CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN
Studies in asymmetric warfare

Martin Evans

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Conflict in Afghanistan

Conflict in Afghanistan provides a timely discussion of the concept of asymmetric warfare which has become one of the main issues of the day in the wake of the attacks of 9/11 and the ensuing invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Broadly speaking this describes a means of fighting where comparatively weak belligerents have been able to exploit successfully the vulnerabilities of their more powerful and sophisticated opponents. Two recent examples have been the Vietnam and the Soviet–Afghan wars, but the historical roots of the concept lie deeper, particularly in Afghanistan.

Conflict in Afghanistan, laying emphasis on contemporary documents and drawing on material from Soviet archives, centres on wars conducted in Afghanistan which have been of the asymmetric variety.

Subjects examined include:

• five wars conducted in Afghanistan by an external invader over the past two centuries;
• the decisions and actions of politicians and the military involved in the wars in question;
• the successes and failures of diplomatic endeavours during the wars.

This book is essential reading for those who have research interests in Asian studies, military studies and current affairs.

Martin Ewans is a retired diplomat with considerable experience of South Asia, including three years as Head of Chancery in Kabul. He is author of Afghanistan: A New History and Afghanistan: A Short History of its People and Politics.
Conflict in Afghanistan

Studies in asymmetric warfare

Martin Ewans

LONDON AND NEW YORK
The guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win.

Henry Kissinger

Afghanistan may evoke the military past, but its importance is as a preview of the battleground of the future.

Robert Kaplan
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Introduction

In the wake of the attacks of 11 September 2001, as well as during the ensuing invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, much has been heard of the concept of ‘asymmetric warfare’. Broadly speaking, this purports to describe a means of fighting through which a weaker power can offset or neutralise the strengths of a more powerful opponent by applying what strengths it has to its opponent’s weaknesses. The concept is as old as history and could, for example, be used to typify the encounter between David and Goliath. It fits set battles between trained and organised armies, as, for example, the Battle of Agincourt of 1415, where a stronger force including armoured horsemen was defeated by a weaker force using the armour-piercing longbow. More frequently, however, it is used to describe situations in which formal state power is confronted by non-state or guerrilla activity. In 9 AD, three Roman legions commanded by Publius Quinctilius Varus were destroyed in the Teutoburger Wald by German tribesmen, having been lured onto terrain in which they were unable to deploy the tactical formations which would have rendered their superiority irresistible. Among the most spectacular of more recent examples were the Boer and Vietnam Wars, where the use of asymmetric tactics against regular forces was supplemented by political and public relations activity. The ability to erode the stronger power’s will to fight by adducing a moral dimension to the conflict is a valuable asset in an asymmetric context. For both parties, to ‘win hearts and minds’ is a significant step towards success.

Since the beginnings of nation-state formation in the seventeenth century, asymmetric warfare has been the exception rather than the rule, except possibly in colonial environments. As states developed and became embroiled in warfare, so they made greater use of regular armies. These were equipped with progressively more sophisticated weaponry, and became increasingly permanent and professional. Mechanisation, which began during the First World War, became the principal characteristic of inter-state ‘conventional’ warfare from the Second World War onwards. This meant that warfare became both more expensive and more destructive, until, with the development of nuclear weapons, the scale of destruction and expense became self-defeating. In a nuclear war, there would be no winners.

In recent years, with major inter-state warfare largely stalemated, the main focus has been on asymmetric warfare. While ‘conventional’ warfare has not been precluded – Iraq/Iran, India/Pakistan, Britain/Argentina, Iraq/Kuwait – it has generally been either short-lived or has been kept within strictly local limits, or both. The threat currently facing the ‘elite’ countries, mainly of Europe and North America, as well as the centres of superior power in the Third World, does not now arise from open warfare between nations. In its place is a threat from non-state organisations, some based in known localities, as for example Chechnya and Kashmir, others, notably al-Qaida, with no readily accessible focus of command or activity. Their ability seriously to challenge major state power is doubtful, but their potential to inflict material damage and loss of life is undeniable, the more so if they should gain access to weapons of mass destruction.
or can find means to disrupt the extensive and intricate infrastructure on which modern societies depend. A discussion of the nature of asymmetric warfare and the applicability to current circumstances of the lessons to be learnt from its past employment, is thus one of considerable contemporary interest, if not urgency.

There are other aspects, both political and military, which need to be part of such a discussion. One is the nature of decision-making, or decision avoidance, at the governmental level. Why, asked Barbara Tuchman, instancing the Trojan War, the War of American Independence and the Vietnam imbroglio, do governments act in so stupidly counter-productive ways? Why do big powers do so badly in small wars? The frequent inability of governments to deal sensibly and appropriately with threats emanating from lesser power centres bears closely on a study of asymmetric warfare.

A similar question arises at the military level. Incompetence is a phenomenon that is common to all ages and in every type of military operation. That this should be so, self-evidently, issues of life and death are involved, is not easy to comprehend. Incompetence is found in such basic areas as command, manoeuvre, logistics and communications, while the lack of good intelligence – or even a realisation of its importance – tends to be a prominent characteristic. But incompetence can also stem from overconfidence and undue contempt for an opponent or from a lack of sober appreciation of his intentions and capabilities. The temptation to belittle an opponent increases in proportion to apparent disparities in relative strengths and the extent to which he can be dismissed as ‘savage’ or ‘primitive’. This too has been a feature of asymmetric warfare in an imperial context, and in Afghanistan led to such disasters as Khurnd Kabul and Maiwand.

The role of diplomacy in dealing with threatening asymmetric situations is also relevant. There are, of course, situations in which issues involving idealism, fanaticism or straight self-preservation put any form of accommodation beyond the bounds of possibility. All too often, however, opportunities for peaceful settlements have been ignored or mishandled. Again, given the extreme sanction which war represents, this is a failing that is often inexplicable.

Afghanistan features here as the focus of investigation for several reasons. Over many centuries, it has been the key to the stability of a region of geo-political importance lying between the Persian Gulf and the Indian subcontinent, and between the Kazakh steppe and the Indian Ocean. For more than a century and a half, it has been the arena for a series of conflicts between imperial powers on the one hand and state and non-state power structures on the other. Most recently, it has been at the hub of confrontations which have borne immediately on current international concerns. The nineteenth-century struggle between Britain and Russia for presence and influence in Afghanistan had implications for the peace of Europe and at one stage brought the two empires to the brink of war. The seeds of the collapse of the Soviet Union were sown during its ten-year occupation of Afghanistan, where it displayed virtually all the errors and shortcomings in waging asymmetric warfare that have been alluded to above. Conversely, the Soviet Union’s inability to sustain its occupation was due to a competence in asymmetric warfare on the part of the Afghans which belied all prognostications. They consistently showed extraordinary resilience and refusal to accept defeat, compensating for technological or organisational inferiority through sheer persistence and will power, together with a remarkable readiness to accept casualties.
When it began, the Afghans’ struggle with the Soviet Union was, in asymmetric terms, typical enough, in that what was at stake for the weaker power was fundamental, whereas for the stronger, the issues appeared to be more marginal. For the Afghans, it was a question of their independence and even survival. For the Soviet Union, the issues were varied, but were, even in sum, seen as not nearly so crucial, even if they appeared to the Soviet leadership to be important enough to risk the appreciable downside in terms of international relationships and repute to which the invasion of Afghanistan gave rise. What was unusual – and of particular interest – is that this asymmetric conflict eventually developed to a point where it had very serious consequences for both parties, the stronger as well as the weaker, as well as a fall-out that came to affect the international community generally. This led to a situation in which a further – and still continuing – asymmetric conflict has developed, this time involving the United States and the international community more widely.

This study will, therefore, deal with each of the five conflicts in which Afghanistan has been embroiled during this time span, namely the First, Second and Third Anglo-Afghan Wars, the Soviet invasion and the most recent American-led operations.

Much has been written over the years, both about these conflicts and, more generally, about Afghanistan and its place on the international scene. All too often, however, the original records and documents have been either unavailable or have been ignored, or have been overlaid with theory or polemic. Thus, Sir John Kaye’s comprehensive history of the First Anglo-Afghan War, although based on substantial access to both public and private documents, was composed as an unrelenting condemnation of the undertaking and conduct of that war. For much of the nineteenth century, the polemic escalated as the ‘designs of Russia in the East’ were intensively debated, as indeed they were at the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Relatively recently, a whole range of Soviet records has become available, including KGB documentation, diplomatic correspondence and the records of Politburo and other meetings, with the result that what were until recently matters of conjecture are now in the public domain. In laying emphasis on the original documentation, the author is mindful of R. G. Collingwood’s dictum that ‘all history is the history of thought’. If, as Collingwood also maintained, the past is encapsulated in the present and the study of history does indeed stand ‘in the closest possible relation to practical life’, the purpose of this book will, hopefully, have been achieved.
Part I
Setting the scene
Afghanistan and the Afghans

Afghanistan’s defining characteristics are its barrenness and its poverty, both now exacerbated by a quarter of a century of warfare and civil strife. It is a land-locked country, bounded by Pakistan to the east and south, by Iran to the west, and by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the north. In the far north-east, in the high Pamirs, the Wakhan Corridor leads to a short frontier with China. An extensive mountain range, the Hindu Kush, runs from the north-east to the south-west of the country, dividing the plains of Afghan Turkestan from the regions to the south. Several of its peaks are among the highest in the world. A number of passes cross the range, allowing for the extension to India of the traditional ‘Silk Route’ between China and the Mediterranean. All of them were closed during the winter months until an all-season tunnel was driven through the Salang Pass in the 1960s. In general, Afghanistan’s communications are poor and have been greatly disrupted during the recent conflicts, although a much damaged ring road connects Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, Kandahar and Herat, with extensions leading to Pakistan, Iran and Uzbekistan.

Afghanistan is a starkly dramatic, even beautiful country, but much of it is arid. Most of the forests have disappeared. To the south, there are two extensive deserts, the Dasht-i-Margo, ‘Desert of Death’, and the Registan. Throughout the country, the winters are harsh and the summers hot and dry. From time to time, when the winter snowfall has been light, drought and famine have ensued. Only 12 per cent of the land is cultivable, and of that, only about half is under cultivation at any given time, due to shortage of water. Much irrigated land was destroyed many centuries ago, through the depredations of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane the Great, and more has been lost in recent years. Yet, some 80 per cent of the population derive their living from the land. Much of the agriculture is subsistence-oriented and farming methods are primitive. Most land holdings are small and many are cultivated by sharecroppers. There are perhaps some half million landless farm labourers. Due to the poverty of the land, many Afghans have led a nomadic, or semi-nomadic, existence, moving between the hills and the plains according to the season. Many others have lived an isolated existence in remote valleys, sometimes with little contact with the
Map 1.1 Central and Southwest Asia
Map 1.2 Afghanistan: relief and main centres


Map 1.3 Afghanistan: political and communications

outside world. They and others often rely on small-scale irrigation, running water channels down the valley sides or digging underground channels from the water table to their lands, sometimes over considerable distances. It is little wonder that many Afghan farmers have turned to opium production as a source of income. Some 3,600 metric tons were produced in 2003, supplying some 80–90 per cent of the heroin consumed in Europe. Trading and smuggling have also long been significant elements in the Afghan economy, particularly along the eastern border.

Afghanistan is a country of unusual ethnic diversity. Migrations and invasions over the millennia have introduced a variety of peoples, most of whom have retained, despite interbreeding, their distinct ethnic characteristics. Some 20 or so main ethnic groups coexist with another 30 or so minor ones, speaking some 30 languages in all. Few groups are homogeneous and many overlap. The country’s population statistics are notoriously unreliable, but of perhaps a total of 27–29 million, not far short of half are Pushtoons, who live mainly in the south and east of the country. They comprise two large tribal confederations, the Durrans, centred on the Kandahar–Herat region, and the Ghilzai, who live mostly in the region around Paktia and Nangarhar, together with a number of what the British used to call the ‘hill tribes’, settled to the east of the country. Between 1747 and 1978, when the Communist coup took place, central power rested with the Durrans, with only a short Tajik interregnum in 1929. Following the establishment of the eastern frontier, the so-called Durand Line, in the late nineteenth century, many of the eastern Pushtoons are resident in what is now Pakistan. The great majority of the Pushtoons are Sunni Muslims, but their society is ordered not just by their practice of Islam, but also by a code of honour known as Pushtoonwali. Its main principles are badal (revenge), malmastia (hospitality) and its extension nanawati (asylum). While it encourages blood feuds and other practices and sanctions that are out of keeping with Islam, it has served well enough the needs of the tribal society in which it has developed.

The basic unit of Pushtoon society is the qawm, a flexible term defining a community which may be based on the extended family, village or larger entity, or possibly a caste, profession or religious group. The qawm provides protection and security for the family and individual and, in turn, attracts support and cooperation. This is where the primary allegiance lies, and a sense of belonging to a wider unit becomes progressively weaker as it becomes more extensive and diffuse. Governance within the qawm blends authority with democracy. Partly it is exercised through leaders, khans, who owe their position sometimes to an accretion of wealth, and sometimes as men of standing and influence. At the same time, power is also exercised through the jirga, an assembly of all the adult men. Rivalries and feud sare endemic within Pushtoon society, exacerbated by the responsibility to take revenge (badal). This has helped to give them their reputation for turbulence, although they have generally managed to combine, even if only briefly, in face of outside threats. An important key to Afghan history is that the Afghan state has always been seen by the Pushtoons as something peripheral or external to their own society. From time to time the tensions between the two have escalated into revolt and repression, mostly when the state has tried to impose measures of reform or ‘modernity’ on traditional society. During the past century in particular, the Afghan state has emerged not as a natural evolution of traditional society, but as an urban-based institution essentially opposed to it, adopting values and institutions, mainly imported from the West, which have been seen as alien and disruptive.
Afghanistan’s other ethnic groups are less influential in the national scheme of things, although the Tajiks, at about 25 per cent of the population, have played a significant role as administrators. With little or no tribal memory, they have mostly been excluded from political power by the Pushtoons, as have the Turkic ethnic groups, the Turkmen and Uzbeks, who live in northern Afghanistan and are of the same ethnic stocks as many of the inhabitants of the Central Asian Republics to their north. Another ethnic group, the Hazaras, possibly a million or so strong, are mostly Shi as and have therefore suffered considerable discrimination. It is clear from their features that they are of Mongol descent, and they largely inhabit the remote centre of the country. Other ethnic groups include the Aimaq and Farsiwan to the west of the country, the Baluchs and Brahui to the south and west, and the Nuristani to the east. The latter, who were forcibly converted to Islam in the late nineteenth century, conducted a ferocious resistance against the Soviets in the 1980s.

