BOOKS:

PEACE FOR FORGOTTEN AFGHANISTAN?
A Review by M. Hassan Kakar*


This new book is a welcome addition to the varied and valuable collection of Dr. Barnett Rubin's writings on Afghanistan. His most comprehensive work is The Fragmentation of Afghanistan, which was published earlier in 1995 [See CAM No.2, 1995 for a review by Edmund McWilliams. ed.]. The present book is devoted to efforts at resolving the seemingly unending crisis of political leadership that has plagued Afghanistan ever since the Soviet Union's 1979 invasion. From that time onward Afghanistan has had no government to rule over it.

In The Search for Peace Dr. Rubin has addressed the above theme with the apparent hope of activating the powers interested in Afghan affairs to persuade the Afghan political factions to institute a government and end the misery of their people. It is therefore an all the more welcome addition because it is the work of a scholar who has come to know the Afghans and their problems through extensive readings, writings, and interviews conducted in the course of numerous trips to Afghanistan and the region. All this has enabled him to offer new insights that should be especially useful to those whose mission it is or will be to bring peace to Afghanistan. The depth of the author's knowledge of present day Afghanistan has empowered him to dedicate the whole of the book to a single but most important theme, the search for peace. I know of no other book with such a theme and significance. It is also lucid and pleasant reading despite its controversial and complex nature.

Some points of the book, however, are open to criticism. As an example, to Dr. Rubin the Afghan state is a "buffer state" down to the time of "the breakdown of cooperation between hegemonic powers during the endgame of the Cold War." (p.142) This is a central theme of the book. Further, in his view the buffer state was "a system of states" or "a system that great powers [Russia and Britain] imposed on a rugged and unruly territory called Afghanistan." (p.15) It was then logical to hold, as Dr. Rubin does, that the breakdown of this cooperation "...turned that buffer state into an arena of regional conflict." (p. 142)

Dr. Rubin's statements imply that the Afghans had never organized a state for themselves. But facts disprove such a view. For example, before the British made Afghanistan a buffer state it had, as a result of the reforms of Ameer Sher 'Ali Khan, become a well-organized state, a state that was on the road to becoming a modern nation-state (a development which I have described in my new work, A Political History and the External Relations of Afghanistan in the Reign of Ameer 'Abd al-Rahman Khan.). In this reformed state even the budget was in surplus without the help of foreign subsidy. The British destroyed this state when they invaded Afghanistan in 1878. After Afghanistan became fully independent in 1918 the "antagonistic powers" as well as others established diplomatic, commercial and cultural relations with Afghanistan and opened missions in its capital and some of its provincial cities.

Dr. Rubin is also incorrect in saying that the imperial powers "created the buffer state of Afghanistan." (p.142) True, they made Afghanistan a buffer, but they had nothing to do with organizing a state for it as his statement implies. If by state is meant "A sovereign political community organized under a distinct government recognized and conform to by the people as supreme, and having jurisdiction over a given territory" it was the Afghans and nobody else who created it. Britain controlled the country's external relations, but she had nothing to do with its organization. She gave the Ameer 'Abd al-Rahman Khan pecuniary grants and weapons to strengthen it, but he never let her influence him in organizing it. Afghanistan was a buffer state in the sense that it was located between empires; Russia acknowledged it to be beyond

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her sphere of influence, and Britain monopolized its external relations without being able to manage its internal affairs.

Dr. Rubin describes the pressures that worked against the setting up of political leadership in the opposition camp in Pakistan during the recent resistance period after the Soviet client state in Kabul had become only a Parchami city state. He writes that "...no one in the United States or Pakistan believed that the opposition would drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan and set up a new government." (p.34) Actually, President Zia al-Haq of Pakistan worked for "...an Islamic state, part of a pan-Islamic revival" in post-Soviet Afghanistan.\(^1\) Likewise, General Akhtar 'Abd al-Rahman, director of the Pakistani intelligence service worked to achieve a "strategic realignment" in which Afghanistan and Pakistan would be a part of an anti-Indian, pan-Islamic regional bloc dominated by fundamentalist parties.\(^2\) Both, in particular the latter, advocated a military, not political, solution, arguing that "...if political activities were initiated before the capture of Kabul it would so weaken the Jihad that a military victory might prove unattainable."(p.34) But Dr. Rubin is correct in stating that General Zia's regime took advantage of the situation "...to create a system of aid that protected [the] Pakistani security interests."(p.35) Toward that end it also weakened Afghan nationalism by favoring the radical Islamist groups.(p.35) Strangely, the United States went along with that program because she wanted only "...to impose military and political costs on the USSR, not to create a political alternative to the Kabul regime."(p.35) The United States was, as Dr. Rubin points out, "...indifferent about which groups might have more popular support, be more amenable to a political settlement, or be more likely to form a stable government."(p.35) The Afghan Islamic groups, as Pir Sayed Ahmad Gailani, the leader of the National Islamic Front, has recently stated also went along with the program of Pakistan, arguing that "From the beginning...we did not think much about how the administration...would be when the communist regime fell, because the groups had so much weapons and money that they thought they would impose themselves on the people."\(^3\) That was why at the Geneva talks, which Dr. Rubin has explained so well, the question of self-determination was not addressed, even though President Najibullah had somewhat liberalized his administration in Kabul and proposed to negotiate a political settlement with the Islamic groups as well as with Mohammad Zahir Shah, the former king of Afghanistan. All that the United Nations-sponsored Geneva Accords accomplished was to allow the Red Army "a dignified retreat" without making the Soviet Union accountable for her aggression, and to tacitly accept the principle of "positive symmetry" through which both sides of the equation were to receive weapons as before. The United Nations special envoy, Diego Cordovez, was promised cooperation only in his personal and not his official capacity for his efforts to pave the way for a broad-based government in Afghanistan. That was why, even though the two major powers as well as the United Nations now agreed to cooperate in supporting an inter-Afghan dialogue, nothing came of subsequent efforts in the matter. Pakistan also failed to persuade the Islamic groups to form a client government despite still being the major conduit of weapons for them. The situation was analogous to that when Britain during her second invasion of Afghanistan tried several schemes to set up a government for the Afghans, but none worked. This was because, as now, all segments of the Afghans were not at least consulted on the question of their self-determination. Consequently, as the British had earlier failed to impose a system of political leadership on the Afghans so did the powers engaged in the present crisis following the Geneva Accords of 1988, especially after President Zia and General Akhtar died in a plane crash in August of the same year. Hence the continuation of the crisis.

