressed as a police sergeant approached Dubs’ idling car. “We have suspicions from the government and would like to search the car,” the officer told chauffeur Gul

¹ Steven Strasser, “Death of an Envoy,” *Newsweek*, February 26, 1979.

² Office of the Historian, “Adolph Dubs, 1920-1979” and “Theodore Lyman Eliot,” U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, www.history.state.gov [accessed April 2009].

³ Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould, *Invisible History: Afghanistan’s Untold Story* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009), 151.

Muhammad in Dari.⁴ Dubs unlocked the doors. The man leaned into the car, pulled out a revolver and held it to Muhammad's head; three more men – dressed in civilian clothes – joined Dubs in the backseat. The morning traffic continued to slowly creep by the yellow Oldsmobile. When Muhammad stopped the car outside the Hotel Kabul, located just a mile away from the intersection in which the car had been waylaid, the three men in the back dragged Dubs out of the vehicle and up a flight of stairs in the hotel, instructing his chauffeur to relay news of the kidnapping to the American Embassy in Kabul. Held at gunpoint, a hotel employee opened the door to room 117.⁵

A half-hour had passed since the Oldsmobile sat idling at the red light. It was 9:15 a.m. in Kabul – 11:45 p.m. in Washington, D.C. The Carter administration had not yet received news of Dubs' kidnapping, so U.S. Embassy political officer Bruce Flatin, an American diplomat located in Kabul at the time, took the lead, arriving at the scene, along with Soviet security advisers and members of the Afghan national police, within minutes of receiving the news.⁶ While Afghan and Soviet officials devised a plan, Flatin pleaded that they avoid action before receiving word from Washington. The instructions finally arrived at the U.S. Embassy from Carter's Secretary of State Cyrus Vance via telephone: Urge the Afghans to exercise "extreme discretion" in order to avoid jeopardizing Dubs' life.⁷ Several hours later, Dubs was dead – the victim of a 40-second assault that had occurred following a morning-long standoff between the kidnapers and Afghan authorities.⁸ Dubs' murder yielded a series of responses that quickly and irrevocably

⁴ Strasser, "Death of an Envoy."

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jim Hoagland, "Soviet Role Alleged in Dubs' Death; Soviet Role Detailed in Dubs' Slaying; State Dept. Cable Gives Details of Slaying in Kabul," *The Washington Post*, February 22, 1979.

⁷ "Death Behind a Keyhole," *Time*, February 26, 1979.

⁸ Ibid.

altered the interplay of U.S. and Soviet interests in Afghanistan for the rest of the Cold War. Prior to 1979, the two powers had balanced each other in the region, giving the Afghan government the option of communist influence on the one hand and U.S. influence on the other.

In chronicling the events leading up to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, historians have largely focused on the Saur Revolution in April 1978 – a communist coup led by the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) – as a turning point in U.S.-Soviet-Afghan relations, ignoring the impact of the Dubs affair or, at most, mentioning it in passing. Dubs’ murder has been taken at face value as merely a tragic event in the history of a diplomatic relationship marred by similar incidents. While such historians as Henry S. Bradsher and M. Hassan Kakar have tied the incident to a hard-line Carter administration response, no attention has been paid to the long-term effects that response had on Afghan, American and Soviet interactions in the country during 1979. Its impact deserves further scrutiny, as a close investigation of the events of Feb. 14, 1979, the days that immediately followed and the shift in the policies of all three countries in the months leading up to December reveals that the assassination of Dubs irrevocably altered the nature of the triangle that was U.S.-Afghan-Soviet relations.

Carter’s administration viewed Dubs’ murder as a threat to its hegemony in the region; thus, when neither the Soviet nor the Afghan governments satisfied the requests of the U.S. president and his advisers following the murder, the American government reacted, taking the type of political hard line it had decided to avoid several months earlier when the PDPA took over in the Saur Revolution. The Dubs affair forced Carter’s hand: He had to react to what his administration believed to be an egregious mismanagement on the part of both Afghan and Soviet officials. It was not the Saur Revolution of April 1978 that eliminated U.S. influence in

Afghanistan but, rather, the murder of Dubs 10 months later. Although American power in Afghanistan had admittedly been waning in the closing months of 1978, the door was still open – there was still a possibility that the United States could influence policy making in that country and reverse the trend toward Soviet dominance. Dubs’ murder slammed that door shut and locked it, entirely eradicating a third party from Afghan politics.

Cold War Politics: The U.S.-Soviet Stake in Afghanistan Prior to Dubs’ Murder

Superpower interest in Afghanistan did not bloom until a decade after the world powers had brought home their troops from the Second World War. During that period of indifference, the Afghans had repeatedly solicited the United States for economic and military aid, offering to align themselves with the West; but the United States had seen little use for the peripheral country, agreeing only to provide a small amount of support for agricultural development and refusing military assistance altogether.⁹ Throughout the Cold War period prior to Dubs’ murder, American interest in Afghanistan had been completely predicated on Soviet interest: If Moscow showed little interest in Afghanistan, in turn, Washington felt little need to become involved there. This tactic was the essence of American Cold War foreign policy at the time, which focused on “containment,” a reactive strategy that sought to combat the spread of communism with American influence. A 1950 U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff study stated that, “Afghanistan is of little or no strategic importance to the United States,” while a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate from the same year asserted that overall “the Soviet Union has shown no considerable interest in

⁹ David Gibbs, “Does the USSR Have a ‘Grand Strategy’? Reinterpreting the Invasion of Afghanistan,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 24, no. 4 (1987), 368.

Afghanistan.”¹⁰ A country with an underdeveloped infrastructure and some of the most inaccessible terrain in the world, Afghanistan had little to offer either superpower, and its rivalries with neighboring Pakistan and Iran – two countries considered to be far more integral to the national security interests of the superpowers – did little to promote the nation in the minds of American and Soviet leaders.¹¹

This cycle changed in 1954 when the United States signed a Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with Pakistan that increased U.S. presence in the region. The Soviet Union countered and became Afghanistan’s primary trading partner, progressively sending more aid to the country. During the four-year periods of 1957-1961 and 1963-1967, the USSR’s economic support jumped from \$126.9 million to \$258.3 million.¹² In fact, from 1949 to 1972, the Soviet Union contributed a total of \$516.9 million in economic aid to Afghanistan.¹³ While the United States did not view the Soviet’s increasing monetary entrenchment in Afghan affairs with particular alarm, it too expanded economic aid to Afghanistan throughout the late 1950s and into the 60s in an effort to combat Soviet influence there – a move consistent with U.S. foreign policy at the time. During the period of 1957 to 1961, the United States provided Afghanistan with \$97.3 million in loans and economic aid and \$1.2 million in military aid; in total, the United States sent \$155.7 million in loans and economic aid and \$4.7 million in military aid to Afghanistan during a subsequent phase of assistance from 1963 to 1967.¹⁴ And, overall, the

¹⁰ United States Joint Chiefs of Staff 1950. Jan. 16, 1950, “Program Assistance for the General Area of China,” from David Gibbs, “Does the USSR Have a ‘Grand Strategy’? Reinterpreting the Invasion of Afghanistan,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 24, no. 4 (1987), 368.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hafizullah Emadi, *State, Revolution, and Superpowers in Afghanistan* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 57.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Emadi, 57.

United States gave Afghanistan \$397.6 million from 1949 to 1972.¹⁵ Still, according to the State Department in 1962, it refused to participate in a “bidding game” with its geopolitical counterpart.¹⁶ The United States viewed Afghanistan as completely autonomous in its internal affairs and dependent on the Soviets in its foreign policy – a relationship that did not particularly concern the American leadership. This line of thinking was certainly appropriate at the time given that the Soviets had not acted in a manner indicating they intended to alter the country’s domestic political affairs.¹⁷

The Daoud Government, 1973-1978

Afghanistan experienced major internal turbulence in the mid-1960s and early 1970s, marked most prominently by the rise of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) – a leftist organization known to have strong ties with the Soviet Union and led by Nur Muhammad Taraki and Babrak Karmal – in 1965, a severe famine in the early 70s and Mohammad Daoud’s usurpation of power in 1973. Daoud’s period at the helm of the Afghan government was eventually marked most prominently by a political shift toward the West, which ultimately led to his downfall through a communist coup in 1978. When Daoud initially came to power through his own coup in 1973, the Soviet Union established close relations with the new leader, becoming the first country to extend diplomatic recognition to his government, pledging political and economic assistance that year and signing a five-year barter protocol in March 1974.¹⁸ On the other hand, the United States was, at first, wary of Daoud’s close relationship with the USSR, as, according to the U.S. State Department, such intimacy threatened stability in

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, telegram, March 4, 1962. From Gibbs, 369.

¹⁷ Gibbs, 369.

¹⁸ Emadi, *State, Revolution, and Superpowers in Afghanistan*, 74.

the region.¹⁹ The United States was far more invested in its relationship with neighboring Pakistan and Iran at the time and it was afraid that the presence communist influence in Afghanistan would have a negative effect on the political balance in the region. From 1973-1977, the Soviets sent \$1 billion in economic aid to Afghanistan, \$428 million of which went to development projects and \$600 million of which financed a five-year development project launched in 1973.²⁰ During that same period, the United States contributed just \$90 million to Afghanistan. Although Soviet contributions dwarfed American aid, the U.S. administration still believed its support played an integral role in improving its relationship with Daoud and neutralizing Soviet influence: “U.S.-Afghan relations during 1977 were excellent ... Funding for the U.S. military training programme [*sic*] for Afghan officers was doubled in an effort to offset ... the massive Soviet predominance in the area of foreign support for the Afghan armed forces.”²¹

Also during that time, internally, many Afghan conservative religious leaders began to express their displeasure with the Daoud regime’s pro-Soviet policies; in fact, Daoud himself became wary of relying too heavily on Soviet support.²² In response, the Afghan leader eventually shifted his policies in order to decrease his country’s dependence on the USSR.²³ Specifically, the new Afghan leader reached out to the Shah of Iran, who supported Daoud’s new anti-communist policies and hoped to eventually become Afghanistan’s number one economic ally – a relationship the United States supported due to its friendly relationship with the Iranian

¹⁹ Ibid., 75.

²⁰ Ibid., 75, 76.

²¹ *The Documents from the U.S. Espionage Den*, Section (1) Afghanistan. From Emadi, *State, Revolution, and Superpowers in Afghanistan*, 76.

²² Ibid.

²³ Gibbs, 370.

leader.²⁴ Additionally, the Shah played a crucial role in mediating relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a relationship historically plagued with dissonance. Daoud had considered normalizing relations with Pakistan integral in enabling him to consolidate his position within his own country.²⁵ The Afghan leader also began sending more military officers and students to Egypt and India for training rather than to the USSR as had previously been the trend. With Daoud in power, the United States seemed to have little to be concerned about: During the later years of his reign, the Afghan leader showed that he refused to let his country become dominated by the communist presence that had become increasingly influential in the late 60s and early 70s.

Such changes led Daoud on a crash course with those opposed to his shift in policies. April 1978 proved devastating to Daoud and his regime, as many Afghans increasingly viewed the leader's policy changes as oppressive in nature. Daoud purged the PDPA's leadership midway through that month, setting the stage for the coup d'état that unseated him. On April 27, 1978, with the help of about 600 men, 60 tanks and 20 warplanes, the PDPA overthrew the Daoud regime in a coup lasting approximately 19 hours.²⁶ Kabul Radio announced the outcome of the Saur Revolution at 7 p.m. on the 27th, though Daoud and his family were not captured and killed until about 4 a.m. on the 28th.²⁷ Taraki, leader of the Khalq faction of the party and previously the general secretary of the central committee of the PDPA, was unanimously elected president and prime minister on April 30, and Kabul Radio reported this to the people of Afghanistan at 5 p.m. that day.²⁸ With a communist party running the government, the Soviet

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Emadi *State, Revolutions, and Superpowers in Afghanistan*, 74.

²⁶ Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* (Druham, N.C.: Duke Press Policy Studies, 1983), 76.

²⁷ Ibid., 77.

²⁸ Ibid., 79, 84; In 1967, the PDPA split into several political sects – largely the result of ideological and economic differences – the most prominent of which were the Khalqs and the

Union and Afghanistan formed a relationship that only grew stronger in the weeks following the February 1979 assassination of Ambassador Dubs.

Parchams. Taraki led the Khalq faction while Karmal led the Parchams. The two factions were at odds for much of the PDPA's history.

CHAPTER ONE: JIMMY CARTER AND SUPERPOWER POLITICS IN 1978

When the PDPA overthrew Daoud in 1978, it altered the political agenda in Afghanistan, halting the progress of crackdowns meant to limit Soviet and communist influence and shifting the country to the left of the political spectrum. While the events of April 1978 proved influential in determining the political future of the country, the PDPA takeover did not automatically result in the severing of ties with the West. In fact, the Carter administration decided to pursue normal relations with the PDAP after its coup, a decision in line with the American president's general foreign-policy agenda at the time, which emphasized conciliatory diplomacy predicated on fostering democratic ideals in Third World countries. Although 1978 eventually yielded the solidification of Soviet-Afghan relations – the two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship in December 1978 – the United States still maintained a diplomatic stake in the country throughout that year and into 1979. While the Saur Revolution challenged Carter's foreign-policy agenda, it was not until the Dubs affair that his administration drastically altered the basic principles of the geopolitical vision he had outlined in his first year in the White House.

Carter's Foreign Policy

When he assumed office, the nation's 39th president was described as a "Wilsonian Internationalist," critical of the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger *realpolitik* approach to foreign policy, which, Carter believed, had relegated human rights to a subordinate status on the international political agenda. To many Americans, Carter symbolized optimism, morality and integrity, virtues that, they contended, had proved elusive during the previous administrations. Foreign policy from the Truman to Johnson administrations had been marked by a certain level of

continuity, with containment, *realpolitik* and anticommunism at its core.²⁹ During that period, the nation had supported the “zero-sum game” – anything that harmed the Soviet Union and boosted the United States was considered worthwhile.³⁰ The American experience in Vietnam drastically altered this approach, however, and Carter was happy to carry the mantle of change.