Islam reached what is now Afghanistan in the middle of the seventh century, although it was some 300 years before it covered the whole country. It is virtually universal among the Afghans, but is divided along sectarian lines. Some four-fifths of the population are Sunni Muslims, while the remaining fifth are Shi as. During the resistance to the Soviet invasion, the Shi as looked mainly to Iran for support, and the Sunnis to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, China and the West. Both, however, defined their opposition, not only to the Soviets but also to the British before them, in Islamic terms. The wars in which they became engaged were seen as being fought between believers and infidels, and a call to arms to defend the Muslim faith evoked a response from Afghans of every background.

According to the tenets of Islam, each believer has a personal relationship with God, and no intermediary is needed. However, for the great majority of Afghans, the focal point of traditional Islam lies in the local or village mosque, served by a mullah, who often acts as a teacher, healer and arbiter in disputes in addition to his religious duties. Often ill-educated, in both religious and non-religious terms, he is usually supported by the community, or perhaps by a patron. He is normally poor, and often farms or practises a craft in order to supplement his earnings from his religious and social duties. Distinct from the mullahs are the ulama or mawlawis, scholars who have acquired religious learning, and are particularly versed in the shari a, religious law. With the development of the state during the twentieth century, the ulama gradually lost their legal responsibilities, while their influence also declined as many of them were integrated into the state apparatus. Outside the cities and big towns, however, while they have never become politically organised, they have retained influence, particularly in taking the lead in opposing invaders or proponents of an infidel doctrine. During the Soviet occupation, many of them supported resistance movements with which they perceived themselves to be compatible, and they subsequently became the backbone of the Taliban movement which emerged in the mid-1990s, as a result of their position in, and influence over the madrassas, the religious schools that had been developed in Pakistan as well as in Afghanistan itself. An almost entirely Pushtoon phenomenon, the Taliban’s aim was to introduce a ‘pure’ form of Islam, with strict observance of the shari a, the subordination of women and a puritanical attitude towards music and other pastimes.

Another movement active in Afghan religious life has been the Sufi brotherhoods. These abjure the formalistic aspects of Islamic practice and focus instead on the personal and mystical life under the guidance of a spiritual leader, a pir, who is often venerated as
a ‘saint’. Two of the Sufi orders that have been particularly strong in Afghanistan have been the qadiriyya and the naqshbandiyya. The former, which was founded in Baghdad in the sixth century, has been headed in Afghanistan by Sayyad Ahmed Gailani, the leader of one of the resistance movements, the Mahaz-i Milli (National Front). The naqshbandiyya, who were founded in Bokhara in the fourteenth century, have been mostly associated in Afghanistan with the Mujadidi family, who have long been prominent in Afghan political life. Under practically the only survivor of the family, Sibghatullah Mujadidi, they have formed the nucleus of another resistance organisation, the Jabha-i Nejat-i Milli (National Liberation Front).

Distinct from what might be termed the traditional forms of Afghan religious culture has been the Islamist movement. The Islamist leaders have come principally from the government schools and colleges, which were established in relatively recent years, and, in particular, from the Faculty of Islamic Law at Kabul University. Several were educated at Al Azhar University in Egypt and were influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood. The movement grew in response to the belief that Afghanistan’s need was for a political ideology that was relevant to the modern world and which could achieve for Muslim society what Western ideologies had achieved in terms of national development for the countries of the West. It thus has some common ground with the ‘Young Turk’ movement which flourished briefly in Afghanistan in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, although its inspiration has been Egyptian rather than indigenous. From the first, it engaged in violent confrontations with the Marxist and Maoist groups in Kabul University, but was equally opposed to the political establishment, as well as to manifestations of both Western and Soviet influence in the country. Its leaders were either killed or forced into exile following an abortive uprising against the Daud regime in the mid-1970s, and two of the organisations that it established in Pakistan became, following the Soviet invasion and a flood of refugees into that country, leading players in the resistance. Of the two, the Jamiat-i Islami (Islamic Association) under Burhanuddin Rabbani has drawn its following mainly from the Tajik ethnic group, while Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-i Islami (Islamic Party) is largely Pushtoon in complexion. It is significant that despite the common ideology, the two organisations have a history of bitter confrontation, an indication that in Afghanistan, personal and ethnic antagonisms take precedence over a common religious and ideological stance. As the Afghan Islamists have never managed to put their political principles into practice, it is unclear what form of political structure an Afghan Islamism would succeed in creating: probably it would have much in common with the theocratic regime in Iran. What is, however, clear is that it is essentially a movement of an intellectual minority, and that it has little in common with the traditional Islam of the Afghan people at large.

Islam is thus a pervasive influence throughout Afghan society and permeates every aspect of personal and public life. Allied to a strong sense of pride and independence, it has served to unify a singularly diverse and divided nation in the face of common enemies, whether internal or external. What it has not done, however, is to bring the
country together within the confines of a nationwide, self-sustaining political system. Instead, power has become concentrated in the hands of the new *khans*, a coterie of political and military leaders who have acquired wealth and power in the course of the upheavals of the past quarter-century. Afghanistan is bedevilled by factionalism and, consequently, remains a continuing threat to regional and international stability and security.
Part II
The First Anglo-Afghan War
There was only a very short period when Afghanistan was, in itself, seen as a threat to the security of British India. This was towards the end of the eighteenth century, when, under Lord Mornington (later Marquess Wellesley) as Governor-General, the East India Company was engaged in extending its frontiers towards the north-west of the subcontinent. Previously, although India had undergone repeated Afghan invasions, they had been of little concern to the Company’s distant Presidencies of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. In 1798, however, Wellesley concluded that he had to take account of the threat which the then Afghan ruler, Zaman Shah, might present to British power, now expanding towards the Sutlej. As quickly as it had arisen, however, the threat subsided, as Zaman Shah was blinded and deposed, and Afghanistan became embroiled in internal strife.

The perceived threat then changed, first as Napoleon descended on Egypt. This was seen in London as an initial step towards an invasion of India, possibly by sea, but also possibly by land through the Afghan kingdom. Also to be feared, as it appeared in London and Calcutta, was the threat of a combined Franco-Russian invasion, although Napoleon’s attempts in 1800 to forge an offensive alliance with Tsar Paul I came to nothing, and the latter’s decision to mount an invasion alone ended in disaster. His troops avoided annihilation in the winter of 1800–1 only when he was assassinated and they were hastily recalled by his successor. Napoleon’s intrigues nevertheless continued. In 1807 he concluded a treaty with the Persian Shah which provided for support against Russia, now hostile to both countries, in return for undertakings to make troops and facilities available for a joint invasion of India. However, the relationship collapsed almost immediately, when Napoleon allied himself with Tsar Alexander I through the Treaty of Tilsit, and the possibility of a joint Franco-Russian invasion of India again came into prominence. Britain responded by concluding treaties with all the intervening rulers, the Persian Shah, Fath Ali Shah, the Emir of Afghanistan, Shah Shuja, the Maharajah of the Punjab, Ranjit Singh, and the Emirs of Sind. The threat vanished, however, when Napoleon turned his attention elsewhere and became tied down in the Spanish peninsula. British apprehensions subsided and tensions relaxed as Napoleon was finally defeated and the Russians, widely admired for their resistance to him, were welcomed as comrades in arms.

An undercurrent of anti-Russian feeling and nervousness about her designs in Central Asia and towards India nevertheless rumbled on into the 1820s and 1830s. Towards the end of the 1920s they acquired fresh focus, as a result of Russian pressures on Persia, which erupted into war in 1826. Following the Russian capture of Erivan and Tabriz, the Persians were forced to sue for peace, losing territory in the Caucasus and rights to
navigation on the Caspian Sea. Britain was also humiliated, since she found it impracticable to respond to Persian requests for assistance, based on her earlier treaties with that country. Persia was now little more than a Russian protectorate, and Britain was compelled to look to Afghanistan, Sind and the Punjab as the barriers to Russian encroachment eastwards.

In the atmosphere created by these renewed Russian pressures on Persia, British fears of a Russian invasion of India intensified, fuelled in 1829 by a book On the Practicability of an Invasion of British India, written by one Lt. Col. George de Lacy Evans. Evans had no doubt at all that the Russians had India in their sights, and he developed the thesis that they could mount an invasion in the course of two campaigns, up the River Oxus and over the Hindu Kush to Kabul and the Khyber Pass. The book attracted considerable interest and was taken very seriously in political circles. The Duke of Wellington, as Prime Minister, and Lord Ellenborough, the President of the Board of Control of the East India Company, discussed it and were impressed. Early in 1830, Ellenborough went on to initiate what was to be a chain of events leading to the First Anglo-Afghan War, by sending a dispatch to Lord Bentinck, the Governor-General, in which he instructed him, with suitable caveats, to discover what the Russians might be up to in Central Asia, and to take counter-measures. According to Ellenborough:

we can neither feel justified in reposing upon the good faith and moderation of Russia, nor in permitting the apprehensions her policy and her power are calculated to excite to be altogether done away by reflection upon the difficulties she would have to encounter in the attempt to approach the Indus … We dread not so much actual invasion by Russia as the moral effect which would be produced amongst our own subjects in India and amongst the Princes with whom we are allied by the continued apprehension of that event – we look with dismay on the financial embarrassments in which we would be involved by the necessity of constant Military preparation, not only to meet a European army in the field, but to preserve tranquillity in our own Provinces and in our Tributary States … This [would] not only occasion so large an expenditure on our part as would be ruinous to our finances in India, but operate in a material degree as a check on the free course of our Policy in Europe.

There has been, both at the time and over the years, considerable debate about the realism of Ellenborough’s thesis. It could, for example, be argued that the threat of a direct invasion was more serious than he thought, at least in terms of geography. When the British came to invade Afghanistan in 1838–9, they succeeded in covering some 1,300 miles within no more than eight months, despite an appalling mismanagement of logistics and two months spent in Kandahar to recover from the worst leg of the march. The determining factor was that it was possible to campaign continuously over two seasons, the cold weather in India and the summer in Afghanistan. Conversely, it would have been no more difficult for a Russian army, similarly adjusting its march to the seasons, to cross the Caspian to Astrabad, and proceed via Meshed and Herat to Kandahar, and thence to India, either through the Bolan Pass or through Kabul and the Khyber. The key to the
route would be Herat and its fertile countryside. Marching through it would bypass the daunting barrier of the Hindu Kush, and an army would be able to find there all it needed for its maintenance and resupply. It was for these reasons that this city was a major focus of British concern: speaking at a later date, Sir John Hobhouse, the then President of the Board of Control, declared in the House of Commons that:

that city and its immediate dependencies are the most important of all the cities and States of central Asia, and the master of Herat is in a position, both with reference to Persia and to the Afghan states, to hold the balance, if it has any considerable power, between the parties who might contend for empire much further and with much greater proximity to India.³

Standing in a fertile oasis, rich in the materials for military supplies, it ‘was the starting point for routes to Kabul on the one hand and to Kandahar on the other, from both of which run natural lines of invasion into India’. Other factors were more problematic. One was whether a Russian invasion would have been tolerated by the Afghans, or whether it too would have met the bitter resistance that was to be offered to the British. Another was the capacity of the Russians to project a military threat so far afield. Lord Heytesbury, Her Majesty’s Ambassador to St Petersburg at the time, certainly thought not. ‘Whatever wild projects may be germinating in the heads of the Russians generally,’ he wrote,

the Emperor and his government have, I am convinced, too thorough a consciousness of the real weakness of the country, to entertain for an instant a serious thought of even embarking on so gigantic an enterprise, as the marching of an army to India. Whether the thing be possible under any circumstances, with all the Attirail of modern warfare, is a question upon which military men are by no means agreed; but even admitting its possibility (which is a bold admission) Russia is far too far behindhand in civilisation, as well as in everything, which constitutes real military greatness, to allow the entertainment of such a project for many, many years to come.⁴

After expatiating on the immense expense and casualties incurred by Russia in a recent war in the Balkans, Heytesbury continued: If such has been the expenditure of a war carried on at her very door, what sort of calculation must be made by Russia of the possible wear and tear of an army, acting upon a line of no less extent than from the Caspian to the Indus, and with the war only to begin at that point? Ellenborough’s comment on this dispatch, however, was that Heytesbury seemed to be ‘a mere Russian’: he was thought to be too much of an admirer of the Tsar, and this was one reason for the later cancellation of his appointment as Governor-General of India.

Apart from the need to acquire more reliable information about the regions lying between Persia and Russia on the one hand, and the Indian frontier on the other, Ellenborough’s concern, true to the ethos of the time, was to explore the possibilities for commercial penetration of Central Asia, in the first instance by means of the Indus. In
Ellenborough’s book, the idea was not that trade should follow the flag, but rather that commerce, while in itself eminently desirable to all parties, would also bring with it influence, and with influence would come security and, ultimately, power. He therefore proposed an expedition up the Indus, to map its course and discover its potential as a trade artery to north-west India and beyond. As such an expedition would undoubtedly arouse antagonism among the Emirs of Sind, a bizarre cover story was arranged, the dispatch of six dray horses and a carriage as a gift to Ranjit Singh. A bright young army officer, Alexander Burnes, was selected for the task and, after he had survived a storm at the mouth of the river and the expected difficulties with the Emirs, he managed to survey the river and deliver the horses. His report, however, suggested that the shallow and shifting nature of the river might prevent it from acquiring the commercial significance for which Ellenborough had hoped. In 1832 Burnes then travelled with a small group of companions through Kabul to Balkh and Bokhara, and thence through Persia to Bushire and by sea back to India.\(^5\) He was sent to London to report and rapidly achieved notoriety as ‘Bokhara Burnes’. He was feted in London society, was received by the King, the Prime Minister and other notables, and presented with the Royal Geographical Society’s Gold Medal. The highlight of his travels was his meeting with the Afghan Amir, Dost Mohammed, by whom he was much impressed.