Dr. Rubin makes only a passing reference to the Peshawar Accords of 1992, and makes no mention of the Coalition of the North, both of which raised the ethnic factor to the forefront of politics after President Zia's Islamist agenda proved unworkable. He has even mistaken the date of the Accords, which was April 24, 1992, not April 26 as he has noted it. (p.33) The framers of the Accords, who outnumbered their Afghan counterparts, "devised a government of minorities to

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\(^2\) Ibid. p.162.  
make it amenable to the interests of its eastern neighbor" 1 while the Coalition of the North that had been set up by leaders of the minority ethnic groups "had been made under the ethnic impulse, as none among those who devised it spoke Pashto."2 The point is that these schemes more than any others brought about realignments on ethnic lines; frustrated the half-hearted efforts of the United Nations' special envoy, Beno Sevan, to work out a negotiated settlement; made the Islamic and the militia groups still more dependent on the regional powers; made ineffective the government that the Peshawar Accords had devised; and led to the prolongation of the war and the destruction of Kabul. It is not a coincidence that even Russia has now become active once again by providing weapons, technicians, and unsupported banknotes to the illegitimate, beleaguered Kabul regime. If national solidarity at the grass-roots level had not been a reality Afghanistan would probably have become another Bosnia.

In the complicated Afghan situation it is difficult to offer a prescription for a settlement as is clear from the failure of the mission of Mahmud Mestiri, the third special envoy of the United Nations. Dr. Rubin does not seem discouraged, however, as he has advanced his view on the subject. Even though he is skeptical of the loya jirga system by calling it the "nationalist myth", he states that "there are times to mobilize myths rather than debunk them." (p.144) He quite rightly suggests that "Left to themselves, these shuras [existing councils] might find a way to summon a national assembly, whether called a Loya Jirga or a shura, to resolve the problems of the country." For that to happen he also suggests that "disarming contending militias, or at least depriving them of heavy weapons, must precede national elections or power sharing." To do so is, of course, a difficult job because as Dr. Rubin points out the countries around Afghanistan are themselves "to different degrees insecure states, warily eyeing each other. Any power shift in Afghanistan disquiets some and pleases others." (p.145) The Afghan groups, each of which is looked on as a proxy or an ally of one or the other of them, can not reassure them. Only the United States and other countries can do so through the United Nations by persuading the Afghan groups to set up a truly non-aligned and independent government in their country. But the United States and others have so far shown no such determination as they have shown in Cambodia and Bosnia, despite the fact that they have a moral responsibility for having sacrificed about one and a half million Afghans to the role of helping break up the "evil empire." If they really want to resolve the Afghan problem and bring peace and stability to Afghanistan and the region they should do what Dr. Rubin has suggested: "Intelligence and political action must combine to shut down the sources of money and fuel for the combatants." (p.145)

**DIVERSE VIEWS OF CENTRAL ASIA**

by Charles Undeland

_Central Asia: Conflict, Resolution, and Change_, Roald Z. Sagdeev and Susan Eisenhower, eds. 341 pp. 1995. CPSS Press, Chevy Chase, MD [301-652-8181 or e-mail cpss@intr.net].

Drs. Sagdeev and Eisenhower of the Center for Post-Soviet Studies have produced a sizable, intriguing collection of essays on issues concerning Central Asia's political developments and prospects written by Russian, Western, and indigenous scholars. The volume is part of a multi-year project undertaken by the Center to assess current and potential conflicts in the region. The book does not seek to provide a comprehensive overview and conclusions on the real and potential conflicts in Central Asia. Rather, it presents a kaleidoscope of articles greatly varying in style, requirements of previous knowledge on the part of the reader, authors' biases, and subject matter. The differences in the last are particularly noticeable, ranging from tactical military lessons culled by a senior Soviet/Russian army officer from the Afghan War to the failings of U.S. assistance with regard to conflicts in the region. The articles are divided into three sections -- Russia's foreign policy; developments in Central Asia; and Central Asia's relations with the outside world -- but these headings appear to be a post-factum effort to delineate a structure for the disparate submissions that were gathered.

The editors state at the outset that they did not aim to find a consensus, hoping that the divergent views presented would "illuminate the true complexities of the

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2Ibid. p.274.