Carter believed previous administrations had seen the world merely through a Cold War lens – that had been the major problem with Vietnam – and he sought to change this, stating that the world was far too complicated to look at merely in terms of the interests of two competing superpowers.³¹ In relying less on military power and covert intelligence and more on fostering democratic ideals in the developing world, Carter planned to alter the nature of America’s foreign policy and the way in which the rest of the world viewed the West. At the foundation of the policy was a complex interdependence approach to international diplomacy and the concept of an existing “global community.”³² During Carter’s four years in office, American economic aid abroad increased from about four to seven billion dollars.³³ This, Carter asserted, was all part of a plan for preventive rather than reactive diplomacy.

During the 1976 campaign, Carter asserted that foreign policy “requires a balancing of tough realism on the one hand, and idealism on the other,” promising to restore “those moral values that have always distinguished the United States of America from other countries.”

Furthermore, in his Inaugural Address, he promised an “absolute” commitment to human rights

²⁹ Jerel A. Rosati, “The Rise and Fall of America’s First Post-Cold War Foreign Policy,” *Jimmy Carter: Foreign Policy and Post-Presidential Years*, Herbert D. Rosenbaum and Alexej Urginsky, eds (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1994), 37.

³⁰ Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 12.

³¹ John Dumbrell, *American Foreign Policy: Carter to Clinton* (New York: St. Martin’s Press), 21-22.

³² Rosati, 37.

³³ Dumbrell, 22.

as a centerpiece of his foreign-policy agenda.³⁴ In his memoir, Robert Gates, who served on both the staff of the National Security Council and as director of the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) Strategic Evaluation Center during Carter's years in office, explained, "Through his human rights policies, [Carter] became the first president since Truman to challenge directly the legitimacy of the Soviet government in the eyes of its own people ... His approach marked a decisive and historic turning point in the U.S.-Soviet relationship."³⁵ Publicly, Carter attacked Soviet hegemony from a different angle than did his predecessors, questioning the Soviet claim to moral leadership on the world stage rather than threatening the USSR militarily. But this new line of thinking still had its problems. While Carter may have built a foreign-policy agenda that sought to deal with global threats in less of a black-and-white manner, his decision-making capabilities, especially later on in his term, proved weak. Gates stated, "Carter was difficult to fathom. There has probably never been a smarter President in terms of sheer brain power ... President Carter would make individual decisions based on technical merits, but – as with decisions on weapons systems – somehow failed to grasp that those decisions taken together conveyed a political philosophy or direction."³⁶

Competing Visions: Brzezinski versus Vance

Perhaps Carter's weak decision-making skills can be attributed to an ideological clash within the high-ranking officials of the administration. Carter had little foreign-policy experience prior to taking the oath of office – he was a product of the country's increased emphasis on domestic affairs following the Watergate scandal – and, as such, he relied heavily on his closest

³⁴ Dumbrell, 12.

³⁵ Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 95-96.

³⁶ Gates, 72-73.

advisers.³⁷ Although the reduction of tensions with the Soviet Union obviously remained the foremost concern of Carter's term, his aids never reached a consensus on the way in which to attain such an end – a fact that is entirely apparent when analyzing the overt inconsistencies in Carter's decision-making. On the one hand was the Department of Defense, headed by the political thinking of Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, and on the other was the State Department, headed by Vance. Brzezinski's big-picture approach called for a toughening of the American position based on the notion that without a hard line, the country would end up with neither a resolution on the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) with the USSR nor détente; he asserted that no agreement could be reached before the Soviet Union ceased its troubling, and at times destructive, ways. Vance and the State Department, in contrast, believed mutual trust could be developed through a block-by-block approach that stressed common interests and, thus, advocated for a relaxation of the American position on contentious issues.³⁸ Although the degree of conflict between the two sides has, perhaps, been a bit exaggerated, the division between the two camps was certainly real, which made it difficult for the administration to develop coherent policies – especially on the most controversial subjects – during its time in the White House. Carter even acknowledged the fundamental clash between the two sides, stating in his memoir, “There were some inherent differences in the character of the White House National Security Council staff and the State Department. I attempted to tap the strongest elements in each as changing circumstances demanded.”³⁹ As it turned out, however,

³⁷ Lawrence X. Clifford, “An Examination of the Carter Administration's Selection of Secretary of State and National Security Adviser,” *Jimmy Carter: Foreign Policy and Post-Presidential Years*, Herbert D. Rosenbaum and Alexej Urginsky, eds (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1994), 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁹ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 53.

Carter's decision to tap "the strongest elements in each" made it difficult for him to establish a coherent international political vision throughout his term.

Brzezinski believed State's view was shortsighted, focusing too much on SALT and a belief in its ability to develop a broader relationship with the Soviet Union. Referring to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he later wrote, "Had we been tougher sooner, had we drawn the line more clearly, had we engaged in the kind of consultations that I had so many times advocated, maybe the Soviets would not have engaged in this act of miscalculation."⁴⁰ Vance also harbored retrospective regrets regarding the interplay between his line of thinking and the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, stating that, "Of the president's advisers, I believed most strongly that we should strive for a balanced policy toward the Soviet Union and should avoid violent swings between trust and hysteria ... Afghanistan was unquestionably a severe setback to the policy I advocated ... The scales tipped toward those favoring confrontation."⁴¹

Prior to 1978, however, the scales had been fairly balanced – perhaps to the detriment of the administration. While divisions within the government along State-Defense lines had been clearly established during the Nixon-Ford eras, they never had quite the same paralyzing impact as during the Carter era, which was marred by fractures in the executive branch due to the president's indecisiveness on key strategic issues.⁴² Carter's Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan once stated, "Who the hell knows whether the president will not veer in some direction tomorrow or the day after tomorrow?"⁴³ By 1978, Brzezinski had begun to push more urgently in favor of a *realpolitik* approach, which he believed to be crucial in combating aggressive Soviet

⁴⁰ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux), 432.

⁴¹ Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 394.

⁴² Clifford, 10.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 11.

expansionism. In April of that year, the National Security Adviser presented his views to the president in a memorandum outlining five courses of action. “I felt that Soviet actions around the world required a firmer response and a more direct and sustained dialogue with the Soviets on what was and was not acceptable,” Brzezinski said in his memoir.⁴⁴ And according to Brzezinski, the president looked upon the memo “favorably.”⁴⁵ This memo arrived on Carter’s desk at the same time Taraki-led communist forces had overthrown Daoud’s Western-leaning regime. Brzezinski saw the power shift as a direct threat to American interests in the region, a fact that further entrenched his view in the *realpolitik* camp and emphasized the continuously widening chasm between State and Defense.

A month later, Vance submitted his own memo to Carter, requesting a formal review of U.S.-Soviet relations. He said, “many are asking whether this Administration has decided to make a shift in its foreign policy priorities ... Increasingly, we are faced with two differing views of the U.S.-Soviet relationship; although so far we have managed to combine the two in our public statements, it is becoming more difficult to do.”⁴⁶ Further, he stated that the division “should be resolved within the government in order to avoid presenting a picture of division which will weaken us.”⁴⁷ That picture of division was impossible to ignore when Carter delivered a speech at Annapolis in June 1978, which offered the Soviet Union “cooperation” or “confrontation.” Although SALT continued to progress, bureaucratic in-fighting persisted throughout the year, coming to a head on Nov. 18, 1978 when, according to Brzezinski, Vance

⁴⁴ Brzezinski, 317.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 319-320.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

placed a memorandum on Carter's desk "out of the blue" that urged a broad review of U.S.-Soviet trade policy; Brzezinski responded with his own memo on the 28th.⁴⁸

The Soviet Union and the United States had come close to a SALT agreement during a Dec. 21-23, 1978 meeting, but political bickering on the part of the Carter administration prevented the superpowers from putting pen to paper.⁴⁹ Dubs' murder and the subsequent American response did little to aid the process and, in effect, alienated both the Soviet and Afghan governments. As paralyzing as Carter's lack of coherent foreign policy had proven prior to the Dubs affair, his first traditional Cold War move – a decision to respond to the assassination in a hard-line manner – created the type of East-West divide his foreign policy vision had been trying to prevent all along. The events surrounding Dubs' assassination gave Carter few options – or, at least, his top advisers believe this was the case – but in shifting his policy agenda by taking a hard line against the new Afghan government, he created a diplomatic barrier between his country and Afghanistan.

The Saur Revolution and Afghanistan's Shift to the Left, April 1978-February 1979

The type of American-Afghan political division that eventually occurred in February 1979 following Carter's response to the Dubs affair was not an inevitable product of the Saur Revolution and the increasing political intimacy between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union throughout 1978 and into 1979. The Afghan power shift in April 1978 challenged Carter's geopolitical vision, but the president did not alter his foreign-policy agenda until Dubs' murder. Although the USSR and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) quickly forged a

⁴⁸ Ibid., 326.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 329.

cordial relationship in April 1978, the United States still maintained active diplomatic communications with the PDPA until Dubs' murder. The Soviet Union tried to use the threat of Western intervention as a bargaining tool with the Afghans during that time, but as the United States continued to send aid to Afghanistan, the PDPA was unwilling to sever relations completely. And so, up until the time of Dubs' murder, both superpowers kept a stake in Afghan affairs.

During Daoud's crackdowns at the end of his reign, the Soviet Union had maintained a working relationship with Afghanistan, delivering military aid to the country until the PDPA overthrew him.⁵⁰ Such actions had set a precedent of sustaining positive relations with the government of Afghanistan regardless of its policies. Although, at the time, the USSR may have been less important to Daoud as an ally than the United States due to Daoud's targeting communist supporters in his country, the two superpowers were both still heavily involved in Afghan affairs. The shift to the PDPA-led government in April naturally altered this dynamic: Instead of the United States, the USSR became the favored ally of the Afghan government. Nonetheless, both powers still remained involved in Afghan affairs.

A half-hour after Kabul Radio reported news of the political power shift, it informed listeners that the Soviet Union had already offered diplomatic recognition to the new regime. The day after the coup, the Soviet ambassador to Afghanistan had reportedly met with Taraki, who assured the Soviet envoy that his country would "set off on the path of building socialism and

⁵⁰ CC CPSU Politburo, "The Delivery of Special Equipment to the DRA, CC CPSU Politburo meeting," April 21, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*, trans., Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, www.wilsoncenter.org [accessed between January and April 2009].

will belong to the socialist camp.”⁵¹ On the other hand, when the Carter administration initially received news about the PDPA’s usurpation of power in 1978, it had seriously considered cutting off relations with the new Afghan government, a line of thinking promoted, most prominently, by Brzezinski, who viewed the April power shift as part of a larger Soviet plan to acquire hegemony in the region.⁵² Although characteristic of Carter-era foreign policy, such ambivalence on the part of the administration can also be attributed to the perceived suddenness of the coup: Just a month earlier, the State Department had reported that, “Internally, the political situation is stable. President Daoud remains very much in control and faces no significant opposition.”⁵³ While the United States ultimately decided that continuing diplomatic relations was the most prudent course of action, it did not do so until the summer of 1978.

Although the DRA naturally favored the USSR over the United States, the existence of a Western presence – a third party – in Afghanistan shaped Soviet-Afghan relations prior to Dubs’ assassination, as the USSR’s concern over potential American influence in the DRA became a focal point in diplomatic negotiations with the PDPA during 1978. The USSR used the threat of the United States as an excuse for forging a more intimate relationship with Afghanistan even before the Carter administration decided on the political course of action it wanted to take with the PDPA. In a May 31, 1978 letter from USSR Ambassador of Afghanistan Alexander Puzanov to the Soviet Foreign Ministry regarding the domestic political situation in Afghanistan, the Soviet ambassador underscored the threat posed by encroaching Western influence in

⁵¹ Odd Arne Westad, “About the Domestic Political Situation in the DRA,” notes, May 31, 1978, *Cold War International History Project*.

⁵² Douglas J. MacEachin, *Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: The Intelligence Community’s Record* (Washington, D.C.: Center of the Studies of Intelligence, 2002), 9.

⁵³ Adolph Dubs, “Statement of Adolph Dubs, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs,” *March 22, 1978*. Washington, D.C.: Digital National Security Archive, *Afghanistan: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1973-1990*, www.nsarchive.chadwyck.com [accessed between October 2008 and April 2009].

Afghanistan, noting that, “the USA and other Western countries received instructions to search out all means to hold on in Afghanistan, including promises to provide economic assistance.”⁵⁴

The vague nature of this statement is important to note, as it is unlikely that Puzanov had much evidence – if any at all – to support it. At the time, the United States had not yet decided to maintain friendly relations with Afghanistan, so the notion that the United States and other Western countries were “search[ing] out all means to hold on in Afghanistan” is incorrect. Even before the Carter administration decided on the political course it would take with the PDPA, the USSR felt threatened and used this threat to forge a more intimate relationship with the DRA.

Additionally, according to the document, Puzanov asserted that the West “received instructions” to align itself with Afghanistan, implying that some higher authority was handing down orders to the United States and its Western allies to follow such a course, which was clearly not the case. Based on this document, it is clear that much of the Soviets’ decision-making with regard to policies in Afghanistan stemmed from a fear of American presence in the region. The USSR’s hasty recognition of the PDPA’s government in April was no accident: In doing so, it had hoped to overshadow the West and its future influence on the communist regime in Afghanistan. Although Puzanov subsequently stated in the same May 31 document that Taraki had not been particularly active in securing a relationship with the West due to his intention of allying himself more closely with the Eastern bloc, the Soviet Union still did not trust the new Afghan head of state and, due to Cold War political realities, continued to worry about Western encroachment. Taraki was only just beginning to establish himself as a force in Afghanistan, and after the Soviet Union had experienced a Daoud regime that had quickly turned to the West, the USSR wanted to make sure the PDPA did not follow a similar path.

⁵⁴ Westad, May 31, 1978.

Even so, the superpower tried not to draw much public attention to the relationship, keeping private certain agreements, such as a \$250 million weapons aid program agreed upon in July 1978.⁵⁵ As the USSR was still feeling out Taraki and his government, there was no need to emphasize the ties between the two countries just yet. The Soviets still had their own relationship with the United States to keep in mind, as SALT continued to dominate the superpower political agenda. Certainly, there was no need to threaten its relationship with the United States in favor of an Afghan government that had yet to prove the legitimacy of its claim to power and its loyalty to the Eastern bloc.