In the spring of 1835, a Whig government took office under Lord Melbourne, with Palmerston as Foreign Secretary. One of its first acts was to appoint as Governor-General George Eden, Lord Auckland, a close colleague who had previously held the posts of President of the Board of Trade and First Lord of the Admiralty. As the man who was held to be chiefly responsible for the ensuing debacle in Afghanistan, Auckland has had a bad press. In reality he was an experienced, if pedestrian, administrator who, if the peaceful conditions enjoyed by his predecessor, Lord Bentinck, had continued, might well have gone down in history as an effective – and possibly reforming – Governor-General. It was his bad luck to encounter a crisis on his frontier, while needled by a hawkish government in London and surrounded in India by a clutch of even more hawkish civil servants and incompetent military commanders. His dispatches and memoranda show that he could give sober consideration to policy, but he was not a good judge of men, nor did he have the local experience, breadth of vision or forcefulness of character to reach sound conclusions and impose his will on men and events.

In London, Palmerston was strongly anti-Russian in outlook, and Sir John McNeill, a diplomat of similar views, was appointed to Teheran. Immediately prior to his posting, McNeill had published a treatise *Progress and Present Position of Russia in the East*. This depicted Russia as a predatory and expansionist power, which had only to extend its influence to Herat to be within manageable reach of India and be able to spread unrest and disaffection among the subject peoples there. On arrival in Teheran, McNeill was struck forcibly by ‘the evidence I everywhere encountered of the increase of Russian influence … and the unaccountable decline of our own’.\(^6\) In 1834, the Persians had also started to lay siege to Herat, although they had, for internal reasons, called it off, at least for the time being. They were firmly believed to have designs to recover all the territory formerly under the control of the Safavid dynasty, including not only Herat, but also Kandahar and Kabul. Instructions were therefore sent to Auckland in June 1836 to
judge as to what steps it may be proper and desirable for you to take to watch more closely, than has hitherto been attempted, the progress of events in Afghanistan and to counteract the progress of Russian influence in a quarter, which, from its proximity to our Indian possessions, would not fail, if it were once established, to act injuriously on the system of our Indian alliances, and possibly to interfere with the tranquillity of our own territory.

The mode of dealing with this very important question, whether by dispatching a confidential Agent to Dost Mahomed of Cabul merely to watch the progress of events, or to enter into relations with this chief rather of a political or merely in the first instance of a commercial character we confide to your discretion, as well as the adoption of any other measure that may appear to be desirable in order to counteract Russian influence in that quarter, should you be satisfied from the information received from your own agents on the frontier, hereafter from Mr. McNeill on his arrival in Persia, that the time has arrived at which it could be right for you to interfere decidedly in the affairs of Afghanistan. Such an interference might doubtless be requisite, either to prevent the extension of Persian dominion in that quarter, or to raise a timely barrier against the impending encroachments of Russian influence.7

Nothing could have been clearer; and Auckland was able to report that, even before the dispatch had reached him, he had already taken action along the lines suggested. Alexander Burnes had been instructed once again to explore the commercial prospects on the Indus and then go on to Afghanistan, both to investigate the commercial potential there and to survey the ground generally. Setting out in November 1837, it took him the best part of a year to reach Kabul, by which time the whole situation had materially changed. As he put it: ‘I came to look after commerce, to superintend surveys and examine passes of mountains, and likewise certainly to see into affairs and judge what was to be done hereafter; but the hereafter has already arrived.’8

While he was en route, several things had happened. Chafing at the loss of Peshawar, Dost Mohammed had tried once more to retake it. A considerable battle had taken place, but, although the Afghans claimed victory and the Sikh general, Hari Singh, had been killed, Peshawar had not been retaken. In Persia, a new Shah, Mohammed Shah, apparently with the encouragement of the Russian Minister at his court, Count Simonich, was marching towards Herat, with the clear intention of laying siege to it. Also, Dost Mohammed in Kabul and his half-brothers in Kandahar had sent envoys both to the Shah and to the Russians. Now that Burnes would have, inevitably, to deal with political matters, fresh instructions were sent to him. He was to be given no political powers, but should merely transmit such propositions as were put to him by Dost Mohammed, while urging him to seek reconciliation with Ranjit Singh. On the British Government’s attitude, he was instructed that:

our first feeling must be that of regard for the honour and just wishes of our old and firm ally, Ranjit Singh; that if, however, he [ Dost Mohammed] looked for terms of peace adapted to a fair measure of his
position, such good offices in his favour with the Maharajah would be given to him; but that if he received with favour every emissary and every proposition, the avowed object of which was to foment disturbances even at the hazard of his own independence, it is impossible but that the friendly feelings of the British Government must be impaired.  

When, therefore, early in the negotiations, Dost Mohammed proposed that Peshawar should be made over to him in return for nominal tribute and the dispatch of a son to Lahore as a hostage, Burnes could only forward the proposal and await a reply. Given that Auckland was currently engaged in touring northern India en route to Simla, his reply was not sent until late January and not received until mid-February. Well before then, several more things had happened. Mohammed Shah had arrived before Herat and commenced the siege, and the general expectation was that the city would soon fall. He had also offered a treaty to the Sirdars of Kandahar, giving them Herat, when he had captured it. Realising the implications, Burnes, entirely on his own responsibility and without instructions, offered the Sirdars protection and a substantial sum of money, if they would reject the Shah’s initiative. He also sent one of his officers, Dr Leach, to Kandahar in a further effort to keep the Sirdars in line. Burnes was to be roundly censured by Auckland for taking this step, although he was later gracious enough to admit that Burnes had done the right thing. A third development, just before Christmas 1837, was the arrival in Kabul of a Russian emissary, a Captain Vitkevitch. A Lithuanian by birth, Vitkevitch had been embroiled in student politics and had been exiled to Orenburg. There, he had risen to become aide-de-camp to the Governor, and had conducted a mission to Bokhara before being chosen to go to Kabul. At the point when he arrived, Dost Mohammed was still hopeful of an agreement with Auckland and so refused to open dealings with him. He did not, however, turn him away, but kept him in seclusion in case the negotiations with Burnes went sour.  

In December, Burnes sent Auckland a lengthy letter making a reasoned case for a relationship with Dost Mohammed, who, he insisted, still much desired the British connection. His solution, if Peshawar was not immediately negotiable, was that it might be promised to Dost Mohammed after Ranjit Singh’s death. The view of Charles Masson, the British Agent at Kabul, was that the town might be passed back to Mohammed Khan, the Dost’s half-brother who had previously held it. The Dost might not like this, but would have no alternative but to accept it. Auckland, however, had made his mind up before Burnes’ letter arrived. Not only had Dost Mohammed’s offer not been passed on to Ranjit Singh, but Burnes was instructed to inform the Dost that he should forgo all claim to Peshawar and effect a reconciliation with the Maharajah. If he wished British good offices to continue, he must not, without British sanction, form any connection with any other power. In effect, this meant that since Dost Mohammed saw no need for good offices, having no fear that Ranjit Singh would dare invade Afghanistan or in any way harm him, all he was offered was the threat of British displeasure. According to Harlan, an American who was present in Kabul at the time, Dost Mohammed was mortified by Auckland’s reply.  

Further correspondence followed and at one point Dost Mohammed appeared to accept Auckland’s terms, but shortly afterwards he again tried to obtain some movement over Peshawar. In the final analysis, the negotiations failed in the face of Auckland’s
adamant refusal to intervene in any way between the two rulers, and his insistence that the first overture to Ranjit Singh – in effect, an abasement – must come from Dost Mohammed himself. For the Dost, this was too much to ask. Burnes therefore departed and Vitkevitch was left in possession of the field. He proceeded to make the Afghans generous offers of money and support, while the treaty between Persia and Kandahar was signed, backed by a Russian guarantee.

Inevitably, there has been a good deal of controversy over the responsibility for the failure. The view of Mohan Lal, Burnes’ amanuensis, was that Dost Mohammed was simply duplicitous, and was doing no more than playing the British and Russians off against each other. 16 Masson was critical of Burnes on several grounds – excessive deference towards his interlocutors, lack of discretion both in his official activities and over his relationships with Afghan women, well known to Dost Mohammed and his court. 17 Masson also criticised Burnes for relying on faulty intelligence and for raising excessive expectations in Dost Mohammed’s mind, only to have, later, to dash them. If Masson is to be believed, Burnes assured Dost Mohammed at the outset of his mission that all would be settled in accordance with the Dost’s initial proposal, 18 while Burnes himself wrote to a friend that:

we are on the threshold of a negotiation with King Ranjit, the basis of which will be his withdrawal from Peshawur, and a Barakzye receiving it as a tributary of Lahore … Ranjit will accede to the plan I am certain. … I have, in behalf of Government, agreed to stand as mediator with the parties. 19

It is also to be noted that Burnes was later taken to task by Macnaughten not just for his Kandahar initiative but also for having raised excessive hopes in Dost Mohammed’s mind. 29 Masson’s view (although one may perhaps again aim off for a certain amount of jealousy), was that the Indian Government had ‘confided in the discretion of a man who had none’; 21 and Harlan is equally critical. 22

Of Burnes, it has to be said that he was intellectually able, courageous and enterprising, and he had a flair for making friends and influencing people. But he achieved advancement and prominence at an early age, it went to his head, and he became prone to over-confidence. He himself boasted that ‘difficulties are my brandy’ and that he enjoyed ‘exercising latitude’. 23 It is difficult, however, not to conclude that he was more sinned against than sinning. Kaye’s – surely correct – judgement was that his mission ‘could by no possibility have succeeded’. 24 The delays and difficulties in communicating with Auckland and his advisers, combined with Auckland’s refusal to give Burnes any discretion whatsoever, in themselves precluded the conduct of an efficient and responsive negotiation. More than this, to have embarked on a negotiation with serious objectives in view, while refusing to make the least concession to ensure their success, was simply self-defeating. As Burnes said, ‘we promised Dost Mohammed
nothing, and Persia and Russia held out a good deal’. The irony is that the mildest of contact with Ranjit Singh might well have resolved the impasse, since there is evidence
that he was finding his occupation of Peshawar both costly and onerous. In any case he was old and ill, and it was pretty clear that he would not be around much longer.
3

Invasion

Auckland now considered his options, against the background of Vitkevitch’s success in Kabul, the conclusion of the treaty between Persia and Kandahar and the continuing siege of Herat, now openly assisted by Simonich. Auckland was also having trouble on his borders with Nepal and Burma, while there was a general sense of unease in India itself, exacerbated by the uncertainties beyond its western frontier, where reports were coming in suggesting that a long-expected Russian expedition against Khiva was also now imminent. Putting pen to paper in May 1838, Auckland sketched out three possible courses of action. One was to do nothing and stay on the defensive on the line of the Indus. Another was to offer assistance to the chiefs of Kabul and Kandahar. Of these, he was clear that the first would be to admit ‘absolute defeat … we could scarcely, with prudence, allow this new and more formidable element of disorder and intrigue to be established, without opposition, on our frontiers’, especially given the evidence of ‘the extent to which Russia is carrying her system of interference on the very threshold of the British-Indian possessions’. The second option was also out of the question, since ‘Dost Mohammed Khan has shown himself to be so disaffected and ambitious that, with him, at least, we could form no satisfactory connection’. Also, he would be more likely to use any assets placed at his disposal against the Sikhs rather than the Persians. There was, however, a third option, ‘to permit or encourage the advance of Ranjeet Singh’s armies upon Cabul, under counsel and restriction, and as a subsidiary to his advance to organise an expedition headed by Shah Shuja’, a former Amir who had lost his throne in 1809 and had subsequently lived in India on a British pension. It is hard to understand how this proposal could have been launched in the face of the obvious objections. It was based, first, on the unwarranted assumption that Ranjit Singh would be prepared to undertake a full-scale invasion of Afghanistan. It also assumed that Shah Shuja, whose record was one of long-term rejection by the Afghans, would now, supported as he would be by infidel Sikhs, be acceptable to them. The idea that there was no possibility of forming a relationship with Dost Mohammed was also wholly at variance with Burnes’ consistent advice. However this may be, Auckland’s next step was to send the Secretary to the Government of India, William Macnaughten, to Lahore and Ludhiana, to concert a tripartite treaty with Ranjit Singh and Shah Shuja. This was to be an adaptation of the treaty that the latter two had concocted when Shah Shuja had undertaken an abortive invasion of Afghanistan in 1834. Under it, the Sikhs would invade Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass, while Shah Shuja, with a force paid for by the British and with British
officers, would invade to the south, via Shikapur and Kandahar. The treaty was signed by Ranjit Singh early in July and by Shah Shuja two weeks later.²

At that point, the whole concept of the venture changed. This seems to have been at the insistence of the Commander-in-Chief in India, General Sir Henry Fane, on the basis that it was for him to make the military decisions and that if an invasion of Afghanistan (which he himself did not favour) was to take place, it must be mounted in sufficient strength to ensure success. Rightly, he was very dubious about the fighting qualities of the makeshift force that Shah Shuja would have at his disposal, and the unlikelihood of his impressing the Afghans unless he had very substantial British backing. It would also not do to leave him supported by the Sikhs alone, whose power might be dangerously enhanced if they were to get a grip of Afghanistan. Also, the troops would be in position to go to the assistance of Herat, if that were to be seen to be necessary. In any case, it would be cheaper to employ British troops than to pay for the large contingent that Shah Shuja would need. Very soon, therefore, signs began to appear of an intention to add British units to the enterprise and, since Ranjit Singh would not hear of them marching through his country to Peshawar and the Khyber, of their similarly taking the much longer route via the Bolan Pass to Kandahar. The mystery remains why Auckland should have gone to the extreme of a British invasion, particularly as it went against all that is known of his character — as his sister Emily Eden remarked, ‘poor dear George has gone to war, rather a contradiction in his nature’.³ It is also revealing that when Burnes called on Auckland in Simla, his two secretaries rushed out to urge him not to do anything ‘to unsettle his Lordship, that they had had all the trouble in the world to get him into the business, and that even now he would be glad of any pretext to retire from it’.⁴ The conclusion has to be that, against his inclinations and, possibly, his better judgement, Auckland was persuaded by his staff to launch this enterprise.

