



Afghanistan: Leaving the mountains to Mohammed

Retreat To Moscow

So the troops are at last called home. The humiliation of a complete collapse of the Kabul regime will probably be averted. But most of the country will remain out of its grasp. Afghanistan is no longer expected to follow the socialist path of development. The original mission of the expeditionary force, consolidation of the new order, has been abandoned.

Soviet propagandists are hard put to justify the sacrifices of the war in the face of this retreat. Alexander Prokhanov, the 'Soviet Kipling' who has spent recent years romanticising the carnage, is now forced to resort to the excuse that the failure is only a partial one. If the best has eluded us, at least the worst has been prevented. Thanks to the war, he pleads, American bases have been kept away from Soviet borders.

Thanks to the war, the USSR faces the prospect merely of a moderate Islamic government in Kabul, instead of an extremist Islamic regime which would have posed a much greater political threat to Soviet cen-

tral Asia.

There are some Soviet soldiers who sincerely believe that they fulfilled their 'internationalist duty' not just for strategic reasons but for the sake of social progress, to protect literacy, land reform and women's rights from medieval obscurantism. As veterans some of them now continue the crusade against 'contras' by attacking the corrupt and the devotees of Western culture. But the means used were not such as could advance creative ends. The Soviet occupation itself pushed many progressive but patriotic Afghans into the feudal camp. And the devastation caused by Soviet firepower far outweighs the results of all civic programmes combined. Like Vietnam, Afghanistan is a country which had to be largely destroyed in an unsuccessful effort to 'save' it.

One goal of the war, however, has been achieved. Soviet troops and commanders have acquired combat experience, and mountain warfare has developed the initiative of junior officers.

The fast promotion of men returning from Afghanistan shows how much the military leadership value these effects. And those like Prokhanov, who fear that Soviet society has gone flabby, look forward to its invigoration as the Afghan veterans 'add their voice to our internal choir'.

How would Soviet analysts assess the impact on the global correlation of forces with the loss of Afghanistan to the socialist camp?

Afghanistan is a very small and - now more than ever - a very poor country. Its geostrategic importance is often exaggerated. What happens there should not matter all that much to a rational superpower politician. That is why the war has always seemed such an absurdity to the technocratically-minded wing of the Soviet elite.

On the other hand, withdrawal from Afghanistan sets a startling precedent. It is in fact the backward edge of a much broader movement of withdrawal from commitments in the Third World. The consensus of Soviet experts is now that 'the

countries of socialist orientation' have proved failures as models of development. The long-term trend in the correlation of forces is determined not by the number of underdeveloped countries taking the socialist path, but by the economic strength, technological progress and ideological influence of the USSR and other developed socialist states. Inasmuch as the support of Third World allies drains the Soviet economy, their proliferation actually weakens world socialism in its rivalry with capitalism.

The USSR must therefore avoid saddling itself with new clients, and even try gently to jettison old ones. From Cuba to Vietnam to Angola, allies are pressed towards compromise solutions of regional conflicts, which reduce the danger of world war but also freeze the status quo. Everything to allow the Soviet Union to turn its attention inwards for the long haul of reconstruction which will eventually, or so it is hoped, safeguard its great-power status on a new and sounder basis. To justify the grand retreat, Soviet writers draw a parallel with the armistice of Brest-Litovsk, when Lenin insisted that the newborn Soviet state abandon its periphery for the sake of preserving its core.

The frustration of the war in Afghanistan has been one of the experiences which led to this turning inwards. Another parallel springs to mind: that of the after-effect on American society of the war in Vietnam. And with that the thought: might the 'Afghanistan syndrome' prove as short-lived as the 'Vietnam syndrome'? It all depends on whether *perestroika* succeeds. An internal revival will confirm the wise realism of Gorbachev's foreign policy. Disappointing results will open up opportunities for those who cannot bear too much reality. Revenge may then be taken on those who 'betrayed internationalist ideals and stabbed the heroes of the Afghan war in the back'.
Stephen Shenfield