Taraki was well aware of this political dynamic and used it to his advantage throughout 1978, warning the Soviet Union of the possibility for increasing Western influence in Afghanistan – a tactic that, Taraki hoped, would yield an increase in Soviet aid to his country. A Soviet Politburo document from Oct. 13, 1978, relaying the events of a meeting with Taraki, stated, “Westerners and Americans are clearly trying to exploit aid in order to force us to steer away from the chosen path. At the present time we are have [*sic*] no intention of spoiling our relations with the West ... [but] in dealing with the West one should not allow oneself to be lured into a trap.”⁵⁶ Such language indicates that Taraki was trying to manipulate the Soviet leaders: On the one hand, he pandered to the Soviet Union, hoping to ensure its friendship by emphasizing his commitment to communist polices, while on the other hand, he emphasized the continuing presence of Western influence in his country – influence that, he implied, could not be avoided without the assistance of the USSR. In doing so, he tried to create a greater sense of urgency and a swifter alliance of the two countries. Portraying the United States as meddling in

⁵⁵ Bradsher, 96.

⁵⁶ CC CPSU Politburo, “Information from CC CPSU to GDR leader Erich Honecker,” Oct. 13, 1978, *Cold War International History Project*.

internal Afghan affairs, Taraki subtly asked for greater Soviet support, which would, in turn, secure the power of his leftist political party. He concluded by assuring the Politburo that, “Afghanistan will always stand next to the Soviet Union, aligned together with the other socialist countries,” an overtly conciliatory statement by an insecure Afghan leader trying to bolster his status within his country and on the world stage.⁵⁷ In response, the Soviets conveyed the depth of their support for Afghanistan, asserting that it was “widely known” that they were assisting the country in every manner possible – a statement that addressed their desire to receive credit for their consistent support and “brotherly concern” for the DRA.⁵⁸

The Appointment of Dubs and U.S.-Afghan Relations during the Summer of 1978

Although the Soviets may have been unduly concerned about American influence in Afghanistan during the PDPA’s first several weeks in power, the United States finally decided to remain diplomatic partners with the PDPA in the summer of 1978. At that time, the Cold War was in full swing, and the United States felt it needed to do all it could to prevent another country from allying itself with the Soviet Union – especially one that had such great strategic advantages. On its own, Afghanistan had little importance to the United States, but the area around it – the Persian Gulf and the ports of the Indian Ocean – was considered critical to American interests in the region.⁵⁹ Additionally, the United States had felt particularly vulnerable in the Persian Gulf region in the final months of the 1970s, as the Shah of Iran – its major ally in the region – had fled his country on Jan. 16, 1979, precipitating the Iranian Revolution led by

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Steve Galster, “Volume III: Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War – the Making of U.S. Policy, 1973-1990,” *The September 11th Sourcebooks*, Washington, D.C.: The National Security Archive, Oct. 9, 2001, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/ [accessed between September and November 2008].

Ayatollah Khomeini, which, in turn, put an unfriendly government at the head of Iran and threatened U.S. influence in the region.

The decision to maintain diplomatic ties with Afghanistan occurred right around the time Dubs began his ambassadorship. When he arrived in Kabul in July, Dubs began monitoring Soviet-Afghan relations and believed the United States had reason to be concerned about the two countries' increasing intimacy.⁶⁰ While Dubs advocated that his country "wait and see" in Afghanistan, continuing to offer the PDPA its diplomatic support while monitoring activities with a critical eye, he also sought to alert the State Department to a trend in Soviet-Afghan diplomatic relations that he had thought could eventually result in intervention. Dubs believed that the United States' reluctant recognition of the new regime had done little to discourage this development. Following the coup in April, the United States had halted officer training on American soil, and Dubs advocated a resumption of this policy in order to encourage Afghan military independence from the USSR.⁶¹

On the other hand, the appointment of Dubs had increased anxiety in the Soviet state, as the Soviet State Security Committee (KGB) had believed the American ambassador possessed extraordinary knowledge of the region, in addition to close ties with the CIA. Indeed, prior to serving in Afghanistan, Dubs had held several influential positions in the State Department during his career, having entered service there in 1950.⁶² In 1974, he had been named deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs and, prior to that, had served as charge d'affaires in a mission at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. With this in mind, the USSR

⁶⁰ U.S. Department of State. "Afghan Leadership Underscores Ties to USSR," cable, Nov. 16, 1978. Digital National Security Archive.

⁶¹ "Towards an International History of the War in Afghanistan, 1978-1989," April 20-29, 2002, *Cold War International History Project*.

⁶² Stephen J. Lynton, "Ambassador Dubs: Eager, 'Knew Post was Tough,'" *The Washington Post*, Feb. 15, 1979.

had viewed Dubs' appointment as part of a greater American plan to ensure that Afghanistan did not become too tied to the Soviet Union. In fact, according to Vasiliy Mitrokhin, a former member of the KGB, "Dubs had been [instrumental] in strengthening American positions and influence in the Middle East and the region of the Persian Gulf and was one of the people behind the idea of the Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran triangle."⁶³ It seems only logical that Dubs' appointment would have raised concern in Moscow: The fact that the Carter administration had appointed an official not only well versed in Soviet affairs but also fluent in Russian was likely a sign that the United States was conscious – and perhaps wary – of increasing Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. Still, a *Washington Post* article published the day after Dubs' death called his assignment a "natural outgrowth of a series of posts that kept him in touch with the Soviet Union and neighboring countries, including Afghanistan."⁶⁴

On July 13 and 14, 1978, U.S. Under Secretary of State David Newsom arrived in Kabul where he and Dubs met with Taraki and Afghan Foreign Minister Hafizullah Amin to discuss "the USA government's concern about the one-sided orientation in foreign policy of the DRA and the chill in Afghan-American relations," according to a subsequent conversation between the Soviet ambassador to Afghanistan and Taraki.⁶⁵ The American interpretation of the meeting's goal was slightly different, however – focused more on stability in the region as a whole and less specifically on U.S.-Afghan relations. Secretary of State Vance recalled in his memoir, "There were substantial risks that the government in Kabul would seek eventually to undermine the government in Pakistan," a U.S. ally that, throughout modern history, had been at odds with

⁶³ Vasiliy Mitrokhin, "The KGB in Afghanistan – Geographical Volume 1," Feb. 2002, from the Vasiliy Mitrokhin Archive, *Cold War International History Project*.

⁶⁴ Lynton, "Ambassador Dubs."

⁶⁵ Odd Arne Westad, "Record of Conversation between Soviet Ambassador to Afghanistan A.M. Puzanov and Taraki," notes, July 18, 1978, *Cold War International History Project*.

Afghanistan.⁶⁶ The United States hoped to stabilize the regional situation by discussing economically assisting the DRA, a move that would, presumably, give the United States some sway in Afghan internal politics. Vance stated, “Our best chance to maintain a measure of influence in Kabul was to continue limited economic aid. To cut off all assistance or refuse recognition would almost certainly weaken our position in Kabul.” Having already signed about 30 new aid and cooperation agreements with the Soviet Union, the Afghan leaders requested the United States increase its aid program, which, in 1978 totaled \$20.6 million.⁶⁷ Such a request demonstrated Afghanistan’s bargaining power at the time, as it procured greater amounts of aid from both superpowers by playing them off of each other. In order to have a stake in the region, the United States had to provide a level of aid that would not be entirely dwarfed by the Soviet Union’s contributions. On the other hand, the USSR had to continue increasing support in order to guarantee its position as Afghanistan’s number one ally. Still, while American diplomats wanted to solidify friendly relations with the new rulers, an American official stated that they were “not going to make a special effort to compete or do anything dramatic.”⁶⁸ Ultimately, according to Vance, the U.S. administration concluded that “the political situation was still fluid and that it would be a mistake for us to halt economic assistance and lose the prospect of any influence in Kabul.”⁶⁹

Dubs believed that if the United States did not maintain friendly communications with the PDPA, it would effectively distance itself from that government politically and would, thus, have little sway in the internal politics of Afghanistan – a fact that would diminish any chance of

⁶⁶ Vance, 385.

⁶⁷ Bradsher, 86.

⁶⁸ *The New York Times*, Aug. 4, 1978, from Bradsher, 86.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

the PDPA leaning toward the West.⁷⁰ Still, he recommended the United States begin planning for a possible Soviet takeover of Afghanistan, warning that the shift to a communist government in Afghanistan would inevitably encourage the PDPA to move close to Moscow diplomatically; but the State Department's South Asia specialists quickly dismissed Dubs' concern as ludicrous.⁷¹ Dubs repeated his concern again a few months into his term of service, but Washington officials only half-heartedly listened.⁷²

Newsom himself was also wary of the Soviet-Afghan relationship that had become increasingly friendly since April. According to a conversation between Soviet Ambassador Puzanov and Taraki regarding the events of the July meeting, Newsom reportedly asked Taraki a "provocative question – what actions will the government of the DRA take in the event of an attack by the Soviet Union."⁷³ Although this statement seems fairly bold given that the United States was hoping to develop its own cordial relationship with the PDPA, Newsom was likely trying to send a message to the Afghans: The United States was fully aware of the close ties developing between the USSR and DRA. Even in July 1978, all three parties were cognizant of the shifting dynamics in diplomatic relationships in that region. A State Department cable from Aug. 1, 1978, describing Newsom's trip to South Asia stated, "there is a general impression around Western embassies in Kabul that the number of Soviet advisers is increasing."⁷⁴ Indeed, following the Saur Revolution, Afghanistan's group of Soviet advisers had doubled to 700 within

⁷⁰ MacEachin, 10.

⁷¹ Bradsher 85-86; MacEachin, 10.

⁷² Bradsher, 86.

⁷³ Westad, July 18, 1978.

⁷⁴ U.S. Department of State. "Under Secretary Newsom's Trip to South Asia," cable, Aug. 1, 1978. Digital National Security Archive.

three months, with a large number serving in the defense ministry.⁷⁵ Still, the American administration recognized that the door was open for the development of sound Afghan-American diplomatic relations, as, according to the same cable, the PDPA “hoped to get substantial help from others as well” as the Soviet Union.⁷⁶

The Treaty of Friendship, December 5, 1978

The intimacy of Afghan-Soviet relations did not manifest into a concrete legal document until the two countries finally signed a 20-year bilateral friendship agreement on Dec. 5, 1978. In his first trip outside of Afghanistan since the April 27 coup, Taraki flew to Moscow and signed his name to an agreement that represented the physical expression of seven months of back-and-forth political pandering on the part of both nations. Although this act represented a direct break from the policies of past Afghan regimes, which had sought to maintain a more middle-of-the-road approach in order to conciliate both the Western and communist blocs, Taraki’s diplomatic action was described as inevitable by the U.S. State Department. In fact, the State Department had even anticipated the signing of such an agreement prior to Taraki’s trip to Moscow. Still, the agency did not downplay the potential effects of the visit as, according to a memorandum from Dec. 6, it “could produce results which would have far-reaching impact on [the Afghan] government’s survival and ability to deliver on many of its reforms and promises.”⁷⁷ With the Soviet Union behind it, the Taraki-led government had the makings of a secure administration, one that could, potentially, threaten U.S. interests down the road. But the U.S. intelligence community also recognized the limits of the agreement. While the treaty solidified Soviet-

⁷⁵ Bradsher, 90.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ U.S. Department of State. “Afghan Soviet Relations on the Eve of Taraki’s Trip to Moscow,” Dec. 6, 1978. Digital National Security Archive.

Afghan relations, it had no explicit mutual defense commitment and specifically mentioned the DRA's non-alignment with the USSR, guaranteeing Afghanistan a certain level of independence – although the Afghan government still had the ability to ask for military aid from the Soviets.⁷⁸

Regardless of the specifics of the language in the friendship document, the mere act of signing such an agreement resulted in a shift in the way the three players in that region viewed their relationship with each other. For the American's part, the treaty forced them to come to terms with their increasingly weak presence in Afghanistan. Until that time, the Carter administration had chosen to continue on a "normal" diplomatic path even though power in the Afghan government had changed hands. But once Taraki and the Soviet leaders signed that treaty, it was clear that there was nothing "normal" about American interests in Afghanistan at the end of 1978. Indeed, the Carter administration clearly understood that by that point in 1978, the Soviet Union had vested interests in the success of Taraki's government and had, by that point, deemed it necessary to prop up his party's power by an overt display of commitment. Yet this treaty did not entirely sever the American diplomatic presence in the DRA – that did not occur until Dubs' murder forced the Carter administration to entirely alter its foreign-policy agenda in February 1979.

⁷⁸ MacEachin, 11.

CHAPTER TWO: REPERCUSSIONS OF THE DUBS MURDER

As tragic as the events of Feb. 14 proved to be, the importance of the Dubs affair lay not in the mere fact that the American ambassador had been kidnapped and assassinated but, rather, in the events that followed. Ultimately, the Dubs affair yielded a series of reactions that not only altered the nature of U.S.-Soviet-Afghan relations but also changed President Carter's foreign-policy agenda for the rest of his term. First, the ambiguity surrounding Dubs' death resulted in a period of finger-pointing and recrimination that put the United States at odds with both the Soviet Union and Afghanistan. As none of the parties involved had a clear handle on who had committed the crime and why Dubs had been a target to begin with, the seeds of suspicion quickly germinated on the part of all three countries. The United States, Afghanistan and the USSR all wanted answers and, in the absence of concrete evidence, it was easy to blame someone else.

Second, this period of suspicion forced the Carter administration to rethink its foreign-policy agenda, which had previously been predicated on the notion that containment was not the only way to handle Soviet encroachment in the Third World. President Carter had decided to continue normal relations with Afghanistan following a communist takeover of that country in April of 1978 in order to continue to hold a stake in a nation that seemed to be diplomatically moving toward the Soviet Union; but the Afghan government's reaction to the Dubs affair and its refusal to comply with American requests forced Carter and his advisers to reconsider their line of thinking. Third, as the Afghan and Soviet governments continued to stonewall American requests for a more comprehensive investigation of the events surrounding Dubs' death, the U.S. administration finally decided it had no choice but to take a hard line against Afghanistan,

cutting off economic aid and essentially severing diplomatic ties. Prior to the Dubs affair, the Soviet-American rivalry in Afghanistan had been built on carrots – incentive-based policies – and after it, U.S. policy took more of a stick-based approach, built on penalties for non-compliance with American requests. These three stages proved crucial in not only eliminating American influence on the Afghan government and irrevocably altering Carter’s foreign policy, but they also forced Afghanistan to lean harder on the USSR for support. Before February 1979, the Afghan government had two powers vying for influence in that region. After, the Soviet Union had sole claim to the superpower stake in the country – a fact that became clear in March 1979 when rebels rose up in the city of Herat and Taraki looked exclusively to Moscow for assistance, increasing the Soviet military and political presence in Afghanistan for the long-term.