The other conundrum is why Auckland persisted with the invasion after the siege of Herat had been lifted. The crisis there came to a head in June, when the Persians, led by a Russian general, Bronowski, and with Simonich providing funds and encouragement, mounted an all-out assault on the city. Earlier, McNeill had been thwarted in his attempts to mediate a settlement and had been provoked into breaking off relations with the Shah. He had, however, in order to be able to exert some pressure, asked Auckland to send a force to Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf, and this arrived shortly after the Persian assault on Herat had failed, possibly in part due to the fortuitous presence in the city of a British artillery officer, Lt. Eldred Pottinger. McNeill sent an officer to the Shah’s camp to deliver an ultimatum, and this had the desired effect. The siege was abandoned and the Shah withdrew. More than this, Palmerston caused vigorous protests to be made in St Petersburg, with the result that both Simonich and Vitkevitch were disowned. The Russians also repudiated Simonich’s guarantee of the treaty between the Persians and the Kandahar Sirdars. This led to Kaye’s well known judgement that the invasion of Afghanistan was no longer one of ‘doubtful honesty and doubtful expediency’, but ‘at once a folly and a crime’.⁵ In Auckland’s favour is the remote possibility that Herat might still have been at risk, but as things stood, the danger that Afghanistan might have fallen under Persian and Russian influence had all but passed and, on any rational calculation, the need for the commitment of British troops had lapsed. The explanation would seem to lie in what Barbara Tuchman has termed ‘wooden-headedness’, the taking of action ‘according to wish and not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts’.⁶ The army had
been collected and was ready to march, and to have stood it down would have not only been wildly unpopular, but would have involved loss of face. Auckland’s opinion of Dost Mohammed was also now such that removing him had become an end in itself.

The decision to invade caused considerable disquiet when it became known in Britain. Among the many who lined up to denounce it was Wellington, who saw what the main problem would be: that while it might be possible to establish Shah Shuja on the throne, it would be impossible to maintain him there. The British Cabinet, however, seem not to have had any doubts. In a dispatch that reached Auckland after he had committed himself to the venture, they specifically endorsed the choice of Shah Shuja and the inclusion of British troops in the invading force. Auckland was given discretion to make one more attempt to conciliate Dost Mohammed and the Kandahar Sirdars, and the thought was put to him that the Persian retreat from Herat might make the invasion unnecessary. However, he was also instructed to ‘lose no time in attempting to recover your influence in Afghanistan; and to establish your relations with the Chiefs of that country upon a more satisfactory basis than you have hitherto been able to obtain’. Auckland paid no attention to either caveat, and the invasion went ahead.

That is not to say that consciences were entirely at ease, whether in Calcutta or London, about the wisdom and morality of the venture. At the beginning of October, 1838, Auckland issued what has been called the Simla Manifesto. Even making allowances for the fact that it was essentially a declaration of war, the extent of its mendacity is remarkable. It alleged that Dost Mohammed avowed schemes of aggrandisement and ambition injurious to the security and peace of the frontiers of India; and … openly threatened … to call in every foreign aid he could command [so that] … we could never hope that the tranquillity of our neighbourhood could be secured, or that the interests of our Indian Empire would be preserved inviolate.

The Manifesto also alleged that ‘it had been clearly ascertained from the various officers who have visited Afghanistan, that the Barakzye chiefs, from their divisions and unpopularity, were ill fitted under any circumstances to be useful allies to the British Government’. Shah Shuja’s popularity, on the other hand, ‘had been proved … throughout Afghanistan by the strong and unanimous testimony of the best authorities’. In London, the pressures on the Government were such that it was compelled to publish, in a ‘Blue Book’, the correspondence that had preceded the invasion. When he saw it, Burnes was enraged, and denounced the collection as ‘pure trickery’, which had resulted in his appearing to have been throughout a supporter of Shah Shuja, and it is the case that his key letters advocating a relationship with Dost Mohammed, and the latter’s strong desire for this, even after Vitkevich’s arrival, are either much edited or suppressed altogether, as is the evidence of his attempts to keep the Kandahar Sirdars from the Persian–Russian alliance.

In September 1838, orders were given for the mustering of the army that was to invade Afghanistan. Having sat in barracks since the Burmese war, some 12 years previously, there was considerable enthusiasm among the military at the prospect of active service. The force chosen consisted of two contingents, one from the Bengal Presidency, the other from that of Bombay. At the beginning of December, the Bengal contingent, under
General Sir Willoughby Cotton, which was made up of five brigades of infantry, a brigade of cavalry, artillery and support units, some 15,000 men in all, began its march from Ferozepur, but as it did so, the news arrived that the siege of Herat had been lifted. The decision was taken to persist with the invasion, but the size of the contingent was reduced to about 9,500 men. The other change was that Fane, who was not in good health and had postponed his retirement in order to command the expedition, was allowed to resign his command, which devolved on General Sir John Keane, the commander of the Bombay contingent. This force, amounting to some 3,600 men, reached Sind by sea from Bombay at the end of November, only to find that no baggage animals were awaiting it. These were supposed to have been provided by the Emirs of Sind, but the latter had done nothing by way of procurement. The Bombay force thus had to wait several weeks while transport was mustered, and it was not until the following April, some distance into the advance, that the two forces met up and Keane assumed overall command. Meanwhile, much to the disappointment of Alexander Burnes, Auckland had decided to appoint Macnaughten to be the senior political adviser to the force.

What was remarkable, given the nature of the expedition, was the amount of baggage and the number of camp followers that were allowed to accompany it. The British officers, in particular, came equipped for a comfortable campaign. One senior officer required 60 camels to carry his personal effects, the 16th Lancers brought with them their pack of foxhounds, another regiment had two camels just to carry its stock of cigars. Henry Havelock, who was on Cotton’s staff and wrote the first account of the march to Kabul states, without any apparent embarrassment, that he was accompanied by 18 personal attendants. Other junior officers are said to have had as many as 40. The total number of camp followers was reckoned at the outset to have amounted to not much fewer than 40,000. This extraordinary extravagance was a principal cause of the army’s near disaster in the course of its advance.

With the Bengal contingent marched a force of some 6,000 men that had been mustered as ‘Shah Shuja’s contingent’. Given that the object of the exercise was to restore Shah Shuja, it was clearly desirable that he should have something that could be represented as his own army, but in fact the arrangement was a sham. There seems, initially at any rate, not to have been a single Afghan in the contingent, which was commanded by British officers and largely recruited from Indian sepoys and camp followers. The difficulties of recruitment were such that standards had to be dropped substantially in order to make up the required numbers, and the force was, to say the least, ill-disciplined and ill-trained.

After an abortive attempt to take Hyderabad, by 18 February some 38,000 men, 30,000 camels, a quantity of artillery and assorted bullock-drawn transport had crossed the River Indus at Bukkur, and a few days later they gathered at Shikapur, ready to march to Kandahar, 380 miles away. The extent of the Indian Army’s incompetence then began to show itself. The route, which lay across largely desert land and through two long passes, was known to be arduous, but no reconnaissance of it was made, and the extent to which water, forage and provisions would be available was practically unknown. Still less had any attempt been made to gather supplies and set up depots in advance. Nothing was known either about the intentions of the Sirdars of Kandahar or of the likelihood of resistance. But Macnaughten, now accompanying Shah Shuja, was anxious to reach Afghanistan while the campaigning season allowed, and persuaded a reluctant Cotton to
press ahead. ‘Sir W is a sad croaker’, Macnaughten reported to Auckland, ‘not content with telling me that we must inevitably be starved, he assures me that Shah Shuja is very unpopular in Afghanistan and that we shall be opposed at every step of our way’. As the column started out, no attempt was made to dispense with unnecessary loads, despite a shortage of camels, nor were the numbers of camp followers reduced. It took until 10 March to cross 170 miles of mostly barren waste to the entrance to the Bolan Pass, by which time the camp followers were on half rations and only a month’s supplies remained. Local

Map 3.1 The First Anglo-Afghan War: the routes taken by the invading armies
chiefs were wholly uncooperative and efforts to obtain provisions en route failed
dismally. Meanwhile, camp followers were being killed and camels and cattle stolen by
local tribesmen. Cotton decided that his only recourse was to press on through the 60-
mile pass to Quetta, where, hopefully, matters might improve. With 150 miles still to go
to Kandahar, he now had full rations for only ten days and was compelled to put his
troops on half rations and to cut the camp-followers’ rations to a quarter. Both camels and
horses were breaking down from the strain of the march and lack of fodder, while
depredations by the local tribesmen continued. Retreat was considered; but having come
so far, clearly the only sensible course was to press on. However, Cotton’s orders were to
wait at Quetta for Keane, who had been making no haste in assuming overall command,
and it was not until early April that he arrived and gave orders for the march to resume.
Again, no reconnaissance was made and no precautions taken against possible attack. The
country ahead was almost as inhospitable as that already crossed, while the Khojak Pass,
which now had to be negotiated, was to prove more difficult than the Bolan. The artillery
had to be manhandled over sections of it and many more animals were lost. Finally,
towards the end of April, the army began to trickle into Kandahar, with Shah Shuja and
his contingent in the van. Cotton’s troops had just two days’ supplies in hand. Bribed by
Mohan Lal, a single renegade, one Haji Khan Kakur, at one time Dost Mohammed’s
Governor of Bamian, came out with his followers to greet the Shah.

The march to Kandahar had taken a considerable toll of the army. The cavalry had lost
some 700 horses and those that remained were in a pitiable condition. Not far out of
Kandahar, some 60 horses had died in a single day. It was reckoned that more than
20,000 camels had already been lost, although at least this meant that the amount of
inessential baggage had been reduced. No account was apparently made of the number of
camp followers who had perished, but it certainly ran into thousands. Had the local
tribesmen shown more determination and organisation in attacking the force, or had the
Kandahar Sirdars taken the field, it is doubtful if it would have survived. The route could
easily have been blocked in any one of several places, and the weakened British cavalry
would have been quite unable to deal with well-mounted opponents. However, the
Sirdars’ nerve failed and they fled in the direction of Herat as the army advanced.

Against the odds, therefore, the army survived an operation which, as one who
participated in it observed, had been characterised by ‘an absolute disregard of all sound
military principles’. The shortcomings of the senior ranks were brutally exposed. With
responsibility for overall command, Keane stayed with the Bombay contingent and did
not assume his proper duties until the march from Shikapur was more than half
completed and the army already in dire straits. Relationships between the military and
Macnaughten’s ‘politics’ were bad, as were those between the military themselves.
Above all, the lack of effective reconnaissance and concern for the security of supplies
was appalling. Not a single day’s supplies were found at any place along the route
between Shikapur and Kandahar. At the heart of the problem was an unclarified
division of responsibility between Macnaughten and his staff on the one hand and the
military leadership on the other. As Auckland’s representative and ‘envoy’ to Shah Shuja,
Macnaughten had the final say, in this instance overruling Cotton who was, for sound
military reasons, reluctant to proceed from Shikapur. It was also left largely to the
‘politics’ to deal with local rulers, and many were young officers who were ignorant of
the country, its languages and its people. They were also, owing to often poor
communications, called on to exercise responsibilities for which they were ill-prepared, and they also had the responsibility for taking decisions which had military implications, much to the frustration of the military leadership.

According to Macnaughten, Shah Shuja was initially received in Kandahar ‘with feelings nearly amounting to adulation’. However, when, on 8 May, a military review was staged to mark his formal inauguration, relatively few Afghans attended and the general response was one of indifference. Partly, it was a question of personality. Macnaughten’s assessment of the Shah was that his faults included ‘pride and parsimony’, neither of which endeared him to his Afghan subjects. Dost Mohammed, by contrast, was known to be affable and accessible, and had a reputation for dispensing justice. While the Sirdars’ rule had been harsh and much resented by the Durrani tribes, Shah Shuja did himself no good in Kandahar by reappointing the same oppressive functionaries who had previously gathered the revenues.

Other factors also worked against Shah Shuja’s popular acceptability. One was a surge in the price of grain as a consequence of the entry into the market of the British military and their following, which caused much distress. But more crucial was the realisation that the Shah was not acting independently to recover his throne, but was reliant on British troops. As the Khan of Kalat had put it to Burnes:

He [Shah Shuja] ought to have trusted the Afghans to restore him to his throne; whereas he is essaying to deluge the land with Hindustanese, an insult which his own people will never forgive him … Your English may keep him by main force for a time on the throne; but as soon as you leave the kingdom, your Shah Shuja will be driven beyond its frontiers. He will never be able to resist the storm of national and religious animosity, which is already raised against him in the breasts of the Afghans.

Despite the return of a Saddozai monarch, there was a general reluctance among the Durrani chiefs to rally to his cause, and Macnaughten soon had to resort to substantial bribery in order to secure their adherence. When Shah Shuja attempted to conciliate the Ghilzai chiefs along the route to Kabul, by sending them money and Korans, they kept the money but returned the Korans, signifying that they were not prepared to give him their support.

After the rigours of the march, there was nothing for it but for the army to remain in Kandahar for two months in order to recover. The cavalry and artillery in particular needed to rehabilitate their exhausted horses and acquire remounts. Although convoys of grain were expected, supplies remained short and the army was forced to remain on half rations. As a reaction both to the prevailing heat and an unhealthy environment, there was a good deal of sickness among the troops. By late June, however, the way seemed clear for an advance on Kabul. There remained, however, persistent problems of supply. The harvest was now ripening around Kandahar and two convoys of grain had come in over the passes. One, however, was much smaller than expected and the private merchants who had brought the other were unwilling to let their camels and drivers be used for its onward carriage with the army. Keane, therefore, again took a gamble in ordering the advance, with barely enough supplies to reach Kabul on half rations. He also took the gamble of advancing without his siege artillery, even though it was known that the town
of Ghazni, which lay on the route, was strongly fortified and widely thought to be impregnable. Here again, intelligence was defective. Two of Keane’s officers, who were supposed to know Ghazni, assured him that siege artillery would not be needed for its reduction. On 27 June, the army marched, leaving General Nott commanding a sufficient force, with reinforcements expected from India, to ensure that Kandahar would remain a secure base.