The Dust Settles: The Aftermath of the Dubs Affair

The Political Blame Game

At 12:50 p.m. on February 14, 1979, “heavy gunfire broke out in the corridor, in the room and from across the street” of room 117 in Hotel Kabul following a standoff that had lasted the entire morning, according to a *Washington Post* article published on Feb. 22.⁷⁹ Police officials found Dubs’ body slumped in a chair beside a wardrobe, a wound on his left wrist, a small-caliber bullet wound above his right eye and a large-caliber wound near his Herat.⁸⁰ Radio Afghanistan announced the news of Dubs’ kidnapping and murder at 5 p.m. on Feb. 14.⁸¹ The American ambassador was dead – that much was clear; but the details surrounding the murder seemed murky at best.

⁷⁹ Hoagland, “Soviet Role.”

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ U.S. Department of State. “Radio Afghanistan Announces News of Ambassador Dubs’ Death,” confidential cable, 01096, February 14, 1979. Digital National Security Archive.

American publications identified the abductors as “right-wing Shiite Muslims,” while Radio Afghanistan called them “anti-Khalqi terrorists,” and the Soviet weekly paper *Literaturnaya Gazeta* blamed “anti-DRA Muslim fanatics.”⁸² According to a *Newsweek* magazine article published at the end of February, the “Soviets spread the story that the attack had been carried out by the [U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)] ... and agents of the exiled [Iranian] Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi ... Subsequent Soviet comments were toned down somewhat, but that did little to produce a more trusting atmosphere for future dealings between the two superpowers.”⁸³ Although unclear at the time, it was later determined that Dubs had been seized by the Maoist PDPA splinter group *Setam-i-Melli*, a predominantly Tajik organization based in Badakhshan.⁸⁴ Still, the motivation for the crime remains murky, “although there was speculation that kidnapers [*sic*] considered the capture of the U.S. envoy to be a certain way to draw attention to the cause in the world media and to place the maximum pressure on the government.”⁸⁵ The State Department also reported that the four kidnapers had told Afghan officials that they would hand over Dubs in exchange for imprisoned members of *Setam-i-Melli*, although the Afghan foreign ministry later made conflicting statements about the nature of this request.⁸⁶

This ambiguity coincided with questions of motives, as the American media wondered not only why the perpetrators had targeted Dubs but whether or not they had the clandestine

⁸² “Death Behind a Keyhole”; U.S. Department of State, “Radio Afghanistan”; U.S. Department of State, *Soviet Press Article on Ambassador Dubs’ Death*, Cable, March 15, 1979. Digital National Security Archive.

⁸³ David M. Alpern, “Feeling Helpless,” *Newsweek*, February 26, 1979.

⁸⁴ Bradsher, 99.

⁸⁵ John M. Goshko and Richard M. Weintraub, “U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Is Kidnapped, Slain in Shootout; Kidnapped U.S. Envoy Slain in Afghanistan Shootout,” *The Washington Post*, February 15, 1979.

⁸⁶ Bradsher, 99.

support of the Soviet or Afghan governments. The morning after Dubs' murder, *The Washington Post* reported, "It is unclear why Dubs was the target of the kidnapers [*sic*]." ⁸⁷ More importantly, however, the U.S. State Department called the competency of both Soviet and Afghan security officials into question, believing their actions had facilitated, if not entirely led to, Dubs' death. The U.S. administration publicly expressed its anger over the loss of its 58-year-old diplomat – its fifth ambassador to have been murdered since 1968 – and U.S. embassy officials asserted that Soviet officers played a role in the assault that had resulted in the death of two of the kidnapers, in addition to Dubs. According to *The Washington Post*, these American officials reported that, "Russian advisers gave hand signals that began and halted the gunfire. After the 40-second volley, Afghan 'police snipers across the street continued to fire until two Soviet advisers gave hand signals to cut it off.'" ⁸⁸

In the hours immediately following the kidnapping and murder, Maj. Daoud Taroun, commander of the Afghan national police and the official who had given the final order for the assault from a radio set up in a small room off the hotel lobby, denied Soviet involvement. Nonetheless, the State Department held the Soviets responsible for the decision to attack, and, additionally, State Department spokesman Hodding Carter criticized the Afghan government, saying, "Our embassy repeatedly urged the Afghan government to exercise patience and to secure the ambassador's release without recourse to force. The Afghan authorities disregarded this advice, which we conveyed in the strongest possible language." ⁸⁹ In his memoir, U.S. Secretary of State Vance later recalled that "in Kabul, a reckless assault by Afghan government forces on Spike Dubs' kidnapers led to his tragic death," and it was reported that Carter himself

⁸⁷ Goshko, "U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan is Kidnaped."

⁸⁸ Hoagland, "Soviet Role."

⁸⁹ "Death Behind a Keyhole"; Goshko, "U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan is Kidnaped."

was “furious” when he heard in early reports that the Soviets had directed the Afghan assault.⁹⁰ Further, Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher summoned Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to his office to express American “displeasure over the Russians’ ‘callous and totally unresponsive’ attitude.”⁹¹ Afghan Deputy Prime Minister Amin called the American concerns “completely baseless” and, additionally, stated, “The actions of the Afghan authorities were completely aimed at releasing the ambassador unharmed, and were inspired by friendly relations between the two countries,” according to a *Washington Post* article published on Feb. 19, 1979.⁹² Over all, the events of Feb. 14 and the immediate days that followed only served to create a deeper divide between the United States and the Soviet and Afghan governments.

Rethinking American Policy Toward the DRA

This period of recrimination yielded a major shift in U.S.-Afghan relations, as the actions of both countries’ leaders created a level of distrust that manifested itself in the subsequent policies of both nations. The United States had asked Afghanistan to send it a formal written report summarizing the incident, but the Afghan leaders viewed the American administration as questioning the competency of their authority and, as a result, felt it had little reason to comply.⁹³ Further, when Afghan authorities stonewalled U.S. requests for both an investigation of the killing and the issuance of a formal apology, the State Department interpreted this to be a reflection of Afghanistan’s anti-U.S., pro-Soviet leanings. The administration had planned to increase aid to Afghanistan for the following year – including a \$9.7 million program for

⁹⁰ Vance, 343; Alpern, “Feeling Helpless.”

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Thomas W. Lippman, “Afghanistan Rejects U.S. Protest over Ambassador’s Death,” *The Washington Post*, Feb. 19, 1979.

⁹³ Lippman, “Afghanistan Rejects U.S. Protest.”

agriculture, rural development and nutrition, which was to be part of a larger \$47 million package – but the actions of the PDPA following the Dubs affair obliged the United States to reconsider this arrangement.⁹⁴ From the American standpoint, the purported “recklessness” surrounding Dubs’ murder, in addition to the Afghan authorities’ subsequent refusal to amicably work with the American government in the hours and days that had followed, signaled a lack of respect for U.S. diplomatic interests in the region. Such actions, the Carter administration believed, were so egregious that they should not have been reinforced with a continuation of America’s carrot-based foreign-policy approach but, rather, with sticks. Conversely, from the Afghan perspective, the Carter administration’s requests also signaled a lack of respect for the DRA’s security procedures and capabilities – and the Afghan leadership felt it needed to show that it would not be bullied. According to a document released by the Afghanistan Task Force’s Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division in 1980, an American organization, the events of Feb. 14 created a level of distrust that was never overcome in the months that followed.⁹⁵ President Carter refused to let the Afghan response slide under the radar: He and his advisers decided they could no longer “wait and see” with regard to policy toward Afghanistan. In refusing to comply with the Carter administration’s requests, the PDPA-led government had compelled the United States to consider a new approach. Carter and his advisers believed they had to show the new communist-led government that such actions would not be overlooked.

On Feb. 20, Carter was to deliver a foreign-policy speech at the Georgia Institute of Technology in favor of SALT, but following the return of Dubs’ body to Andrews Air Force

⁹⁴ Robert G. Kaiser, “U.S. to Make Deep Cuts in Aid to Afghans,” *The Washington Post*, Feb. 22, 1979.; Barry Shlachter, *The Associated Press*, Feb. 25, 1979.

⁹⁵ Afghanistan Task Force: Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, “Afghanistan: Soviet Invasion and U.S. Response.” Library of Congress report, Jan. 10, 1980. Digital National Security Archive.

Base, he did some editing. “There was a feeling,” one of Carter’s aids said, “that the country was shaken – that we had to reassure people that the sky wasn’t falling.”⁹⁶ And so, perhaps in an effort to calm and conciliate his own people, Carter promised his country that, “We will stand by our friends, we will honor our commitments, and we will protect the vital interests of the United States.”⁹⁷

The American Hard Line Following Dubs’ Death

Several days after the murder, then-Rhode Island U.S. Senator and former Foreign Service officer Claiborne Pell sent a letter to Carter, pressuring the president to respond to the “gross recklessness on the part of Afghan authorities.” Expressing his shock that “the Afghan government [had] not accepted responsibility for Ambassador Dubs’ death,” Pell outlined a series of four reactive steps he believed the situation warranted. He advised the president to: 1.) refuse to reappoint an ambassador until the Afghan government released an official apology and accepted full responsibility for the murder of Dubs, 2.) cut embassy personnel in half, 3.) withdraw U.S. aid personnel and terminate the \$15 million aid program, and 4.) withdraw Peace Corps volunteers.⁹⁸ Whether or not this advice actually influenced Carter in his policy-making is unclear; yet Pell’s response to the Dubs affair indicates that Carter and his administration felt external pressure to take a hard line with their Afghan counterpart – something that had not been the case several months earlier when the left-wing PDPA had overthrown Daoud in April 1978.

The perceived Afghan and Soviet mismanagement surrounding the events of Feb. 14 forced Carter and his advisers to do a complete 180-degree turn in their policies and ask

⁹⁶ Peter Goldman, “Small-Stick Diplomacy,” *Newsweek*, March 5, 1979.

⁹⁷ Jimmy Carter, Speech, Feb. 20, 1979, Georgia Institute of Technology, from Goldman.

⁹⁸ Claiborne Pell, *Recommendation for U.S. Response to Killing of Ambassador Dubs*, letter, February 23, 1979. Digital National Security Archive.

Congress to take action in a manner befitting the nature of the crime. Congress responded with a set of four steps similar to those advocated by Pell. It voted to phase out economic assistance to the DRA; it removed its Peace Corps workers from the country; it reduced the size of its Afghan embassy; and perhaps most symbolically notable, it refused to replace Dubs with another ambassador.⁹⁹ Vance later recalled, “With the security situation becoming ever more dubious, we refused to replace Dubs or to authorize new aid to Afghanistan.”¹⁰⁰ By cutting off its diplomatic liaison, the Carter administration effectively severed all diplomatic ties with the DRA – the exact course of action it had intentionally avoided several months earlier.

From a public-opinion standpoint, such drastic actions were necessary for an administration that had watched its approval ratings drop precipitously from early January 1979 through the end of February. A Gallup Poll from Jan. 2, 1979 reported that Carter’s approval rating was 50.19 percent (n = 2662), while a poll conducted on Feb. 20 recorded the president’s approval rating 13-percentage points lower at 37.15 (n = 2751).¹⁰¹ While this drop cannot necessarily be tied to the Dubs affair – more likely, it was the result of the increasing turmoil in Iran, where the Shah had fled the country on Jan. 16 and Ayatollah Khomeini had returned to Tehran, Iran, to lead the revolution two weeks later – it is safe to say that the administration was well aware of its declining approval ratings and, thus, had felt increased pressure to show its strength following the Dubs affair.¹⁰² Obviously, this was not the only factor contributing to the administration’s decision-making, but, especially with an election just around in the corner in

⁹⁹ After Dubs’ assassination, the United States did not appoint an ambassador to Afghanistan until the Bush administration selected Robert Patrick John Finn on March 21, 2002.

¹⁰⁰ Vance, 385.

¹⁰¹ The Gallup Poll#119G and #123G, *Gallup Brain* (The Gallup Organization, Jan. 2 and Feb. 20, 1979).

¹⁰² Gallup found a seven-percent drop in Carter’s approval rating from its Jan. 2 survey to the one conducted on Jan. 16 – the day the Iranian Shah fled his country.

Nov. 1980, the president needed to quickly restore public confidence in his ability to deal with international crises.

The decision to cut off economic aid was a major change in policy for a country that had spent the years following World War II expanding trade with Afghanistan, which had been considered vital to strategic interests – if not for its geographic location than to combat Soviet influence there. Since that time, both the USSR and the United States had been battling to bring Afghanistan into their respective spheres of influence through the use of aid; but after Feb. 14, the Carter administration felt it politically expedient to advertise its anger.¹⁰³ The White House announced on Feb. 22 its intention to cut a majority of its \$14.8 million aid program, which included \$11.7 in education and other development projects, in addition to its \$25 million military training program. According to a State Department memorandum from March 29, 1979, the House Foreign Affairs Committee formally accepted an amendment on March 28 that cut off aid to Afghanistan unless the “president determines, and reports to Congress, that assistance for Afghanistan is in the national interest of the United States.”¹⁰⁴

President Carter sought to further publicize American policy toward Afghanistan several months after Congress’ response when he signed P.L. 96-53, the International Development Cooperation Act of 1979, into law on Aug. 14, 1979. Section 505 of the Act prohibited any further assistance to Afghanistan unless the U.S. president certified to Congress that the Afghan government had officially released an apology, assumed responsibility for Dubs’ death and agreed to provide “adequate protection” for all American government officials stationed in

¹⁰³ Hafizullah Emadi, “State, Modernisation and Rebellion: U.S.-Soviet Politics of Domination of Afghanistan,” *Economic & Political Weekly*, 26, No. 4 (Jan. 26, 1991), 177-178; Kaiser, “U.S. to make Deep Cuts.”

¹⁰⁴ U.S. Department of State, “House Committee Cuts Aid to Afghanistan,” memorandum, March 29, 1979. Digital National Security Archive.

Afghanistan.¹⁰⁵ Carter wanted to send a message to both countries: The events of Feb. 14 had insulted and angered the United States and it would not resume normal diplomatic relations until Afghanistan provided a diplomatic remedy. Carter needed the global political community to understand that the United States would not be pushed around: If the Afghan government valued its relationship with West, it would have to comply with American requests. This particular move not only provided further legislation regarding the American stake in Afghanistan following the assassination of Dubs – legislation that now came from the executive branch of the U.S. government, in addition to the legislative branch – but it also emphasized the far-reaching implications of the events of Feb. 14, as several decades of economic policy toward Afghanistan had been dramatically altered. Half a year after Dubs’ body had been buried, the United States was still passing legislation in response to the events surrounding Dubs’ death. Clearly, American legislators had not taken his murder lightly, as, its legal repercussions were still being felt months after the kidnapping had occurred. The United States ultimately made it impossible to offer incentives to Afghanistan for maintaining a more middle-of-the-road foreign policy and, with the Carter administration having moved from a carrot-based approach to one reliant on sticks, the DRA and USSR only became more intimately involved in the weeks and months that followed.

The Herat Rebellion, March 1979

Until March 1979, the PDPA had formed a relationship with the Soviet Union out of both prudence and convenience: For a communist government just getting its bearings, it seemed logical to turn to the USSR for support. Yet, while the United States remained a presence in

¹⁰⁵ Afghanistan Task Force.

Afghanistan, that Soviet support had never been crucial in the way it became following Dubs' assassination. Although the Soviet Union was intimately involved in Afghanistan almost immediately following the 1978 PDPA coup, the events of March 1979 – a rebellion in the city of Herat – forced Taraki to turn to the USSR with unprecedented requests. Faced with a crisis in his country, Taraki had but one government to turn to in March, moving the DRA and the USSR into a new stage in their relationship.

Following the 1978 coup, Taraki's radical – and violent – policies quickly alienated large groups of Afghans and, as a result, the new governing party faced a plethora of open rebellions from a variety of tribes and religious organizations located in the countryside. In late May 1978, nine Islamic and anti-communist organizations founded the National Rescue Front to challenge Taraki, who, in his first official news conference on May 6 stated, "Religion must not be used as a means for those who want to sabotage progress and to continue exploiting and suppressing the people ... We want to clean Islam in Afghanistan."¹⁰⁶ Taraki wanted to purge Afghanistan of those opposed to his policies; he saw organizations and individuals advocating ideas contrary to those of the PDPA as threats that needed to be eradicated. As a result, the PDPA released a set of objectives on May 9, 1978 and followed it up with four reform decrees issued between May 15 and Nov. 28, 1978, which sought to, as Taraki explained, "sharpen the class struggle in Afghanistan" and rid the country of any pro-Western policies still in place from the Daoud era.¹⁰⁷ The reforms challenged many long-established traditions at the Herat of Afghan Islamic society and attempted to impose government control on the countryside, which had never before experienced this type of forceful and violent governmental incursion into its lifestyle.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Kabul Radio, May 12, 1978, from Bradsher, 91-92.

¹⁰⁷ Kabul Radio, Aug. 2, 1978, from Bradsher, 89, 92-93.

¹⁰⁸ Bradsher, 92-94.

Ultimately, the reforms created cultural resentment and economic issues, as religious conservatives felt their values were being targeted by the state, and agricultural production became so limited that, as a result, an estimated one-third of arable land went untilled during the PDPA's time in power.¹⁰⁹ The party's socialistic programs did not gain the support of the people as it had intended but, alternatively, fueled popular uprisings.

The winter of 1978-79 proved especially trying for Taraki, as farmers, tired of the land reforms and presented with more free time due to the seasonal shift, began to resist some of the more radical decrees the PDPA had started imposing on the people of Afghanistan. This movement blossomed into guerilla warfare; yet the Afghan army had little interest in combating such popular resistance, and the Afghan leader found himself low on resources with which to combat such threats.¹¹⁰ Still, because uprisings were limited to the countryside, Taraki had just enough power to quell the opposition without the assistance of another country's military. That changed in March 1979 when the armed resistance made its way to Herat – a major city in Northwestern Afghanistan – and the PDPA leader, out of alternatives, turned to Moscow for assistance. The survival of his regime depended on it.¹¹¹

The Uprising and the Soviet Response

The PDPA had been in power for less than a year when internal rumblings among disenchanted citizens reached a crescendo that threatened the party's preeminent position in the country. On the morning of March 15, 1979, a group of peasants residing just outside Herat

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 95.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 100.

¹¹¹ Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis: A Comprehensive Study of the Causes and Consequences of War in the Twentieth Century* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 356.

collected at the mosques with the city-dwellers and attacked government symbols. After the 17th army division revolted, the rebels had the military's support, enabling them to seize government buildings.¹¹² When news reached Taraki and his associates in Kabul, they blamed neighboring Iran for having incited the rebellion, as half the residents of Herat were Shi'ites – the majority religious group in Iran – and, according to the government's reasoning, were likely prompted by the Iranian revolution.¹¹³ The PDPA used this assertion to spur a propaganda campaign that condemned the revolts and yielded a period of harsh oppression. Conversely, the primary Soviet newspaper, *Pravda*, blamed the trouble in Herat on Pakistan, China, Egypt and the West in general. Taraki called in the air force, but of the pilots who had not already defected, only a few agreed to fly against their fellow Afghan citizens.¹¹⁴ For a week, the city remained in the hands of the rebel forces, as mobs turned on PDPA officials and supporters, in addition to Soviet advisers.

Taraki needed to quell the rebellion, and it had become increasingly obvious that he could not do it on his own. With American-Afghan relations having become increasingly strained following Dubs' murder, Taraki's decision to turn to the USSR seemed predetermined. Given the size of the uprising and the fact that it occurred in one of Afghanistan's major cities, Taraki confronted the gravest threat of his 11-month stint as prime minister. At the same time, he also had fewer diplomatic options available, as the absence of the United States as a major political player in Afghanistan weakened his power to bargain with the USSR over the level of assistance. Not only did Taraki face an internal uprising that rendered him militarily weak but he also had to negotiate for external support from a politically inferior position.

¹¹² Gilles Dorransoro. *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present*. John King, trans (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 98-99.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

Additionally, Taraki's party did not unanimously support his decision to request Soviet assistance in putting down the rebellion – a fact that eroded his political position even further. During a time when Taraki was practically groveling on his knees to ensure Soviet support in quelling the Herat rebellion, Afghan Deputy Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin expressed his lack of concern for the destabilizing forces within the country. In a Soviet Politburo meeting on March 17 – a day before Taraki had stated that he believed Herat would fall without Soviet intervention – USSR leaders described Amin's calm: "He did not express the slightest alarm about the situation in Afghanistan, and on the contrary, with Olympian tranquility, he said that the situation was not all that complicated, that the army was in control of everything."¹¹⁵ The Soviet executive body recognized this inconsistency, stating, "He said that not a single incident of insubordination by a governor had been reported ... Whereas in reality, according to reports of our comrades, the situation in Herat and in a number of other places is alarming."¹¹⁶ Perhaps the tenor of Amin's discussions with the Soviet Union reflected his bargaining abilities; it is possible he believed that pandering to the PDPA's main ally would ultimately prove harmful to his party's political power. More likely, however, Amin's statements reflected his own desire for autonomy from the Soviet Union. In essence, Taraki's decision to seek assistance from the Soviet Union by whatever diplomatic means necessary was counter to Amin's desire for independence and control in his country. Amin and Taraki's different responses to the Soviet role in the Herat uprising revealed major ideological fractures in the Afghan leadership. While

¹¹⁵ CC CCPSU Politburo, "Transcript of CPSU CC Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan," meeting of the Politburo, March 17, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Taraki favored active support from the communist bloc, Amin preferred to develop relations with other countries.¹¹⁷

As a result, Taraki continued to be the liaison between his country and the Soviet Union during March, enabling him to forge a positive relationship that carried through the rest of his time at the helm of the Afghan state. The Afghan prime minister called the Soviet leaders on March 17. While members of the Soviet Politburo were hesitant to commit their country militarily, they nevertheless recognized the extent of their interests in Afghanistan: “Under no circumstances may we lose Afghanistan,” they stated at a meeting on March 17. “For 60 years now we have lived with Afghanistan in peace and friendship. And if we lose Afghanistan now and it turns against the Soviet Union, this will result in a sharp setback to our foreign policy.”¹¹⁸ The next day, however, the leaders noted the repercussions of sending in troops: “If we introduced troops and beat down the Afghan people then we will be accused of aggression for sure.”¹¹⁹ They understood the geopolitical implications of sending military aid to quell the rebellion but allowing the communist regime to fall to anti-government forces seemed the more dangerous of two evils. The two countries had penned a Treaty of Friendship in December and the USSR felt it had a responsibility to prevent the PDPA from falling. But similar to their decision to keep aid packages to Afghanistan private during mid-1978, the Soviet leaders were once again concerned of the effect such overt assistance would have on their relationship with the West – specifically the United States. This time, however, the Soviet leaders did not have the option of providing under-the-radar assistance. Taraki stated that he believed Herat would fall on

¹¹⁷ M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 35.

¹¹⁸ “Transcript of CPSU CC Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan,” March 17, 1979.

¹¹⁹ CC CCPSU Politburo, “Excerpt from Politburo Meeting,” meeting of the Politburo, March 18, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*.

the night of the 18th or the 19th of March and noted that if this were to occur, both countries – not just Afghanistan – would feel the ill effects.¹²⁰ As a result, before concluding its March 18 session, the Soviet Politburo agreed to create a political document outlining the situation in the DRA and the steps its country could take to aid its ally and stabilize an otherwise regime-threatening situation for the PDPA.¹²¹

Invited to Moscow for a meeting, Taraki arrived on March 20 hoping to ensure a military commitment from the Soviet Union. Although it is likely that the Soviet leaders already knew they would intervene militarily – they certainly did not want to lose Afghanistan to Islamic fundamentalism and, at that point, intervention seemed the only mode of support that would ensure the country remained both an ally and a buffer state – on the outside, they continued to drag their heels on the issue.¹²² Taraki had little leverage at the time: The Soviets dictated the terms of the game. Recognizing his country had the upper hand in negotiations, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Leonid Brezhnev stated on March 20, “We must take steps to correct the situation that has developed and eliminate the threat to the new order in the DRA. And not only eliminate the threat, but also work to strengthen the gains of the April revolution.”¹²³ He continued to play the diplomatic game, however, and continued, “And now for the question of deploying Soviet military forces in Afghanistan. We have examined this question from every angle, weighed it carefully, and, I will tell you frankly: this

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Andrew Hartman, “‘The Red Template’: US Policy in Soviet-Occupied Afghanistan.” *Third World Quarterly*, 23, no. 3 (June 2002), 467-489.

¹²³ “Excerpt from Politburo Meeting,” March 18, 1979.

should not be done.”¹²⁴ Further, Brezhnev assured Taraki that the exertion of Soviet political influence alone would ultimately be the best means of assistance for both countries.

Despite their statements to the contrary, the Soviet leaders knew they had no option but to intervene if they wanted the PDPA to maintain its hold on the state – the rebels were too numerous and the government’s power too weak for the party to survive without outside assistance. By March 26-27, the Soviets had begun a large-scale airlift of cargo planes, light tanks, armored personnel carriers and helicopter gun ships.¹²⁵ The Soviets had slid down the slippery slope and were, from that point forward, fully committed to the future of Afghanistan. During May 1979 alone, they agreed to deliver 100 tanks and 160 single-use bomb cassettes to the DRA.¹²⁶ That same month, the Soviets also agreed that between 1979 and 1981, they would deliver 53 million rubles-worth of supplies, including 140 guns and mortars; 90 armored personnel carriers; 48,000 machine guns; 1,000 grenade throwers; 680 aviation bombs; and 50,000 rubles-worth of medicine and medical equipment between June and July 1979.¹²⁷

Impact of the Events of March 1979

The Herat rebellion not only created a situation in which the Soviet Union had little option but to assist the PDPA if it wanted the communist regime to stay afloat, but it also required the USSR to commit an unprecedented level of resources to the country – so much so that the USSR began to view the success of the PDPA as tied to its own. The absence of the United States forced Taraki to rely on the assistance of one external power to combat the

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Brecher and Wilkenfeld, 356.

¹²⁶ CC CPSU Politburo, “CPSU CC Politburo Decision and Instruction to Soviet Ambassador in Afghanistan,” May 24, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

insurrection in Herat, and, as the sole provider of aid, the Soviets became more involved in internal Afghan affairs than ever before.

None of this went unnoticed by the Carter administration. Although President Carter and his administration knew they had little leverage with which to combat the increasing Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, they monitored the situation closely, concerned that the Soviet Union might take advantage of its presence in Afghanistan to influence events in Iran and Pakistan. In addition to having lost a stake in Afghanistan, the administration did not want to alienate the USSR at a time when the two nations were still devoted to reaching an agreement on SALT. National Security Adviser Brzezinski vocalized this apprehension to Carter on numerous occasions and eventually persuaded Secretary of State Vance and Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher to “register formally [their] concern over the Soviets creeping intervention in Afghanistan.”¹²⁸ Brzezinski initially had difficulty emphasizing what he believed to be an urgent situation because, as he explained in his memoir, people within the administration were more inclined to focus on SALT and its positive aspects than problems in Afghanistan.¹²⁹

When Deputy Prime Minister Amin took over as Afghan prime minister on March 27 and announced his new cabinet on the 31st, power dynamics between the USSR and DRA shifted once again. While Taraki maintained his position as president and became the head of the new High Council for the Defense of the Homeland, increasingly, he became a figurehead, and his country moved forward in its relationship with the Soviet Union without him at the helm. Quickly, the USSR became frustrated with Amin, who preferred to maintain his distance from the Soviets, and, as a result, they began to look for a replacement for the new prime minister.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Brzezinski, 426-427.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 105.

At the same time that the Soviet Union became more entrenched in Afghan affairs, Amin began to use his authority to resist that Soviet influence.

CHAPTER THREE: THE PATH TO INTERVENTION

When Deputy Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin officially assumed the position of prime minister following the Herat insurrection in March 1979, the Soviet Union encountered a political paradox. It had possessed little choice but to assist the PDPA in quelling the rebellion, but once the USSR had committed itself to Afghan internal affairs, Amin began to separate himself from Moscow, hoping to ensure the independence of his country. With the United States now virtually absent from Afghan affairs, a growing tension continued to permeate relations between the two countries. In the later months of 1979, Amin was so adamant about ensuring his government's independence from the Soviet Union that he reached out to the United States – a country that was in the midst of a campaign that covertly funneled aid to the very internal forces that threatened his power. Amin quickly discovered that the United States had cemented its position in Afghanistan following the Dubs affair and was not willing to assist him.