Dost Mohammed, meanwhile, had had difficult decisions to make. From his point of view, the more pressing threat had seemed to lie from the direction of Peshawar, where, in accordance with the agreement with the Sikhs, a force had been assembled for an advance through the Khyber Pass. The Dost accordingly sent his eldest son, Akbar Khan, via Jalalabad to Dakka, where he could command the exit from the Pass, while Afridi tribesmen defended the Pass itself. To the south, the Dost seems to have hoped that the Kandahar Sirdars would stand firm, or that, if they did not, that the British would aim for Herat rather than Kabul. The Dost now recalled Akbar Khan and himself drew up his forces to the south of the capital. Another son, Hyder Khan, occupied Ghazni with a garrison of some 3,000 men, while a third, Afzul Khan, commanded a force of 5,000 horsemen in the neighbourhood of the fortress. The expectation was that the British would either have to besiege Ghazni or bypass it and press on to Kabul. In the former event, they would be attacked by Dost Mohammed and Akbar Khan as they delayed before the fortress, in the latter, they would be confronted by Dost Mohammed before the capital and would be attacked by Hyder Khan and Afzul Khan in their rear.

The route to Ghazni presented little difficulty to the British force and, just as Macnaughten had believed that there would be no opposition before Kandahar, so now, with his habitual optimism, he predicted that Ghazni would also fall without a fight. As the army approached, however, it became clear that the town was well defended and that it would be dangerous to pass it by. In any event, the army now had only a few days’ provisions left, and so both a siege and a continuance of the march were ruled out as options. The prospects of a successful attack also appeared bleak. The walls were too tall to be scaled and too strong to be breached without the siege artillery. By happy chance, however, there was a traitor in Dost Mohammed’s camp, a nephew by the name of Abdul Rashid Khan. The latter was persuaded to desert, and revealed that there was a single gate, the Kabul gate, that was not bricked up and was therefore vulnerable.20 Keane divided the army in order to take up position opposite the gate and, at the same time, to cut the town off from any assistance from the direction of Kabul. The plan was to launch a diversion on the northern side of the fortress, while sweeping the walls with artillery fire as another diversion, and then blow up the gate and launch a storming party through it.

Just before dawn on the 23rd, the attack on Ghazni began. The night was blustery and gave cover to the attackers. A party of sappers placed bags of gunpowder against the Kabul gate and, after two misfires, a fuse was lit and the gate blown in. A storming party rushed the gate, followed by the main party, led by Brigadier Sale. After some hesitation, occasioned by a false report that the gate remained blocked, Sale’s force fought their way into the town. Sale, himself, was wounded in a hand-to-hand encounter with a defender. The citadel was stormed and, within the space of little more than two hours, the fortress was in British hands. This defeat, sudden and unexpected, put an end to Dost Mohammed’s hopes of defending Kabul. Defections began in his ranks, and he sent an
envoy to Shah Shuja, offering his submission on the condition that he became his vizier, the position that the Barakzyes had traditionally held at the Saddozai court. When this was rejected, the Dost tried to draw up his troops to defend Kabul, but realised that there was treachery in his camp. He dismissed the bulk of his army and, with a small band of followers, fled to the north. On 31 July the British force resumed its march and a week later Shah Shuja entered Kabul in state, accompanied by Keane, Macnaughten, Burnes and other officers, and escorted by squadrons of cavalry. The primary object of the enterprise, his restoration to the throne from which he had been driven 30 years previously, had thus been achieved. All concerned proceeded to congratulate themselves, not least on the achievement at Ghazni, which was described as ‘the most spirited, skillful and successful coup-de-main on record in the annals of British India’. 21 Honours were distributed all round. Auckland received an Earldom and Keane a Barony, Macnaughten was knighted, and other honours and promotions were appropriately gazetted.

What the feelings were among the Afghans is less clear. Havelock noted that there was not much acclaim for Shah Shuja as he entered Kabul, but did discern ‘ready acquiescence or something more’. 22 He judged that, while there was not much personal affection for the Shah, there were ‘the clearest manifestations of public satisfaction at having got rid of the exactions and oppressions of the Barakzai dominion’. Another officer, on the other hand, reported that the Shah was received ‘without a show of welcome or enthusiasm’. 23 A third recorded that

the people were very orderly; there were immense crowds, every place in the town was filled with them. As the king advanced, they stood up, and when he was passed on they reseated themselves. This was the only demonstration of joy exhibited on the occasion. 24
According to the Simla Manifesto, ‘when once he [Shah Shuja] shall be secured in power, and the independence and integrity of Afghanistan established, the British army will be withdrawn’. A straightforward course of action would have been to have capitalised on the success of the campaign and to have put this declaration promptly into effect. No doubt substantial sums of money would have been needed in order to keep the Shah on his throne, but the key points of the country were secure and, with winter coming on, he would have had a breathing space in which to consolidate his rule. With adequate funding, he might have been able to conciliate the chiefs on whose support he would have to rely, by providing subsidies and opportunities for paid military service. The judgement of a contemporary observer of the scene was that:

he might possibly … with conciliatory conduct towards the chiefs, for whose restless but petty ambition he could have found scope in the civil and military service of the State, soon have been in a position to brave the return of Dost Mohammed. Freed from the dictation of a British envoy, and from the domineering presence of a British army, provided that his financial measures had proved judicious, his popularity would have increased, and with it his real strength.¹

Notwithstanding Macnaghten’s professed conviction of Shah Shuja’s popularity in the country, however, neither he nor Auckland were prepared to take the risk. They were certainly conscious of the disadvantages of leaving a force in Afghanistan. India would remain without units which it needed at home. The financial burden of a continued occupation would be considerable. The army’s lines of supply and communication would be lengthy, tenuous and vulnerable. Ranjit Singh had now died and the stability of the Punjab was in doubt, increasing the risk of their rupture. On the other hand, Shah Shuja was himself anxious that the army should stay and was fearful of Dost Mohammed, who remained at large. Pottinger in Herat had also reported that the Russians were assembling a force in Orenburg in preparation for an expedition in the direction of Khiva, and this was causing concern in both London and India. Above all, if the Shah were not to survive a withdrawal, the consequences for Britain’s standing in the region would be unthinkable. What seems not to have been appreciated, however, was that the continuing British presence would, in itself, progressively reduce the likelihood of the Shah being able to win popular acceptability and would make his situation less, rather than more, secure. To
resentment on religious and nationalistic grounds would be added the economic burden of the army’s consumption of the crops and other resources of what was basically a poor country. In a lengthy minute issued in August, however, Auckland concentrated on what he saw as the immediate problems, the difficulty of ensuring the adherence of the Afghan chiefs and the uncertainty over the security of Herat:

The obstacles which must be opposed to the establishment of a new and well regulated Government, with a nation which has for many years been subject to a weak and distracted control, are obviously much enhanced by the circumstance that the Afghans are a people comprised in a great measure of various and unconnected Chiefs and Tribes. Every separate Chief in the contest of party will feel himself to be possessed of power and of importance, the demands of all will be extravagant, and as one Tribe or Chief may be favoured, there will be the risk that another will be offended, and that thus there may long be a rallying point for discontent. Although, therefore, with good management and with moderation and justice, the balance of parties may be greatly turned in favour of the King, it still seems to be obviously necessary that, at least at the commencement of his reign, he should have a strong Force directly at his command, by which any partial outbreak of disaffection may at once be quelled, and acting under good advice, it may fairly be hoped that his power will rapidly acquire consistency.  

The army, Auckland agreed, was badly needed back in India, and the costs of keeping it in Afghanistan would be great:

yet I need scarcely add that even these objects, and the immediate reduction of expenditure, would be ill attained at the price of leaving unaccomplished the great purposes with which the expedition to Cabool was undertaken. … The result would indeed be most imperfect, if Afghanistan should be left otherwise than with its peace and integrity assured, if we but place Shah Shooja ool Moolk on his throne, and tell him to maintain himself with inadequate military means, with an impoverished country, an empty treasury, and a people unused to the restraints of a firm and effective rule … It would, I think, be folly the most lamentable if we were to run the risk of forfeiting the fruit of our exertions, if the friendly authority which we have thus rapidly organised should be prematurely exposed to the shock of accident, and to the disturbing causes which must for some period continue to affect its safety. An over hasty withdrawal of all our Troops, before our relations with Herat are fairly settled and until some satisfactory understanding is reestablished between Britain and Persia, might too, on that account alone, be productive of the most seriously evil consequences.

There was thus a fundamental flaw in Auckland’s reasoning, and no appreciation of the reality of the situation. This was later cogently set out by Kaye:
Neither was the restoration sufficiently popular in itself, nor was there sufficient stability in the character of the King to warrant so hazardous an experiment. If the policy of the Afghan invasion had not been based on error, the experiment would not have been a hazardous one. But the very acknowledgement of the Shah’s inability to maintain himself after the departure of the British army was a crushing commentary on the assertions put forth in the great October manifesto. The truth was not to be disguised. The ‘adoration’ which had greeted the Shah on his return to his long lost dominions, was found to be a delusion. The palace of his fathers had received him; but it was necessary still to hedge in the throne with a quickset of British bayonets.

Auckland did not, however, at first think that it would be necessary to retain more than a small proportion of the Army. Accordingly, in late September, the whole of the Bombay contingent started to march back to India. However, by the time that the Bengal contingent was due to leave, minds had changed. Only a few units were withdrawn, and the bulk were retained as garrisons in Kabul, Ghazni, Jalalabad and Kandahar. The problem was partly fresh news of a Russian intention to attack Khiva, partly it was Dost Mohammed. In mid-August, a party that had been sent in pursuit of him had returned empty-handed. It was, indeed, probably just as well that they did not meet up with him, as they would have been heavily outnumbered. They pursued him over the passes as far as Bamian, but found that he had fled beyond their reach across the Hindu Kush, where he was thought to be forming an alliance with the Wali of Khulm. In something of a panic, Macnaughten proposed the dispatch of a force over the Hindu Kush both to deal with him and to forestall the Russians, but Keane vetoed the enterprise. A regiment of Gurkhas and a troop of artillery were, however, sent to Bamian, where they were forced to sit through a cold and uncomfortable winter. At the same time, Dr Lord, who had accompanied Burnes on his mission to Bokhara and had himself explored the territories lying beyond the Hindu Kush, was sent to reconnoitre. Within a few days, he returned to report – mistakenly as it turned out – that Dost Mohammed was in process of gathering a large force in Northern Afghanistan and that rebellion was also threatened nearer Kabul. Hence Macnaughten’s request that a much larger body of troops should be retained in Afghanistan, amounting to nine regiments of infantry, as opposed to the three originally contemplated. During October, the Sikh levies, which had arrived the previous month, departed, followed shortly afterwards by Keane and his small column. After some brushes with the Afridi tribesmen, they reached Peshawar in the course of November. Keane was an unpopular general, partly because he was British Army, rather than Indian Army, and also because he was not a ‘gentleman’, had a considerable temper and swore like a trooper, characteristics that prompted Wellington to rule him out as successor to Fane. But he had a reputation as a lucky officer, and certainly earned it in the course of this campaign, where, purely through good fortune, he had narrowly escaped two major disasters and had ended up with honours and congratulations all round. He was clearly glad to be going while the going was good: as he put it to an officer who was accompanying him, ‘I cannot but congratulate you on leaving the country, for, mark my words, it will not be long before there is here some signal catastrophe.’
With winter coming on, Macnaughten now had to decide how the army was to be accommodated. The obvious place was the Bala Hissar, the fortress that dominated Kabul and that could have been put into a sound and defensible condition without much trouble. Work had actually been started on it when Shah Shuja objected, on the grounds that it overlooked his palace and suggested that it was the British who were ruling the country (which they were). After much havering, Macnaughten conceded the point and cantonments were constructed a mile or so outside Kabul. When Brigadier Shelton, a later arrival in Kabul, went to see them, he found them:

of frightful extent – the two sides of the oblong, including the two mission compounds, about 1,400 yards each, the two ends each 500, with a rampart and a ditch an Afghan could run over with the facility of a cat, with many other serious defects. The misfortune of this was that so many troops were necessary for the actual defence of the works, that few could be spared for external operations.\(^5\)

Worse than this, the position was overlooked by neighbouring hills, and around it were gardens and orchards, along with a number of forts and other buildings, so that fields of fire were restricted. Moreover, both the army’s commissariat and magazine were situated outside the perimeter. This combination of military blunders was to contribute materially to the eventual disaster.

The army then settled down to enjoy life as best it could. Shah Shuja and Macnaughten went down to the milder climate of Jalalabad for the winter and left Burnes in charge in Kabul. With Lady Macnaughten and 40 servants in the lead, wives came up to join their husbands. They included

*Map 4.1 The First Anglo-Afghan War: Kabul and the British Cantonment*
the redoubtable Florentia, Lady Sale, who was to compose a scathing journal of the errors and misfortunes that were later to overwhelm the enterprise. 6 Both officers and men entertained themselves with a variety of pursuits, including horse racing, cockfighting, shooting, skating, amateur theatricals and, to the particular bemusement of the Afghans, cricket. Pursuits of a different kind also flourished, and the Afghans were soon appalled to find that the army was consorting with their womenfolk. Burnes was widely believed to have been an offender, and, whether or not this was the case, it seems that he at least caused acute resentment by refusing to take action when complaints were brought to his attention.