The Soviet Union became alarmed at the potential for this major policy shift in the DRA and, due to its commitment to sustaining a communist regime in Afghanistan, it began to consider political and even military options. Amin emerged as a threat to Soviet gains in Afghanistan, and with the United States virtually out of the picture, intervention became a realistic possibility. Unlike in the past when the British in India had countered Russian power in central Asia during the early 20th century or when the United States had posed an equalizing threat in the 1950s, in 1979, no outside power had the capacity to oppose Soviet encroachment and all-out invasion.¹³¹ The Soviet Union had less fear of invading a country in which the United States was absent. Not only had the United States essentially isolated itself from the region

¹³¹ Kakar, 45.

through its hard-line policy, but it was also preoccupied by the revolution simultaneously occurring in neighboring Iran.¹³²

Fifteen months after the PDPA seized power in Afghanistan, it ceased to exist as the independent ruling party of the country: The Soviet Union invaded in December 1979 and its troops remained in the country until 1989. The Dubs affair, coupled with the Herat rebellion several weeks later, had brought the two communist regimes into the kind of dependent relationship that, in retrospect, could have only ended in complete Soviet intervention. Once the Soviet Union sent its troops into Afghanistan to quell the rebellion in March 1979, it was determined to maintain its hold on the country; it had vested far too many resources in Afghanistan to let Amin change the course of the DRA's policies.

Amin's Rise to Power and the Erosion of PDPA Control

Internal Resistance in 1979

When he became prime minister following the Herat insurrection in March 1979, Amin sought to reconcile the dissonance created by his two competing objectives: maintaining his country's independence on the one hand and ensuring its stability through Soviet assistance on the other.¹³³ Ultimately, Amin's attempts to preserve political autonomy backfired, only creating further resentment among the people of Afghanistan and division within the PDPA. Instead of recognizing the Herat rebellion as a warning sign of brewing opposition across the country, Amin began his term in office by continuing to impose his will on a nation that had, time and again, expressed its displeasure with PDPA policies through open insurrections.¹³⁴ In creating a

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 43

¹³⁴ Bradsher 101.

socialist state, the PDPA had sought to eliminate competition for national power through a series of decrees meant to redistribute wealth and power. Enforced through repressive measures, the campaign was marked by arrests, torture and mass executions.¹³⁵ Such actions created resentment not only because of the violent nature through which they were carried out but also due to their poor implementation – the PDPA did not clearly articulate its message to the people and, further, the changes did little to help the poor – and their attack on Islamic cultural values.¹³⁶ Starting with the Herat uprising and continuing through 1979, this widespread feeling of resentment was coupled with a disintegration of the army, as insurrections yielded a loss of troops, which ultimately enabled resistance movements to spread in 1979, further eroding PDPA control.¹³⁷

In addition to these resistance movements, the PDPA struggled under the weight of divisions within its own party structure. Amin's ascension to power brought two competing visions to the political table in Afghanistan. As historian M. Hassan Kakar explained in his assessment of the Afghan political climate leading up to the Soviet invasion in December, the Herat uprising and Amin's rise to power emphasized the differences between the new prime minister and Taraki: Amin resisted the idea of Afghanistan's increasingly intimate relationship with the USSR while Taraki, though still in favor of non-alignment, supported active Soviet assistance.¹³⁸ In an attempt to promote his own foreign-policy agenda, Amin alienated both Taraki and Taraki's supporters within the party.¹³⁹ While Amin tried to strip Taraki of all of his power, in public, the new prime minister continued to praise his predecessor, recognizing that in

¹³⁵ Barnett A. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 115-118.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹³⁸ Kakar, 35.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

order to implement his internal reforms and continue to work with the Soviet Union, he at least needed to feign unity of command within the PDPA.

Amin's Relationship with the USSR

It did not take long for the Soviet Union to become displeased with the new Afghan head of state, as, increasingly, due to Amin's policy objectives centered on political autonomy, the USSR viewed him as a major obstacle in its search for a political solution for Afghanistan.¹⁴⁰ Amin began promoting a political agenda much less in line with Soviet interests and, instead, focused on securing PDPA ruling independence in the state. Despite Amin's attempts to eradicate Soviet influence, the USSR felt it had invested far too much in Afghanistan since the Dubs affair to allow the new prime minister to eliminate – or even diminish – its political, military and economic influence in the country.

As historian Henry S. Bradsher recounted in his book *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, following the Herat rebellion, the USSR recognized the need for a less radical government more open to non-communists, but when its diplomatic representatives sought to encourage the PDPA to pursue more politically middle-of-the-road policies so as to stabilize party control, Amin reportedly prohibited the Soviet diplomats from working with Taraki. As a result, Amin became the main diplomatic contact for the Soviet Union, and he not only became a barrier to the Soviet attempt to rescue the PDPA and its regime from its own shortcomings but he also created diplomatic tensions between his country and the USSR, as he was unwilling to compromise.¹⁴¹

According to American observations, there existed general displeasure between the Afghans and Soviets following Amin's ascension to power in the weeks after Herat. On May 11,

¹⁴⁰ Gibbs, 373.

¹⁴¹ Bradsher, 104.

the U.S. Embassy reported that, “there are indications that the Soviets regret their close association with the Taraki regime.” Interestingly, the report referred to the “Taraki regime” rather than the “Amin regime,” perhaps indicating that the world continued to view Taraki as the figurehead of the governing party. Yet, even from the outside view of the United States, the situation had clearly changed since Taraki had yielded power to Amin, as the Soviet Union did not believe that the Afghan regime was acting in the same compliant manner as it had several weeks earlier. On the other hand, a May 24 State Department memo revealed that “the Afghans themselves are disappointed with the performance of the USSR,” indicating a level of “disenchantment between Afghanistan and the USSR.”¹⁴² Together, both documents reveal that the rifts between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union had become so apparent that even the United States – which had been relegated to the sidelines of the politics in the DRA – noticed such tensions. The same May 24 document also stated that “Prime Minister Amin has been seeing less of the Soviet Ambassador Puzanov and some Soviet advisers have been withdrawn from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,” implying that the tensions had grown from a shift in PDPA policies promoted by Amin. The new prime minister was clearly trying to distance himself from the Soviet Union – part of his greater plan for political autonomy – and such actions were disconcerting for a Soviet government that had invested so many resources in propping up the PDPA in Afghanistan. While Amin attempted to create a larger distance between the PDPA and the Soviet leaders, effectively reversing the shift in relations that had occurred when the USSR agreed to quell the Herat uprising, the Soviet Union tried to bring itself closer to the DRA so as to ensure that Afghanistan did not turn away from the communist bloc.

¹⁴² U.S. Department of State, report, May 11, 1979, from Gibbs, 373; U.S. Department of State, “Soviet-Afghan Relations: Is Moscow’s Patience Wearing Thin?,” Memorandum, May 24, 1979. Digital National Security Archive.

The Soviet leadership reacted to these threats to their influence in Afghanistan by looking for alternatives to Amin – seeking a leader who would abide by their requests – and Amin was not ignorant of this plan. In a report to the Soviet Politburo from June 28, 1979, the Soviet leaders stated that “the situation in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan ... continues to deteriorate ... all power in fact is concentrated in the hands of N.M. Taraki and H. Amin, who none too rarely make mistakes and commit violations of legality.”¹⁴³ In reaction to this realization, the Soviet Politburo considered it “expedient” to send “a letter to the PDPA Politburo ... express[ing] the concern and anxiety of the Soviet leadership in connection with the real danger of the loss of the gains of the April Revolution.”¹⁴⁴ Such sentiments underscored the importance the Soviet leaders placed on maintaining communist control in the country. Following the coup in 1978, the Soviet Union had sought friendly relations in order to maintain its political stake in that region, but by June 1979, as expressed through these statements, the fate of the PDPA in Afghanistan was more than merely a peripheral interest. Rather, its future had become so inextricably linked with the interests of the Soviet Union as to cause “anxiety” for the possibility of losing a country like Afghanistan from the communist sphere.

America’s Covert Involvement

During the early summer 1979, American intelligence analysts watched the increase in Soviet involvement with great concern and began to review the factors that could ultimately result in a Soviet military intervention.¹⁴⁵ Although the United States had little invested in

¹⁴³ CC CCPSU Politburo, “Gromyko-Andropov-Ustinov-Ponomarev Report to CPSU CC on the Situation in Afghanistan,” meeting of the Politburo, June 28, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ MacEachin, 15.

Afghanistan diplomatically and economically at this time, the possibility of a Soviet invasion threatened the balance of power in Central Asia. Specifically, Iran and Pakistan, both neighbors of Afghanistan, were integral to U.S. influence in the region, and the idea that the Soviet Union might have control of a bordering country caused serious alarm. Still, while according to Secretary Vance it had become clear that the Afghan regime was almost entirely dependent on Soviet military aid by the summer, intelligence estimates continued to view the introduction of more Soviet troops as unlikely.¹⁴⁶

This intelligence assessment was perhaps born from the knowledge of popular Afghan resistance to the Soviet-sponsored regime. Prompted by National Security Adviser Brzezinski, the Carter administration saw an opening: While its reaction to the Dubs affair had essentially eliminated the possibility of overt involvement, this did not mean the United States had to be entirely passive. The administration began to look for ways to weaken the PDPA and its relationship with the Soviet Union. Around that time, the CIA Near-East Division reported that Pakistani President and General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq was interested in discussing efforts to increase its clandestine support of Afghan insurgents; yet, in order to do so, he requested America's backing if the Soviet Union attempted to retaliate against Pakistan for such actions.¹⁴⁷

Deputy National Security Adviser David Aaron questioned, "Is there interest in maintaining and assisting the insurgency, or is the risk that we will provoke the Soviets too great?"¹⁴⁸ Not surprisingly, Aaron's boss Brzezinski supported an activist U.S. policy, recommending Carter endorse "non-lethal" covert support for the Afghan rebels.¹⁴⁹ To the

¹⁴⁶ Vance, 386.

¹⁴⁷ Steve Coll. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 45.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

American National Security Adviser, such action gave the United States a type of leverage otherwise unavailable to it in the region – it was a chance for the Western leader to undercut the Soviet Union on what had essentially turned into the USSR’s home turf. On July 3, 1979, Carter signed a presidential “finding” that authorized the CIA to spend about \$500,000 in order to provide radio equipment, medical supplies and cash to Afghan rebels, in addition to unleashing a propaganda and psychological operations campaign in that region.¹⁵⁰ This tactic continued throughout the Soviet invasion and occupation, as, according to Carter’s memoir, “direct military action on our part was not advisable,” so the administration “inventoried every conceivable alternative ... that would hit the Soviets where they were most vulnerable.”¹⁵¹

The Removal of Taraki

Feeling weak with its hold on Afghanistan by the end of July 1979, the Soviet Union and its “machinations to alter the Afghan regime ... moved into a more active phase,” according to information received by the U.S. embassy in Kabul at the time.¹⁵² By August, it had become clear to the Soviets that the window for a political solution had essentially vanished, as the PDPA faced both internal and external problems.¹⁵³ Internally, the party had lost virtually all of its popular support due to its increasingly violent and repressive policies, and, further, the rift between Taraki and Amin made comprehensive decision-making difficult for the PDPA. Externally, the tension between Amin and the Soviets continued to grow, as Amin’s policies

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Carter, 473.

¹⁵² U.S. Embassy, Kabul, telegram no.5470, date unclear (probably July 31 or Aug. 1, 1979), from Bradsher, 105.

¹⁵³ Gibbs, 374.

threatened to eliminate the USSR's influence over Afghan politics.¹⁵⁴ These simultaneous issues posed a dilemma for Amin: On the one hand, he wanted to maintain his independence from the USSR but on the other hand, popular discontent across the country dictated that he lean on the USSR in order to ensure the longevity of his regime. In August, the Soviet Union ratcheted up its military commitment, sending a high-level military delegation to Afghanistan.¹⁵⁵ Amin had become more open to the idea of Soviet military assistance, telling Lt. Gen. Gorelov, chief of the Soviet military advisory group in Afghanistan, on Aug. 11 that “the arrival of Soviet troops will significantly raise our moral spirit, [and] will inspire even greater confidence and calm.”¹⁵⁶ Still, Amin qualified this statement by saying, “we are a sovereign and independent state and solve all our problems independently,” reminding the USSR, once again, that he intended to maintain political autonomy.¹⁵⁷ This independence continued to be a source of pride for Amin, who, even on Sept. 9, boasted, “We are proud that we have not asked any foreign country to fight for us or to provide our country with security and safety.”¹⁵⁸ Of course, this statement was far from the truth, but Amin felt he needed to publicly draw a line between his country and the Soviet Union in order to give his political agenda credibility. Maintaining Afghan independence was his number one objective and he needed to ensure his people – and also the Soviet leadership – that he refused to back down.

Amin clearly recognized the tenuous nature of his hold on power in the country and oscillated between his idealistic vision of an independent Afghanistan and his realistic one of a

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Archives of the General Staff of the USSR Armed Forces, “Conversation of the chief of the Soviet military advisory group in Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. Gorelov, with H. Amin,” Aug. 11, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Bradsher, 108.

country sorely in need of outside assistance. What had begun as sporadic assistance in mid-1978 had turned into a dependency that Amin recognized to be frustrating yet necessary.¹⁵⁹ Not only was Amin struggling to maintain the support of his people, but he was also fully aware of Soviet displeasure with his ruling tactics. Over the preceding months, Amin had not masked his displeasure with Afghanistan's increasing reliance on the Soviet Union, and, as a result, the USSR viewed his rise to power as a threat to its influence in the region. Amin's poor relationship with the Soviet Union was so obvious that even Brzezinski delivered a speech on Aug. 3, a transcript of which was subsequently published in *The New York Times*, outlining the possibility of a Soviet plan to unseat Amin.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, the Soviet leadership made clear its preference for the more moderate Taraki over Amin. Unlike Amin, Taraki was intrigued by the Soviet idea of broadening the PDPA's base to include even anti-communists, and he continued to travel to Moscow during the concluding months of the summer of 1979 and into the fall to work on diplomatic solutions to the instability in Afghanistan.¹⁶¹ Although the Soviet Union would have gladly eliminated Amin's power, it still recognized the independent sovereignty of the Afghan government and, thus, its own limits with regard to actions in the DRA. An excerpt from a Sept. 13 Soviet Politburo statement asserted, "we cannot take it upon ourselves to arrest Amin with our own battalion force, since this would be a direct interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan and would have far-reaching consequences."¹⁶² The Soviet leaders recognized that an attempt to oust Amin would likely yield a response not only from the DRA but also from the

¹⁵⁹ Kakar, 41.

¹⁶⁰ Brzezinski, 427.

¹⁶¹ Bradsher, 111.

¹⁶² CC CPSU Politburo, "CPSU CC Politburo Decisions on Afghanistan," Sept. 13, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*.

international community as a whole, as such an action would be an infraction of international law.

Although, in September, the USSR had no intention of forcibly removing Amin, the Afghan prime minister believed he faced major internal as well as external threats to his power. At this time, it was clear he could not eliminate his external threat – the Soviet Union – but a removal of his major internal threat, Taraki and his supporters, was a realistic feat that, he believed, would ensure his hold on PDPA power at least for the short term. Amin began to pin the country's problems on Taraki, accusing him of abusing his power and engaging in “tyrannical acts.”¹⁶³ Three days after Taraki returned home to Kabul from a meeting in Moscow, Kabul Radio announced that Amin had made changes to the government's cabinet on Sept. 14.¹⁶⁴ Four ministers, all of whom had been pivotal in conducting positive negotiations with the Soviet Union, had been ousted for reportedly plotting against Amin; Taraki did not mask his displeasure for a decision that had effectively equaled a coup on the part of Amin. Several weeks later, Taraki was dead. On Oct. 10, the *Kabul Times* officially reported that Taraki had died the previous morning of a “serious illness, which he had been suffering for some time.”¹⁶⁵ Although the events surrounding Taraki's death were hazy at best, it is believed that Amin ordered the commander of the police guards to assassinate Taraki.

The United States took note of the detrimental impact Amin's actions in September and October had on the fibers of Soviet-Afghan relations. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee stated on Sept. 21 that Amin's decisions “may force Moscow into choosing between allowing a neighboring Marxist regime to be overthrown or substantially increasing its commitment to the

¹⁶³ Kabul Radio, Sept. 26, 1979, from Bradsher, 115.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁶⁵ *Kabul Times*, Oct. 10 1979, in Afghan Council, *Newsletter*, Jan. 1, 1980, from Bradsher, 115.

regime.”¹⁶⁶ Further, the committee stated that, “the Soviet Union appears to have been surprised, and probably also somewhat dismayed, by Amin’s seizure of regime control.”¹⁶⁷ The White House viewed the situation similarly, as Brzezinski recalled: “The situation had become sufficiently grave for the President to ask me to prepare contingency options in the event of an overt Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan.”¹⁶⁸ It was apparent that the Soviet Union could not maintain the status quo in Afghanistan; the friendly relationship that had existed in 1978 and during the early part of 1979 was so obviously altered by the fall of that year. And Amin’s assumption of power emphasized this point: The fact that the Soviet Union appeared surprised by his actions during the summer months is evidence of the wedge Amin had created between his government and the Soviet Union. As such, the more Amin clamped down and sought to solidify his sole claim to power in Afghanistan, the more threatened the Soviets felt.

During a summit in East Berlin hosted by Erich Honecker, general secretary of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, on Oct. 4, Brezhnev spoke candidly about his country’s displeasure with Amin and the Afghan leader’s recent usurpation of control. Brezhnev noted that Afghanistan had essentially taken advantage of Soviet good will.¹⁶⁹ “Our efforts were directed to contribute to the unity of the Afghani leadership and not allow for divisions to happen,” Brezhnev said.¹⁷⁰ “But Amin has taken advantage of Taraki’s indecisiveness and as you know, eliminated him ... Amin did this even though he was held as

¹⁶⁶ U.S. Congress, Committee on Foreign Relations. *Developments in Afghanistan and Possible Increased Soviet Intervention*. 96th Congress, 1st Sess., September 21, 1979.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Brzezinski, 427.

¹⁶⁹ “Transcript of Brezhnev Honecker summit in East Berlin (excerpt on Iran and Afghanistan),” Oct. 4, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Taraki's friend ... Frankly, we are not pleased by all of Amin's methods and actions.”¹⁷¹

Although Brezhnev did not say it directly, the implication here is clear: If Amin betrayed a friend like Taraki, he could do the same to his country's friend, the Soviet Union – something Brezhnev sought to highlight in order to dissuade Amin from choosing the same path. Still, relations had not been entirely destroyed, as Brezhnev publicly emphasized his country's continued commitment to supporting Afghanistan. While this statement of assistance represented Brezhnev's attempt to smooth diplomatic relations in a public forum, behind it all was a warning to the Afghan leader. By mentioning the Soviet Union's intention of continuing its support, Brezhnev emphasized the permanence of Soviet influence in Afghanistan – the communist world leader was in Afghanistan for the long run even if Amin resisted.

Indeed, publicly, Amin began to make statements to warrant such Soviet concern. In an interview with reporters from *The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* at the end of October, Amin said, “We want that in a realistic manner the United States should study the situation in this region and provide us with more economic assistance.”¹⁷² While the State Department did not ignore Amin's interest in restoring relations with the West, as a result of its unfriendly relationship with the PDPA following Dubs' assassination, it was skeptical of Amin's intentions and ultimately decided to refrain from changing its policy toward the DRA.

In an Oct. 1 cable, the State Department reported that it had “been receiving clear signals that the DRA seeks better relations with us ... but ... it is too early to tell whether these signs will be substantiated in areas important to us.”¹⁷³ The document noted that while the DRA was

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Raja Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan: A First-hand Account* (New York: Verso, 1988), 184.

¹⁷³ U.S. Department of State, “Implications that DRA Seeks Better Relations with USG: A Commentary,” cable, Oct. 1, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*.

politically extending itself to the United States in a manner unseen since the Dubs affair, “on another level, in areas more important to us, such as investigating Ambassador Dubs’ death ... we have encountered many roadblocks.”¹⁷⁴ For an American government that had quickly cemented its policy toward the DRA following Dubs’ death, the idea of reestablishing relations with that country seemed intriguing. Not only would it enable the United States to reclaim influence in a region of the world that, at the time, troubled American officials – the loss of friendly relations with Iran following the Shah’s exit from the country in Jan. 1979 had proven a major blow to U.S. interests in Central Asia – but it also clearly threatened a Soviet regime that had been increasingly aggressive in the Third World. Yet despite all of this, the Carter administration was unwilling to reestablish relations. Additionally, even if it had decided to negotiate, the fact that the United States did not have an ambassador to Afghanistan – or even a full embassy staff in Kabul – at the time would have likely hampered discussions related to altering policy toward the DRA.

Two weeks later, in an Oct. 15 cable, the State Department reported that, “if we now go to see Amin, we risk either giving an erroneous signal that they have us over the ball and ... we are prepared to be forthcoming on issues of interest to them or ... we will be raising expectations we cannot later meet.”¹⁷⁵ The United States recognized that its previous decision to take a hard line with the PDPA limited its ability to negotiate with Amin, and, as a result, it turned down the offer to, once again, become involved in Afghan internal politics, instead, continuing to support anti-government forces. Amin had to negotiate with the Soviet Union on his own.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ U.S. Department of State, “President Amin’s desire for Better Relations,” cable, Oct. 15, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*.

Amin's decision to negotiate with the West created alarm among the Soviet leaders. On Oct. 29, a report released to the Soviet Politburo by several of its members referred to Amin's desire for a "balanced policy" that sought a more conciliatory relationship with Western powers, asserting, further, that "the Afghans ... are coming to a conclusion about the possibility of a change in the political line of Afghanistan in a direction which is pleasing to Washington."¹⁷⁶ The Soviet Union did not trust Amin – especially after Taraki's death – and, as a result, feared he would turn against the East in favor of Western policies. Yet the Soviet leaders understood that they needed to show an interest in maintaining friendly relations with the Afghan head of state in order to dissuade him from turning to the West; any aggressive act on the part of the USSR that made Amin feel in the least bit threatened would have pushed him toward a more "balanced policy," the Soviet leaders believed. In the same Oct. 29 document, the members of the Soviet Politburo stated that they intended to "continue to work actively with Amin and overall with the current leadership of the PDPA and the DRA, not giving Amin grounds to believe that we don't trust him and don't wish to deal with him."

Taraki's death not only solidified power in the hands of Amin, but it also drastically altered the nature of Soviet-Afghan relations: The main diplomatic link between the two countries had been severed, and distrust only continued to brew on both sides. In fact, Brezhnev considered the murder of Taraki to be a personal insult, and it was not long before the Soviet Union altered its policy on Afghanistan from one of friendship and aid to military occupancy.¹⁷⁷ The more Amin tried to keep his ally at arms length, the more the Soviet Union began to seriously consider a more interventionist policy. As much as he resisted it, Amin was realistically

¹⁷⁶ CC CPSU Politburo, "Gromyko-Andopov-Ustinov-Ponomarev Report to CPSU CC," Oct. 29, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*.

¹⁷⁷ Kaker, 39.

never going to free his country from its dependency on the Soviet Union, especially given that the United States refused to alter its policy and continued to clandestinely support the rebel cause in Afghanistan. Since the April coup the number of Soviet advisers in the country had increased from 2,100 to 5,500, and, prior to the invasion, there were between 3,500 and 4,000 Soviet officers in the Afghan armed forces while at least 1,500 people in the civilian ministries were Soviets.¹⁷⁸ By the fall of 1979, the world's communist leader had devoted far too much to Afghanistan to back down and the friendship it had based its Dec. 1978 agreement on seemed a distant memory.

The Decision to Invade

The Soviets have begun to move their forces in to overthrow the existing government ... 215 flights in the last 24 hours or so. They've moved in a couple of regiments and now have maybe a total of 8,000 or 10,000 people in Afghanistan – both advisers and military. We consider this to be an extremely serious development.

—Jimmy Carter, diary entry, Dec. 27, 1979¹⁷⁹

Amin's relationship with the Soviet Union remained strained through the middle of December. The Afghan leader continued to publicly deny Soviet involvement and influence, while the Soviets, themselves, became increasingly resentful and, at the same time, entrenched in Afghan internal political, military and economic affairs. In the middle of December, Amin still publicly denied the existence of Soviet military bases in his country in an attempt to assure the Afghan people – and the world in general – that he possessed control of his country.¹⁸⁰ But such statements could not have been further from the truth – in fact, they seemed to reek of

¹⁷⁸ Bradsher, 123.

¹⁷⁹ Carter, 471.

¹⁸⁰ Anwar, 184.

desperation on the part of a leader watching his party's power crumble beneath him. By that time, the Soviet Red Army had already positioned two battalions at Bagram air base, three battalions at an air base near Kabul and 30,000 troops on the Afghan border.¹⁸¹ Additionally, between Dec. 23 and 26, the Soviet Union dispatched 10,000 troops to Kabul.¹⁸²

Two days after Christmas, President Carter received the official news: The Soviets had embarked on an offensive military campaign into Afghanistan. It was the exact act of aggression Dubs had warned the State Department about more than a year earlier, and it was the exact move that the Soviets, for months, had been stating they wanted to avoid. The day of the invasion, Dec. 27, the Soviet Politburo released a decree that justified the intervention, citing the violent actions taken by Amin and the subsequent deterioration of the communist regime as cause for the Soviet invasion. The decree stated:

The situation right now appears that the foundations of the April Revolution of 1978 and the democratic and progressive gains of the Afghan people are under great threat. The gross interference on the part of several powers into the affairs of Afghanistan is continuing, its scale is increasing, and armed formations and weapons are being sent into Afghanistan for counterrevolutionary elements and groups whose activity is being directed from abroad. The goal of this interference is completely obvious – the overthrow of the democratic and progressive system established by the people of Afghanistan as a result of the victory of the Revolution.¹⁸³

Further, according to the Soviet decree, the USSR was acting out of “international duty” and in accordance with the 1978 Treaty of Friendship and a “commonality of interests” with Afghanistan.¹⁸⁴ Such reasoning only emphasized the inevitability of the intervention. Once the

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ CC CSPU, “Politburo Decree P177/151,” Dec. 27, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

Soviet Union became heavily involved in Afghanistan, the interests of the DRA were, from the Soviet perspective, completely tied to the interests of the Soviet Union. As a result, when Amin assumed complete control following his assassination of Taraki – an act specifically cited in the decree as a factor in the decision to intervene – the Soviet Union viewed him not only as a threat to the future of the DRA but also to its own claims in the region, in addition to the international community’s interests by extension. The Soviet Union used the Treaty of Friendship, coupled with the repressive policies of Amin, as legal justification for the intervention. According to the treaty, both countries were responsible for ensuring the “security, independence, and territorial integrity” of the other, and the Soviet Union claimed that Amin’s behavior and the general insecurity in the country warranted intervention.¹⁸⁵

Yet internally, according to a personal memorandum from Yuri Andropov, head of the KGB, to Brezhnev – written in early December when the Soviet Union was deciding whether or not to intervene militarily and overthrow Amin – the reasons for intervening had less to do with Amin’s repressive measures and the general security of the country and more to do with fear of Amin’s turning away from the Soviet Union as Afghanistan’s sole ally. The memorandum described the arrival of “alarming information ... about Amin’s secret activities, forewarning of a possible political shift to the West.”¹⁸⁶ Prior to the Dubs affair, the Soviet Union had expected Western influence in the region, but this memorandum clearly revealed just how altered Soviet policies had become since that time: Even the slightest hint of a shift in PDPA interest toward Western policies triggered alarm in the Soviet Union. Unlike at the

¹⁸⁵ “Circular Cable to Soviet Ambassadors in non-fraternal countries with official Soviet position regarding developments of the situation around Afghanistan,” cable, Dec. 27, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*.

¹⁸⁶ A.F. Dobrynin, “Personal memorandum, Andropov to Brezhnev, n.d. [early December 1979],” Daniel Rozas, trans. Provided by Odd Arne Westad, *Cold War International History Project*.

beginning of 1979, there had become too much to lose for the Soviet Union to allow for any level of Western influence on the government of Afghanistan. Andropov also referred to the “danger of losing the gains made by the April [1978] revolution” and a “growth of anti-Soviet sentiments within the population.” According to former Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin, this early December document was especially influential in altering Brezhnev’s position on the debate regarding military intervention in Afghanistan.¹⁸⁷

Upon entering Afghanistan, the Red Army immediately eliminated Amin and replaced him with Babrak Karmal, who had founded the PDPA with Taraki in 1965. The events surrounding Amin’s death are unclear. An ambiguous announcement claimed that a “revolutionary tribunal” had sentenced Amin to death, while Karmal blamed Afghan fighters and other asserted he was “shot by the Russians.”¹⁸⁸ Regardless, by the end of the first day, Soviet forces had overtaken Kabul and replaced Amin with their own puppet leader.