As the winter progressed, the Russian expedition against Khiva duly materialised. Throughout the 1830s, the Russians had been making considerable efforts to develop trade with the Khanates of Central Asia, with the hope also of being able to penetrate the markets of Afghanistan and India. They had, however, found their ambitions thwarted by Turkmen nomads, who not only attacked trade caravans, but took prisoners, among them Russians, who were then sold in the slave markets in Khiva and Bokhara. The Russian expedition was intended primarily to deal with this problem, although the British ‘forward policy’ in Afghanistan no doubt also sharpened Russian incentives. It was, for example, noted that the Simla Manifesto talked of gaining for the British ‘a legitimate influence’ in Central Asia, while Nesselrode had earlier complained to Palmerston that:

> English industry, exclusive and jealous … would cause, if it could, the produce of our manufactories to disappear from all the markets of Central Asia: witness the remarks of Burnes, and the tendency of English travellers who have followed his steps to the very gate of Orenburg. 7

In the course of diplomatic exchanges, the Russians had started by denying that there was any question of conquering Khiva, 8 but later admitted that the purpose was to ‘punish the Khan and establish tranquillity for the future in that country’. 9 This persuaded the government in London to lend weight to Macnaughten’s urgings that a counter-move should be made north of the Hindu Kush, and Auckland was assured of their support, should he decide to move on Herat or to the north. As Palmerston put it:

> their [the Russians’] next move will be to do the same thing with Bokhara, and then they have the waterway of the Oxus open to them through a friendly country to the Foot of the Hindu Kush … It is pretty clear that sooner or later the Cossack and the Sepoy, the Man from the Baltic and He from our Indian Possessions will meet in the Centre of Asia. It should be our Business to take Care that the Meeting should be as far off from our Indian Possessions as may be convenient and advantageous to us. 10

Auckland, however, was all too conscious of the restraints, both financial and in terms of manpower, and set his face firmly against any further initiatives. The priority, he insisted, was to do everything possible to consolidate Shah Shuja’s power in Kabul. 11

The Russian expedition, led by General Perovsky, the Governor of Orenburg, and comprising 5,000 soldiers, mainly Cossacks, and 10,000 camels, set out at the end of November, 1839. 12 It was deliberately timed for the winter, in order both to avoid the
searing summer heat of the steppes, and to ensure that the troops could obtain water from snow. For three months the expedition battled against the worst winter for decades, until eventually it was forced to turn back, having lost 1,000 men and 8,000 camels.

In Afghanistan, meanwhile, the occupation army seemed destined for a longer stay. Not only did this appear advisable in the light of the Russian activity, but it was becoming clear that Shah Shuja was failing to gain the adhesion of the principal Afghan chiefs. By May 1840, Auckland was admitting that his earlier hopes of a withdrawal after the hot weather were not going to be realised and, once again, he emphasised the need to establish Shah Shuja at the head of an effective government. Apart from the Shah’s own character, there were several continuing impediments to this. One was that he had appointed as vizier one Mullah Shakur, who had been in exile with him in Ludhiana and who was not only incompetent but widely disliked, thoroughly corrupt and even disloyal. It was only after some time had elapsed that Macnaughten managed to have him replaced. Another was that instead of following traditional practice by raising levies from the tribes to supplement his contingent, Shah Shuja proceeded to recruit his own force, paid from his treasury and led by British officers. The tribal chiefs were quick to resent what they saw as a slight to their standing and influence, as well as loss of income. Above all, it was proving impossible to reconcile the need to promote Shah Shuja’s independence with his propensity to mismanage affairs and abuse his powers. There was no way of squaring the circle: Macnaughten and his staff had either to intervene, revealing the Shah’s puppet status for what it was, or acquiesce in damaging maladministration. In any case, the British themselves were not sufficiently sensitive and knowledgeable to be able to conduct affairs in a manner acceptable to local sentiment. Popular antipathy therefore grew, but was still discounted by Macnaughten. When in September 1940 Burnes composed a memorandum that drew attention to a whole range of shortcomings, Auckland forwarded it to Hobhouse with the snide comment that Burnes’ purpose was no doubt that ‘when he succeeds me, his failings would thus find excuse and his successes additional credit’. Burnes and Macnaughten never got on.

Meanwhile, in the north, Dost Mohammed, who had earlier reached Bokhara and had been held virtually prisoner there by the Emir, had managed to extricate himself and by August 1840 was recruiting actively among the Usbeks, with the support of the Wali of Khulm. Macnaughten promptly panicked: ‘The Afghans are gunpowder and the Dost a lighted match.’ In September, therefore, a force was sent to Bamian to reinforce Lord’s garrison. When it arrived, it found that many of the Afghan levies had deserted. The remainder were disbanded and a third of the force was sent out in response to a report that Uzbek cavalry were only a few miles off. Once the advance contingents had driven in the Uzbek outposts, however, they found themselves facing Dost Mohammed’s entire force, 6,000 strong. To have halted or retreated would have been fatal, so they attacked. When the enemy faltered in the face of artillery fire and a Gurkha onslaught, the cavalry were sent in and put the whole force to flight. The Dost and a small party saved themselves solely through the speed of their horses. However, he did not give up, but moved over to Kohistan to take advantage of disaffection there. Units under Brigadier Sale, with Burnes in attendance, were sent out to deal with him, and some inconclusive engagements took place, while several forts were taken and demolished. Eventually, however, when attacking a force of cavalry, several British officers were deserted by their troops and left to die facing the enemy alone. Matters looked serious, but the
following day, as Macnaughten was out for his evening ride, he was approached by two horsemen, who turned out to be Dost Mohammed and an attendant. Why the Dost should have surrendered at this point has never been explained. Possibly he had come to realise the long odds against his being able to prevail over the British and wished to surrender with honour while this was still possible. His surrender naturally encouraged Auckland and Macnaughten in the hope that Afghanistan could be regarded as pacified, while Palmerston in London commented that he ‘had no fears of our ascendancy in Afghanistan, except as to the expense of maintaining it’. 18
Disaster and withdrawal

The early months of 1841 saw growing exasperation in London at the continuing lack of progress in establishing Shah Shuja on his throne. Hobhouse sent two dispatches to Auckland in which he criticised the decision to withdraw the Bombay contingent, discounted the current policy as one of trying to maintain stability with an inadequate force, and suggested that it would be better either to withdraw from Afghanistan completely or to accept that troops would have to stay there for several years and in sufficient numbers to ensure its submission. Britain would have to make no bones about its responsibility for public order and good government: the present attempts to keep Shah Shuja on a loose rein produced the worst of both worlds – a combination of misgovernment and the conclusion that the British bore responsibility for it. Auckland was somewhat aggrieved but, in reply, he and his Council conceded that the situation was unsatisfactory and that time would be needed before Shah Shuja could cease to rely on a British military presence. However, they continued to believe that matters would gradually improve and that there was no need to go to either of the extremes set out by Hobhouse. The principal problem was finance: Afghanistan was accounting for £1 million of the Indian Government’s annual deficit of £1.25 million. Eventually, the financial burden might become intolerable, and certainly there was no means of affording extra deployments of troops. Auckland’s temporary solution was to float a 5 per cent financial loan, which attracted over £2 million; enough to sustain current expenditure up to the end of 1842.

During the winter of 1840–1, changes were made to the military leadership in Afghanistan. Sir Willoughby Cotton, who was not in good health, was allowed to leave and was replaced by General William Elphinstone, a veteran of Waterloo who had subsequently spent many years on half pay before being appointed in 1839 to command the Benares Division in Meerut. He was then invited to take the Afghanistan command, but, because he too was far from fit, he was given the option to refuse. However, he seems to have felt that duty called and, under pressure from Auckland, accepted the appointment. His main qualifications seem to have been that, unlike the competent but abrasive Nott, he was ‘of good repute, gentlemanly manners and aristocratic connections’. Unfortunately, he was also suffering from severe gout and rheumatism and was on the verge of senility. To support him in Kabul, the choice fell on Brigadier Shelton, a one-armed veteran of the Peninsula War and a brutal disciplinarian. The combination was lethal: Elphinstone was unable to control Shelton, while the latter did not conceal his contempt for his superior officer.
Early in 1841, trouble broke out among the Durranis, prompted largely by resentment at the exactions of Shah Shuja’s revenue collectors. A force sent by Nott dispersed a Durrani force and, at least temporarily, restored calm. Macnaughten, as blithely optimistic as ever, took the view in February that ‘all things considered, the present tranquillity of this country is to my mind perfectly miraculous’, even though conceding that it would be a long time before the army could be withdrawn. Soon, however, operations had to be mounted against the Ghilzai and again against the Durranis, and it was not until August that Nott succeeded in bringing them to battle and defeating them. The same month, an election took place in Britain and the Tories under Sir Robert Peel regained power. Auckland promptly submitted his resignation and began to look forward to leaving India by the end of the year. Also in August, Macnaughten learnt that he was to be appointed Governor of Bombay, and he too was looking forward to an end to his tour of duty. ‘The country’, he declared, ‘is perfectly quiet from Dan to Beersheba.’ In little more than a month, he was forced to eat his words.

The event that triggered the disaster that overwhelmed the Army of the Indus in the winter of 1841–2 was a decision by Macnaughten, in response to demands for economy, to summon the Ghilzai chiefs who commanded the passes between Kabul and Jalalabad, and inform them that the subsidy that they had been receiving to ensure safe passage would be cut by half, to the equivalent of £4,000 a year. Their response was prompt and decisive: in early October they occupied the passes and proceeded to plunder a large caravan that was making its way up to Kabul. However, Macnaughten saw no problem about dislodging them and was still confidently expecting to leave Afghanistan for good later in the month, when he and General Elphinstone were due to accompany Sale’s brigade on its departure for India, on completion of its tour of duty. A regiment was immediately sent out to deal with the rebels, to which was attached a contingent of sappers under Captain Broadfoot. The latter’s account of his efforts to obtain orders shows the total lack of grip which already pervaded both the military and civil commands. He shuttled several times between Elphinstone and Macnaughten, each of whom professed ignorance of what was intended and referred him back to the other. Elphinstone was ill and exhausted, and initially took half an hour even to be able to attend to Broadfoot, while Macnaughten eventually lost his temper, insisting that the initiative was intended merely as a demonstration, that the rebels would promptly submit and that no fighting would be involved. He could not have been more wrong: both the regiment and the sappers found the rebels out in numbers and Sale had to be sent with the rest of his brigade before the Khurd–Kabul Pass could be forced. The tribal leaders promptly came to terms, but then, just as promptly, reneged and Sale had to fight his way through the passes to Gandamak, where he halted. A regiment had meanwhile been sent back to Kabul to act as escort for Macnaughten and Elphinstone.

Although it was not realised at the time, this trouble in the passes was merely the first manifestation of a national uprising. Several warnings were received about what was about to happen, but both Macnaughten and Burnes chose to ignore them. Mohan Lal, whose sources were all too reliable, warned Burnes in the course of October that a conspiracy was being hatched, which it would be dangerous to disregard. On 1 November he repeated the warning and urged that a strong guard should be sent to the city. Later that day, a friendly Durrani chief came to Burnes with a similar warning, followed, early the following morning, by no less a person than Shah Shuja’s vizier,
Osman Khan. Burnes rejected all these approaches and so was caught defenceless when, shortly after the vizier had left, a mob appeared in front of his house. He tried to reason with them from the balcony, but, deaf to all appeals and offers of money, they persisted in attacking the building. Burnes, his brother and all who were with him were murdered. The mob then turned their attention to the army’s treasury, which was situated next door. Its occupants were similarly slaughtered and the equivalent of £17,000 plundered.

In the cantonment, the commotion in the city was distinctly heard, while a note was also received from Burnes. At Macnaughten’s suggestion, Brigadier Shelton was ordered to march to the Bala Hissar, there to consult Shah Shuja and act on his own best judgement. However, Elphinstone then sent him a note countermanding the order, apparently on the basis of a message from the Shah objecting to the deployment. Shelton recorded that he sent back a stiff note to the effect that as there was an insurrection in the city, it was not a moment for indecision and that he recommended that Elphinstone should ‘decide upon what measures he should adopt’. He was then instructed to proceed, but was again halted, and it was not until around midday that he finally set out. On arriving at the Bala Hissar, he found that Shah Shuja at least had acted promptly by sending part of his contingent into the city, but that this had become bogged down in the narrow streets and was in the process of retreating, with appreciable casualties. Shelton succeeded in covering the retreat, but thereafter relapsed into inactivity in the Bala Hissar. In the cantonment, meanwhile, Elphinstone was in a state of total indecision, concluding merely that ‘we must see what the morning brings, and then think what can be done’. Apart from summoning Sale back from Gandamak and ordering Nott to send a brigade from Kandahar, however, his thoughts led him nowhere. As Lady Sale noted, ‘many projects were entered into, for the purpose of putting down the rebellion, but none were put into practice’. The moment at which the rebellion might have been stifled was lost, and thereafter, as no retaliatory action was taken, it escalated rapidly. In the British camp, there seemed to be two alternatives, each with their advocates. One was to concentrate the whole force in the better security of the Bala Hissar; the other was to consolidate in the cantonment, most crucially by bringing into it the stores housed in the commissariat. Neither course of action was decided upon and, within 24 hours, the insurrection had grown to the point where the countryside around the cantonment was swarming with armed tribesmen. The next day the commissariat was surrounded and besieged and, two attempts to relieve it having failed, Elphinstone was at a total loss what next to do. He spent the rest of the day and into the following night unable to make up his mind; and when, finally, on the morning of 5 November, he was about to send a detachment to reinforce the commissariat, its garrison abandoned it, leaving the whole of the army’s supplies in the hands of the rebels. It was rapidly plundered and the garrison had the mortification of seeing their means of subsistence being carried off only a few hundred yards away. At the same time, the loss was compounded by the capture of the commissariat in the city which contained the supplies belonging to Shah Shuja’s contingent. After two days of resistance, during which repeated requests for help were sent to the cantonment, these stores too were plundered.