Carter’s Response

President Carter was at Camp David for the Christmas holiday when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Brzezinski had called the president at 6 p.m. on Christmas to inform him that the Soviets had “made their move.”¹⁸⁹ The formal invasion did not come as much of a surprise, however, as the administration had received news that Soviet paratroopers had moved

¹⁸⁷ Svetlana Savranskya, ed. “Volume II: Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War – the Soviet Experience in Afghanistan, Russian Documents and Memoirs,” *The September 11th Sourcebooks* The National Security Archive.

¹⁸⁸ *Sotsialisticheskaya Industriya*. Feb. 6, 1980. From Bradsher, 182.

¹⁸⁹ Brzezinski, 353.

into Afghanistan on Dec. 20.¹⁹⁰ Carter returned to Washington quickly and held a National Security Council meeting on Dec. 28 and condemned the invasion, which the administration considered to be a grave breach of international peace. The American president warned that the previous day's invasion would "severely and adversely" effect U.S.-Soviet relations "now and in the future."¹⁹¹ The next day, Brezhnev sent a letter to Carter defending his country's actions, which he claimed were orchestrated at the request of the DRA and were not meant to threaten U.S.-Soviet relations.¹⁹² Brezhnev's defense of Soviet actions did little to persuade the Carter administration, however: In a televised interview on Dec. 31, Carter rejected Brezhnev's justification.¹⁹³ Although the United States had no diplomatic presence in Afghanistan at the end of 1979, the Soviet action still presented a major threat to the Western power in that region of the world. Vance later explained, "The security interests of the West dictated that we act cohesively and promptly to demonstrate to the Soviets that such behavior was not an acceptable part of the East-West competition ... the invasion moved Soviet ground and air forces several hundred miles closer to the gulf and the West's jugular vein of oil."¹⁹⁴

The American administration saw the Soviet invasion as a threat to its interests in both Pakistan and Iran – two countries that had figured much more prominently in American foreign policy than Afghanistan up until that point.¹⁹⁵ The invasion, Carter and his advisers contended, involved more than just the internal affairs of two countries, but, rather, it had the potential to tip the balance of power in a region that had become increasingly important economically over the

¹⁹⁰ Vance, 387.

¹⁹¹ Afghanistan Task Force.

¹⁹² CC CPSU Politburo, "Reply to an appeal of President Carter about the issue of Afghanistan through the direct communications channel," minutes, Dec. 29, 1979, *Cold War International History Project*.

¹⁹³ Afghanistan Task Force.

¹⁹⁴ Vance, 391.

¹⁹⁵ Carter, 473.

preceding decades. The United States was already feeling vulnerable in the region following the fall of the Shah in Iran and the Iranian hostage crisis – which occurred when 52 U.S. diplomats were seized in Iran on Nov. 4, 1979 – and the Soviet invasion exposed American geopolitical deficiencies in the geographic area.

The Soviet political leaders may have defended their actions as mere housekeeping – an attempt on the part of one friend to secure the stability of the other – but there was no chance the Western power would see it that way, and the United States led the expression of outrage toward the Soviet Union for its invasion. According to an Afghanistan Task Force paper released in Jan. 1980 to evaluate the circumstances surrounding the invasion, the United States was not alone in its condemnation of the Soviet actions. The paper referred to a statement released by the Iranian government on Dec. 29 that termed the invasion “a hostile act ... against all the Muslims of the world.”¹⁹⁶ Similarly, the Pakistani leadership feared for the safety of its country, as the potential for a Soviet invasion of Pakistan seemed to have increased exponentially due to the Red Army’s proximity.¹⁹⁷ The People’s Republic of China also stated that the invasion posed a threat to its security, while, naturally, the other Western powers, in addition to the United Nations (UN), backed the U.S. reaction to the Soviet action.¹⁹⁸ On Jan. 7, 1980, the Soviet Union vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that had condemned the invasion and demanded the immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops.¹⁹⁹

Carter, too, believed that the invasion represented unprecedented aggression on the part of his country’s geopolitical counterpart, as, in his mind, it was the first time the Soviet Union had used its own troops to expand its sphere of influence since its overthrow of the

¹⁹⁶ Afghanistan Task Force.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Afghanistan Task Force.

Czechoslovakian government in 1948.²⁰⁰ In response, the United States responded diplomatically, recalling its ambassador to the Soviet Union, Thomas Watson, from Moscow. Additionally, Carter considered the invasion an “immediate and automatic loss of any chance for early ratification of the SALT II treaty.”²⁰¹ The Soviet decision to deploy troops to Afghanistan prevented the United States Senate from formally ratifying the SALT treaty, which Carter and Brezhnev and Carter had signed at a conference in Vienna during the summer of 1979. Any progress made on détente, it seemed, had been lost the minute Soviet troops overtook Kabul and assassinated Amin.

In general, the Carter administration responded to the December invasion with a level of hard-line ferocity that had only begun to develop following the Dubs affair. In a Jan. 4, 1980 address to the nation, Carter called the invasion a “callous violation of international law and the United Nations charter,” and laid out the steps his administration would be taking to respond to it.²⁰² Most notably, in a decision similar to refusing economic assistance to the DRA following Dubs’ murder, Carter promised to withhold 17 million tons of grain the Soviet Union had ordered, in addition to inhibiting the initiation of new American or Soviet Consular facilities.²⁰³ Yet Carter’s most prominent and widely cited reaction to the invasion did not come until two weeks later when he delivered his State of the Union Address on Jan. 23, 1980. In it, he laid out what later became known as the Carter Doctrine, “Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interest of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled

²⁰⁰ Carter, 471.

²⁰¹ Carter, 473.

²⁰² The White House, “Text of the President’s Address to the Nation,” Jan. 4, 1980. Digital National Security Archive.

²⁰³ Ibid.

by any means necessary, including military force.” When the Soviet Union invaded, Carter’s administration had three primary policy objectives: get the Soviets to withdraw their military, punish them for an act Carter believed to be illegal and inhibit further Soviet expansion in the region.²⁰⁴

The president could not have strayed more from the original philosophies he had emphasized on his way to the Oval Office. He threatened with the use of force, his policy was reactive and his doctrine reflected the realities of Cold War duality on the world stage. Containment had never really been abandoned; it had just been pushed to the backburner until crisis called for a return to America’s traditional Cold War policies.

²⁰⁴ Minton F. Goldman, “President Carter, Western Europe, and Afghanistan in 1980: Inter-Allied Differences over Policy toward the Soviet Invasion,” *Jimmy Carter: Foreign Policy and Post-Presidential Years*, Herbert D. Rosenbaum and Alexej Urginsky, eds (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1994), 19.

CONCLUSION

Several months after the Soviet defense minister signed an order to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, the USSR Defense Ministry delivered a statement to the head of the UN Mission in Afghanistan regarding the Soviet Politburo's decision to pull its troops out of the country after having occupied it for the greater part of a decade.²⁰⁵ The UN received the notice the same day the last of the Red Army's 100,000 troops left the country – February 14, 1989, the 10-year anniversary of Dubs' assassination. It marked the first time since World War II that the Soviet army had withdrawn under fire from a nation it had previously occupied.²⁰⁶ As early as 1980, the USSR leadership had recognized that a military solution to the situation in Afghanistan was untenable; yet it took no real steps to find a political alternative, and the Red Army continued to fight without a clear objective until the end of the decade.²⁰⁷ It was not until ten years after Dubs' murder that the Soviets finally relinquished Afghanistan.

Dubs in the Context of History

The Dubs affair had far-reaching diplomatic and geopolitical effects that initially colored and ultimately turned the tide on the nature of Afghan-American, Soviet-American and Soviet-Afghan relations during the months and years following the Feb. 1979 murder. When the State Department received news that its newly appointed ambassador had been murdered in Kabul – a situation that, it believed, had been exacerbated by irresponsible reactions from both the Soviet and Afghan security officials at the scene – it seemed another step in a process that was phasing out American influence in the region. The Soviets and Afghans had only moved closer after

²⁰⁵ Savranskya.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

signing a Treaty of Friendship in December 1978, and in this context, the assassination of Dubs threatened whatever remaining influence the United States still had in Afghanistan, a country barely on its radar two-and-a-half decades earlier yet increasingly important due to the dynamics of superpower politics in the Cold War era. Although the Saur Revolution had altered politics in Afghanistan, shifting the country to the left, the same dual-superpower dynamics that had characterized relations in the 1950s, 60s and 70s had remained relatively unchanged until Dubs' murder. The Soviet Union had certainly become more politically intimate with the government of Afghanistan following the PDPA's April overthrow of Daoud; yet the coup did not automatically eliminate American influence in the region. That did not occur until Dubs' murder ten months later.

Struggling under the pressure of a foreign-policy agenda plagued by two opposing ideological beliefs – the hard-line position of the Department of Defense headed by Brzezinski on the one hand and the softer more appealing line taken by the State Department and supported by Vance on the other – the Carter administration could no longer drag its heels in its policy toward Afghanistan and the Soviet Union in Central Asia. The Dubs affair eradicated the final remnants of U.S. leverage in the DRA – namely, its diplomatic power. The murder not only eliminated Dubs, a major proponent of the United States' "wait and see" strategy toward the DRA but it also forced Carter to take a hard line against Afghanistan, a fact that ultimately proved harmful to both his country's relationship with the DRA and its hope of inhibiting the Soviet Union from becoming more politically intimate with the Afghan government. Thus, with Dubs' murder, American foreign policy toward Afghanistan shifted from one based on carrots to one based on sticks.

When rebellion broke out in Herat, Afghanistan, just several weeks after Dubs' assassination, the PDPA had just one country to lean on: the USSR. Prime Minister Taraki, feeling both the negative effects of the Dubs murder and pressure mounting in one of Afghanistan's major cities for the first time, had but one country to turn to in March 1979. Because the United States had been eliminated from the Soviet-Afghan-American political triangle that had existed in Afghanistan since the conclusion of World War II, the Soviet Union quickly became more entrenched in Afghan affairs than ever before, filling the void left by the United States. The Herat uprising gave the Soviets few options, and, because the USSR did not want Afghanistan's communist government to fall, it intervened militarily – an unprecedented move for a nation that had spent the previous decades establishing a relationship purely based on economic assistance programs. From that moment forward, the Soviet Union became inextricably linked to the DRA, feeling it had vested too much in the country to walk away from Afghanistan.

While the USSR and DRA appeared to be entering a new phase in their relationship, the United States continued to watch from the sidelines. Following the Herat rebellion, it seemed the Soviet Union had become far too committed to the DRA to pull back its support – if it had, the PDPA's control would have likely shattered to pieces. The Soviet leadership saw itself as defending gains made in Afghanistan, so in order to prevent a setback, it believed it had no choice but to continue down a path that eventually resulted in intervention – a path the Carter administration recognized months before the Soviet invasion in December 1979 but a path that, in the end, it had little leverage to impede.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ Harry Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo and the Decline of Détente* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 170.

Shortly after the Herat rebellion, the Soviet Union began to feel threatened by the rise of Afghan Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin, who, above all else, wanted to ensure his country's independence. Amin grappled with the clash of his idealistic vision for complete separation from the Soviet Union and his realistic understanding of the internal turmoil in Afghanistan that necessitated external aid and assistance. Ultimately, the Afghan prime minister put his idealism before his realism and, in determining that autonomy from the USSR was of paramount importance, turned to the United States – a country in the midst of a campaign that funneled aid to the very forces rebelling against Amin's regime – for assistance. Amin was desperate. But the PDPA had never complied with the U.S. administration's requests following Dubs' assassination, and, as a result, the Carter administration refused to help the Afghan leader. Having allegedly been responsible for the death of Taraki – a political official with whom the Soviets had a positive relationship – and having turned to the United States for assistance, Amin was no friend of the USSR. The Soviets believed Amin needed to be eliminated, and, as the United States no longer had a political stake in Afghan governmental affairs, there was little to stop them.

When the Red Army moved into Afghanistan in December 1979, President Carter “stood by the fireplace in the Oval Office and ruminated sadly about the Soviet move,” Brzezinski wrote in his memoir. “The President told me that he saw the Soviet move as a far-reaching challenge to which he had to respond in a firm and credible way,” Brzezinski said.²⁰⁹ The precedent had been set with Dubs' murder: The United States would respond to Soviet threats in Afghanistan by taking a hard line – a foreign-policy agenda Carter had been entirely opposed to when he first set foot in the Oval Office three years earlier.

²⁰⁹ Brzezinski, 432.

The Jimmy Carter who stood up on the commencement of his fourth year in office and condemned the Soviet Union's invasion in his 1980 State of the Union Address was a much different one than the man who had come to office skeptical of the post-World War II *realpolitik* foreign policy that, he argued, had entrenched America in the Vietnam War. The Jimmy Carter of 1980 had watched much of his foreign-policy agenda take a 180-degree turn in the months following the death of Dubs in February 1979. That change saw its culmination in Carter's State of the Union statement – the single most memorable line of his entire presidency. Carter's idealistic foreign policy had failed to buoy him when the world began to crumble around him in 1979, and by the end of that year, Carter had reverted to a policy primarily composed of containment. That year, revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua, in addition to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, forced the administration to reconsider its priorities, and more generally, its line of thinking, prohibiting Carter from following through on his idealism. And so, ultimately, his foreign-policy agenda remained just that – idealism shrouded by the realities of Cold War threats. It seems a bitter irony that the man who won the presidency partially based on his moderate foreign policy became defined by a doctrine so in opposition as to resemble all of the previous policies Carter had been criticizing. Yet Carter spoke out of necessity: Just as his administration had to react aggressively to the Dubs affair so too did it have to staunchly condemn the Soviet invasion several months later. Dubs' murder marked the beginning of a period in which the Carter administration began to rethink its foreign-policy agenda, and just 10 months after the kidnapping, Carter led the Western world in responding to “the most serious threat to peace since the Second World War.”²¹⁰

²¹⁰ Jimmy Carter, State of the Union Address, January 23, 1980. Digital National Security Archive.

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