In the space of a few days, therefore, the army had lost virtually all its supplies and, to avoid starvation, was being compelled to purchase whatever it could, at exorbitant prices, from neighbouring villages. Elphinstone himself had been thinking in terms of surrender almost from the outset and advised Macnaughten that:
It behoves us to look to the consequences of failure: in this case I know not how we are to subsist, or, from want of provisions, to retreat. You should, therefore, consider what chance there is of making terms, if we are driven to this extremity.\textsuperscript{11}

By the end of a week, matters had gone from bad to worse. Shelton and his force were recalled from the Bala Hissar, where they had done nothing to any purpose, but his arrival served only to add to the prevailing indecision, since he immediately clashed with Elphinstone and maintained, in defiance of Macnaughten’s view, that the only practicable course of action was for the whole force to withdraw from Afghanistan. The problem was that, Sale’s brigade having departed, the force was too small both to defend the cantonment and at the same time to engage in offensive operations of any significance. Some successes were achieved in small engagements around the cantonment, but reverses also occurred and demoralisation set in. On 15 November, two wounded officers and a single sepoy arrived from the outpost at Charikar in the Kohistan valley, the sole survivors of the Gurkha regiment stationed there. In Kabul, a particular debacle occurred on 23 November, when a force sent to occupy the nearby village of Beymaru was routed and fled back to the cantonment. Hopes of receiving assistance from the outside world were also receding. Due to the onset of winter conditions, Nott was unable to send troops from Kandahar, while Sale at Gandamak was faced with a considerable dilemma when, on 10 November, he received the instructions to return to Kabul, not least because his wife, daughter and son-in-law were still there. He called a council of war to review the options, but concluded that, with 300 sick and wounded, and a shortage of ammunition, supplies and transport, the forcing of a passage back up the passes was not a practicable proposition. It is unclear why he did not remain at Gandamak, where he would have been in a position to support a force retreating down the passes, but he decided to withdraw to Jalalabad and await developments there. On 22 November, the tribal leaders were joined from Bamian by Akbar Khan, who immediately became the rallying point against the British.

Having received Elphinstone’s advice, which he repeated with growing urgency over the following weeks, Macnaughten began to negotiate. The tribal leaders’ initial demand was that the army should simply surrender, but this Macnaughten rejected.\textsuperscript{12} Eventually, at a meeting on 11 December, a treaty was hammered out, the main provisions of which were the withdrawal of all British troops from Afghanistan within three days, the supply to them of food, fodder and transport, the return of Dost Mohammed, a general amnesty and an undertaking that no British force would ever again invade the country. It would be left to Shah Shuja to decide whether he wished to stay in Kabul or leave with the British. The treaty was not, however, acted upon – Macnaughten, still hopeful of assistance from Kandahar, procrastinated, while the chiefs debated with Shah Shuja whether he might remain as their king. A further meeting was arranged for 23 November, but the previous evening Akbar Khan conveyed to Macnaughten a proposition that in return for his receiving a substantial British subsidy and appointment as Shah Shuja’s vizier, the British would be allowed to over-winter in the Bala Hissar. As part of the deal, a leading tribal leader would be handed over as a hostage. Macnaughten duly signed a paper consenting to this highly dubious arrangement and thereby sealed his doom, since its purpose was simply to test his good faith. Despite warnings, he attended the meeting outside the
cantonment, at which he and his companions were seized and, in the fracas that followed, he was killed, probably by Akbar Khan himself. His remains were then displayed at the entrance to the Kabul bazaar.

With thick snow now on the ground and temperatures below freezing, Eldred Pottinger, the ‘hero of Herat’ and one of the survivors of the Charikar massacre, took over the task of negotiating terms with Akbar Khan and the chiefs. Fresh demands were made, but by the New Year the chiefs had signed a treaty very much on the lines agreed with Macnaughten on 11 December, explicitly promising the army a safe passage back to the frontier. On 6 January, therefore, a force of 4,500 men, accompanied by over 12,000 camp followers, began their march, but not before Elphinstone had again been wracked by agonies of indecision. When half the force was on its way, he tried to stop them, but found he had left it too late. As they went, they passed the Bala Hissar, where they could undoubtedly have found a safe refuge until relief arrived the following spring. Shah Shuja was simply left to his fate: three months later, when he finally emerged from the security of the Bala Hissar, he was, predictably, murdered.

By the end of the first day of the retreat, the force, already in a state of considerable disorder, had travelled just five miles, and both soldiers and civilians were faced with a night in deep snow and sub-zero temperatures. Many did not survive. The next day, now little more than a rabble, it moved on a further five miles, to the head of the Khurd–Kabul pass. Akbar Khan, who was hovering close by, was clearly, despite assurances, either unwilling or unable to control the Ghilzai chiefs and, as the force pushed down the pass on the third day, it came under heavy fire, with a loss of some 3,000 lives. Akbar Khan then offered to take the British ladies, together with their husbands and children, into his protection. By the following morning the single British regiment in the retreat, the 44th Foot, had no more than 100 survivors from an original tally of 500, while the Indian regiments had fared even worse. By the end of the fourth day, having suffered, with the camp followers, some 10,000 casualties, the remnants of the force reached more open country. They then decided to make a dash for it, but were still ten miles from the last remaining pass, at Jagdulluk, the following morning. Throughout most of that day they pressed on under withering fire and finally halted, exhausted, in the course of the afternoon. Akbar Khan again made contact with them, and Elphinstone and Shelton were taken as hostages. The survivors remained near Jagdulluk the following day, but, having heard nothing from the hostages, decided to push on. They found the pass blocked and were again mercilessly shot down. The next morning, at Gandamak, a mere 20 survivors made a last stand, until all were massacred. A single horseman, Dr Brydon, was the only one of the force to reach Jalalabad. The garrison there hung out lights and blew bugles at intervals, but no one else appeared. So ended what was, in Wellington’s words:

a blow from the effects of which we shall not recover for some time. There is not a Moslem heart from Peking to Constantinople which will not vibrate when reflecting upon the fact that the European ladies and other females attached to the troops at Cabul were made over to the tender mercies of the Moslem Chief who had with his own hand murdered Sir William Macnaughten, the representative of the British Government at the Court of the Sovereign of Afghanistan. It is impossible that that fact should not produce a moral effect injurious to British Influence and Power
throughout the whole extent of Asia, and particularly among the Moslem population of the British Dominions in the Peninsula of India and the Dependencies thereof.¹³

There were now two pressing problems. One was to rescue the hostages, the other was to relieve Sale’s brigade, which was holding out at Jalalabad. Having arrived there, Sale had proceeded to rebuild the city’s dilapidated fortifications and was able to procure enough forage and provisions from the surrounding countryside to last him through the siege. Following a major earthquake in February, the fortifications had again to be rebuilt, but this was rapidly achieved. Early in March the garrison sallied out and dispersed the force which Akbar Khan had been gathering and which had been harassing the defenders. The following month, as Akbar Khan reassembled his force in increasing strength, a full-scale attack drove them off, with heavy losses. Akbar Khan and his men abandoned the siege and took to the hills. At the same time, Nott in Kandahar was also having problems. A disaffected son of Shah Shuja, Prince Suffer Jang, had gathered a tribal lashkar and prepared an onslaught on the city. In response, Nott expelled all the residents and prepared for a siege. Early in March he was lured out with the bulk of his force and, in his absence, a mass attack was made on the city. However, the defenders managed to hold out and, as at Jalalabad, Nott was eventually able to defeat his opponents and clear them from the area. The garrison at Ghazni, on the other hand, was not as fortunate: its water supply gave out and it was forced to surrender.

In Calcutta, meanwhile, an emotionally shattered Auckland had departed, leaving the decisions on policy towards Afghanistan to his successor, Ellenborough. The latter at first decided that he would withdraw from Afghanistan as soon as he honourably could:

not from any deficiency of means to maintain our position, but because we are satisfied that the king we have set up has not, as we were erroneously led to imagine, the support of the nation over which he has been placed.¹⁴

When news of the success at Jalalabad came in, he was tempted to conclude that honour had been satisfied, but was soon to be disillusioned. Letters from Wellington and Peel strongly suggested that something more had to be done,¹⁵ and they seem to have reflected the public mood, which had been stirred by the publication in instalments of Lady Sale’s journal. There was doubtless much agreement with her sentiments:

let us show the Afghans that we can both conquer them and revenge the foul murder of our troops; but do not let us dishonour the British name by sneaking out of the country like whipped pariah dogs … I have been a soldier’s wife too long to sit down tamely whilst our honour is tarnished in the sight and opinion of savages.¹⁶

Perhaps even more pertinently, Ellenborough’s generals were of a similar opinion. After initial problems, a force under General Pollock had breached the Khyber Pass, by means of using a new tactic of ‘picketing the heights’. As the main column advanced, troops were sent up the high ground on each side, so that they could command the defenders
from above, and this stratagem worked well. By the middle of April, Pollock was at Jalalabad and the garrison had been relieved. Ellenborough was, however, still in favour of withdrawal, and ordered Nott and Pollock to draw back to positions where they would have ‘certain and easy communication with India’. Nott simply replied that on account of the climate, he would be unable to move before October, while Pollock argued that a withdrawal would ‘have the very worst effect – it would be construed into a defeat, and our character as a powerful nation would be entirely lost in this part of the world’. There were also, he pointed out, the hostages to consider. Early in July, therefore, Ellenborough changed his mind. Both generals were still to withdraw, but could do so by way of Kabul, if they considered this to be feasible. Neither needed any urging: early in August, Nott was on his way from Kandahar and Pollock set out from Jalalabad later in the month. As his men marched back up the passes to Kabul, the sights they met were grim – ‘skeletons thrown into heaps of eighty and a hundred’, many of them ‘having hair of a colour which enabled us to recognise the remains of our own countrymen’. At Jagdulluk, his troops dislodged the tribesmen opposing them by again ‘picketing the heights’, and a few days later they defeated Akbar Khan’s main force at Tezin. By the middle of September Pollock was in Kabul, where he was joined two days later by Nott, who had defeated a force before Ghazni and had then razed the town’s citadel and fortifications. A contingent was promptly sent to Bamian to rescue the hostages, who had, however, already secured their freedom and were on their way to Kabul. The two armies then set about inflicting some ‘retribution’ on the Afghans. The great Kabul bazaar was blown up and the villages of Istalif and Charikar destroyed, along with much other rural property, trees and crops. Mohan Lal, who had bravely stayed in Kabul after the retreat and had been a valuable source of information about developments in the capital, was distressed when Afghans suffered who had helped him during his stay.

The combined force then withdrew to India, suffering casualties as it was attacked by Afridis on its way through the Khyber Pass. When it reached Ferozepur, Ellenborough organised extensive ceremonial displays in its honour, but this empty triumphalism failed to mask the scale of the British reverse.

The damage done by the First Anglo-Afghan War was both material and psychological. Including the 4,500 killed during the retreat, some 15,000 British officers and soldiers lost their lives. The number of camp followers who died is unknown, but was certainly even greater. The losses inflicted on the Afghans, both human and material, were severe. The total cost, met from Indian revenues, was of the order of £20 million. The economy of northern India also suffered, partly through the loss of some 50,000 camels. But the psychological damage was worse. The myth of British invincibility was shattered and fires of rebellion stoked. The Sikhs were encouraged to take on the British three years later, and it is significant that most of the regiments that had served in Afghanistan during the war had to be suppressed or disbanded at the time of the Indian Mutiny.

In reviewing the war, it is the strategic question that is perhaps the most interesting. Were the British blinded by excessive Russophobia? That Russophobia existed is undeniable, but it has to be said that the perception of Russia as an expansionist power was well founded on her activities in the Caucasus and beyond during the 1820s and 1830s. Moreover, even if one agrees with Heytesbury that there was no danger of a Russian invasion of India and dismisses de Lacy Evans and the hawks, the more subtle
question, posed by Ellenborough, remains: would it have been wise to allow Russia, using Persia as her surrogate, to extend her influence, via Herat, to the immediate vicinity of British India? Auckland certainly thought not:

> We could scarcely, with prudence, allow this new and more formidable element of disorder and intrigue to be established, without opposition, on our frontiers. The extraordinary excitement which has been produced in the public mind, as well as in the Punjaub as in Affghanistan, in consequence of the approach of the Persian power, is also a signal to us of the mischief which might arise, were that power to acquire a settled authority or influence over all the Affghan countries.22

Underlying his concern was the consciousness that the British power in India rested on coercion, not consent. All were very aware of this, to the extent that a much more experienced man like Lord Metcalfe was capable of saying that:

> Our situation in India has always been precarious … We are still a handful of Europeans governing an immense empire without any firm hold in the country, having warlike and powerful enemies on all our frontiers, and the spirit of disaffection dormant, but rooted universally among our subjects. The insuperable separation which exists between us and our subjects renders it necessary to keep them in subjection by the presence of a military force, and impossible to repose confidence in their affection or fidelity for assistance in the defence of our territories.23

It was understandable, therefore, that the British should have concluded that some action had to be taken to keep Afghanistan free of Russian influence and the contamination that this might cause to British India. In strategic terms, moreover, it could be maintained that the war was not altogether a failure.24 British India had shown itself unable to seize and hold Afghanistan, but its ability to project its force there, which Dost Mohammed had underestimated, had been proved. The Dost returned to Afghanistan as the British withdrew and, apart from a brief foray during the Sikh Wars, was careful to avoid entanglements outside his borders. In 1855 and 1857 he concluded two treaties with the British, to which he adhered, and he kept aloof from the Russians. He took advantage neither of the Crimean War nor of the Mutiny, when, according to Lord Roberts, the Punjab would very probably have been lost had he intervened.25 A ‘long peace’ of nearly 30 years was also secured between Britain and Russia in Central Asia. The British occupied Sind in 1844 and the Punjab in 1849, while in 1844 the Russians established themselves on the Aral Sea and pushed some distance up the Sri Darya. But that was as far as matters went until later in the century.

If the strategy might have been justified, however, the tactics employed to realise it are more open to criticism. Here, there were a succession of mistakes, born of faulty political intelligence and miscalculation. They included the conclusions that there was no prospect of a mutually acceptable accommodation between Dost Mohammed and Ranjit Singh, that the Sikhs would be willing to invade Afghanistan, that Dost Mohammed would be an unreliable ally, that the invasion should proceed despite the Persian retreat from Herat.
and the disowning by the Russians of their envoys, and, above all, that Shah Shuja would, backed by a British army, be acceptable to the Afghans. At the military level, too, there were many shortcomings. The Company’s army was, as will have been clear from the narrative, wholly unprepared and unsuited for the military operations it had to perform in Afghanistan. It exemplified the precept that there are never any bad soldiers, only bad officers. In general, the calibre of officers was poor. Those in command had risen over the years on the basis of seniority rather than merit, and were, with a few exceptions, unfit to lead troops. The military fell out with the political officers, the Company officers resented the officers seconded from the British Army, the Bengal and Bombay officers despised each other and all were jealous of their status and privileges.

In the last analysis, however, the First Anglo-Afghan War was a classic example of an asymmetric conflict in which the weaker side managed successfully to apply what strengths it had to its opponent’s weaknesses. In set battle, disciplined infantry, supported by cavalry and artillery, could be relied upon to defeat a considerably more numerous force of irregulars, which is what happened outside Jalalabad, when Sale’s garrison routed an Afghan force six times larger than its own. In Afghanistan, however, the terrain was often such that it was difficult to deploy troops in regular formation, and this is where the Afghans scored. Their jezails outranged the British muskets, and this enabled them, using cover, to harass British troops with comparative immunity. In the retreat from Kabul, they used this tactic with decisive results. Macnaughten himself saw the problem clearly:

We have learned, by the experience of this rebellion, one important fact, which is that our regular European and Hindoostanee troops fight against Afghans, in their native hills, to a great disadvantage. The superior agility of the latter enables them to evade pursuit, and their fuzils, or long guns, carry with deadly precision to a distance where our muskets are harmless. There is now no enemy to oppose us in the open plain, and should we hereafter be forced into hostilities the desultory mountain warfare will doubtless be that with which we shall have to contend.26

Their other problem arose from the fact that the Afghans were considerably underestimated and dismissed as ‘savages’. The hatred engendered by the sight of their country being invaded by infidels, the implacability with which they resisted the invader, their toughness and resilience, their readiness to suffer and accept casualties, were wholly unexpected. This was to be by no means the last time that these qualities were to confound an invading power.
Part III
The Second Anglo-Afghan War
During his long reign, Dost Mohammed managed gradually to extend his rule over the country. He occupied Kandahar in 1855, parts of northern Afghanistan in 1859 and Herat in 1863. His death in the latter year left his kingdom in turmoil, with a dozen or so of his twenty-seven sons competing for the throne. The power struggle that ensued lasted several years and it was not until 1868 that his chosen successor, Sher Ali, was able to secure a permanent ascendancy. The Indian government, which had followed a policy of strict neutrality and non-intervention while the power struggle lasted, recognised him as Amir in October of that year.

During the 1850s, Britain had maintained a friendly relationship with Dost Mohammed, fortified by subsidies and the two treaties, and had intervened in 1856 to force Persia to abandon another attempt to occupy Herat. Beyond that, however, it had followed a policy of ‘masterly inactivity’ on the north-west frontier. Particularly following the Mutiny, it had seemed to be sensible to concentrate on India’s internal stability and well-being, rather than pursue expansionist policies. No strategic value, nor material gain, was seen in trying to advance further what some termed the ‘haphazard frontier’ of British India, where it met the lands occupied by the eastern Pushtoons and Baluchs. During the 1860s, however, the map of Central Asia began to change. Within Russia, there had for some years been argument over the question of a ‘forward policy’ in Asia. The principal doves were the Foreign Minister, Prince Gortschakov and the Finance Minister, Mikhail Reutern. Ranged against them were the influential Head of the Asiatic Department of the Foreign Ministry, Nikolai Ignatiev, the commercial and manufacturing elites, and, above all, the officer corps, headed by Prince Alexander Baryatinsky, the recently victorious Commander-in-Chief of the army in the Caucasus. The latter’s view was the obverse of that of the British advocates of a ‘forward policy’ in Central Asia: he believed that the British were intending to march northwards from the Persian Gulf and from the east through Afghanistan, with the intention of establishing themselves on the Caspian Sea. ‘If the British flag appears on the Caspian’, he pronounced, ‘it will deal a death blow not only to our influence in the East and on foreign trade there, but to the political autonomy of our empire generally.’ In 1863, with the hawks in the ascendant, the Russians steadily annexed the Central Asian khanates, and within a decade they had all fallen. Chimkent was taken in 1864 and Tashkent in 1865, while Bokhara was made a protectorate in 1868 and Samarkand occupied the same year. In 1869 the Russians started to build a major base at Krasnovodsk on the Caspian Sea. Finally Khiva fell in 1872 and also became a protectorate. In several cases, over-zealous commanders had taken matters into their own hands, but invariably, their successes brought them honours and rewards rather than rebuke. In a circular letter to foreign governments in November 1864, Gortschakov insisted that Chimkent was to be the limit of the Russian advance, only for
the local commander, General Chernyeyev, to attack and seize Tashkent on his own initiative the following summer. In total, the Russian advances represented a major political, as well as military, success and had a considerable effect as far away as India. A new province of Russian Turkestan was set up, with Tashkent as its capital and General Kaufmann as its first Governor-General. To the world at large, and to Britain in particular, it seemed that Russia was engaged in a policy of expansion southwards, masked by cynical declarations that such was not her intention. However, relations between Britain and Russia remained reasonably good. The British government were prepared to acquiesce in the Russian occupation of Khiva, the reasons for which were explained by the Russians through diplomatic channels, while both sides were in agreement that the integrity of Afghanistan should be maintained and the Russians conceded that it should remain outside their sphere of influence.

An unusual feature of the Second Anglo-Afghan War was that its rationale had been extensively discussed by the British and Indian governments several years before it was undertaken. A debate over the nature of the British response to the Russian advance in Central Asia was prompted in 1868 with the dispatch to the Government of India of a memorandum written by Sir Henry Rawlinson, a member of the Advisory Council of the Secretary of State for India. During the First Anglo-Afghan War, he had been a Political Agent on Macnaughten’s staff, but thereafter had had little experience of the subcontinent. He did not explicitly recommend military intervention in Afghanistan, but urged that British authority should be extended over the country. The Emir, Sher Ali, should be subsidised and strengthened at Kabul, our position at that capital being rendered as secure and paramount as would have been Burnes’ position at Kabul at the Court of Dost Mohammed in 1837, if he had been supported by the full weight of Lord Auckland’s authority and resources.

Rawlinson also suggested the establishment of a military base at Quetta and pressed for the extension of the railway as far as Multan and Peshawar. His views were strongly contested by the Viceroy, Sir John Lawrence, and his senior officers and officials, who saw grave disadvantages in any entanglement in Afghanistan. Summing up a lengthy expression of their views, the Viceroy put forward a classic defence of the ‘close border’ policy:

We object to any active interference in the affairs of Afghanistan by the deputation of a high British officer with or without a contingent, or by the forcible or amicable occupation of any post or tract in that country beyond our own frontier, inasmuch as we think such a measure would, under present circumstances, engender irritation, defiance, and hatred in the minds of the Afghans, without in the least strengthening our power either for attack or defence. We think it impolitic and unwise to decrease any of the difficulties which would be entailed on Russia, if that Power seriously thought of invading India, as we should certainly decrease them if we left our own frontier, and met her half way in a difficult country, and possibly in the midst of a hostile or exasperated population. We foresee no limits to
the expenditure which such a move might require. ... And we think that the objects which we have at heart, in common with all interested in India, may be attained by an attitude of readiness and firmness on our frontier, and by giving all our care and expending all our resources for the attainment of practical and sound ends over which we can exercise an effective and immediate control.

Should a foreign Power, such as Russia, ever seriously think of invading India from without, or, what is more probable, of stirring up the elements of disaffection or anarchy within it, our true policy, our strongest security, would then, we conceive, be found to lie in previous abstinence from entanglements at either Cabul, Candahar, or any similar outpost; in full reliance on a compact, highly-equipped, and disciplined army stationed within our own territories, or on our own border.6

Broadly speaking, this was the policy that was followed by the Gladstone administration up to 1874. As soon as Sher Ali was seen finally to have secured the Afghan throne, efforts were made to establish a friendly relationship with him. He started to receive subsidies, and in 1869 he was invited to meet Sir John Lawrence’s successor, Lord Mayo, at a conference at Ambala. There, reflecting the problems he had had in securing his throne and his dissatisfaction at not having received British support during the process, he pressed for a treaty that would give him unconditional support if attacked and that would recognise the legitimacy of himself and his heirs. While Mayo was personally sympathetic, London was not prepared to go that far, and the Amir was told merely that he would have ‘warm countenance and support, discouragement of his rivals, such material assistance as we may consider absolutely necessary for his immediate wants’. He was also explicitly assured that he would not be asked to receive any British troops, officers or Residents in his territory, and that the British would not interfere in his internal affairs.7

There matters rested until, with the fall of Khiva, Sher Ali became increasingly concerned at pressures building up on him from the north. Earlier, the British had undertaken a negotiation on his behalf, which had resulted in 1873 in the Russians agreeing to recognise his title over Badakhshan and the Wakhan which they had earlier disputed.8 The British also mediated over a frontier dispute between Persia and Afghanistan in the Seistan, and Sher Ali was considerably aggrieved at the award. A new Viceroy, Lord Northbrook, had also antagonised him by delivering a rebuke over his imprisonment of his son, Yakub Khan, to whom he had earlier promised safe conduct. In July 1973, Northbrook decided that it would be sensible to have a further exchange of views with Sher Ali over these and other issues. As Sher Ali was not prepared to receive a British Envoy in Kabul, it was arranged that his Prime Minister, Nur Mohammed, should come to Simla for discussions. There, in place of the guarantee of support against Russia that Sher Ali wanted, his envoy was assured only that if another problem arose with the Russians, it should be referred to the British government, who would try to resolve it ‘by negotiation and every other means in their power’. If this could not be done, and provided Sher Ali was not the aggressor, the British government would ‘afford him assistance in the form of arms and money, and will also, in case of necessity for such, aid him with troops’ – the British government, however, being the judge of the necessity.9
Sher Ali was then offered one million rupees and 15,000 rifles. He was clearly less than content and refused to touch the money, but had little option but to accept the situation. His relationship with the British over the next few years was not unruffled, but he did nothing that could be regarded as hostile, or even disobliging.

In 1874, the government in London changed. Disraeli became Prime Minister and Lord Salisbury Secretary of State for India. Dissatisfied with a policy of inaction and reliance on Sher Ali’s good faith, Salisbury began to needle Northbrook and, finally, early in 1875, sent him a dispatch which, in peremptory terms and with the minimum of argumentation, instructed him to arrange with Sher Ali for the establishment of a British Agency at Herat, possibly to be followed by one at Kandahar. The primary purpose would be to gather ‘more exact and constant information’ than was being provided by the Vakil, or ‘Native Agent’, employed at Kabul. A further object would be to demonstrate support for Afghanistan and discourage ‘counsels dangerous for the peace of Asia’. Northbrook’s response was to ask whether he could delay action and, on being told that he could, he proceeded to consult with his senior subordinates, in particular the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab. They were unanimous in opposing the proposal, and in June 1875, Northbrook returned a lengthy dispatch setting out his objections. He conceded that the presence of a British Agent at Herat might be useful, but everything depended on Sher Ali’s willing acceptance of the proposal, which would certainly not be forthcoming. Memories of the previous war were still very much alive in Afghanistan and Sher Ali’s position was not such that he could ignore his subjects’ feelings. He would also be concerned for the safety of the Agents. As things stood, the relationship with the Amir was satisfactory and nothing should be done to disturb it. If the proposition were to be put to the Amir and he were to reject it, this would damage the relationship and weaken British influence. In any case, the reporting of the Vakil had been wholly adequate. Further exchanges followed, with Salisbury insisting at some length that the Russian advances towards Afghanistan enhanced the possibility that they might by one means or another manage to establish their influence in that country, to the detriment of British interests. The presence of a British Agent, even if it did not deter such a development, would at least provide timely warning of it:

The case is quite conceivable, in which Her Majesty’s Government may be able by early diplomatic action to arrest proceedings on the frontier which a few weeks, or even days, later will have passed beyond the power even of the Government of St. Petersburg to control.

As a compromise, Salisbury suggested the dispatch of a temporary Embassy to Kabul on some other pretext, the purpose of which would be to secure Sher Ali’s agreement to a permanent Agency. Northbrook continued to disagree: he saw no evidence of a Russian intention to interfere in Afghanistan; he pointed out that if pressed to accept a British Agent, the Amir would certainly ask for unconditional assurances of support and large sums of money; and that without his wholehearted consent, the Agent would be prevented from functioning effectively. He also feared that to press Sher Ali too hard would be to risk another war with Afghanistan.

These exchanges of view took more than a year, and the issue was still unresolved when in April 1876, Northbrook was succeeded as Viceroy by Lord Lytton. A diplomat
by profession, Lytton’s record in India suggests that he was an impulsive, overbearing and intellectually arrogant man. The instructions he received from Salisbury, apparently drafted by himself, ignored entirely the considerations put forward by Northbrook and proposed that a strong line should be taken with the Amir. Although they were spelled out at greater length, the assurances the latter were to be given were no more substantial than those already tendered at Ambala and Simla, and he was to be told, if no satisfactory conclusion was reached, that he was ‘isolating himself, at his own peril, from the friendship and protection it is in his interest to seek and deserve’. In other words, the policy was now one of pressure and threat. Lytton’s first step, taken through the Vakil, was to ask Sher Ali to receive a temporary Embassy at Kabul, headed by an official, Sir Lewis Pelly, for the purpose of informing him formally of Lytton’s appointment and the assumption by Queen Victoria of the title of Empress of India. Sher Ali had no difficulty in seeing through this stratagem, and replied politely that he was delighted to learn of the two appointments, but saw no need for an Embassy. He would be unable to guarantee its safety, he foresaw trouble if he were unable to agree to its demands, and if he were to accept it, he would have to accept a Russian counterpart. If some consultation were required, he would be glad to send an Agent to India for the purpose. Lytton’s response was to reject the counterproposal and to articulate the threat set out above. However, Sher Ali again declined to receive Pelly and suggested that the Vakil should go to Simla and explain the situation to the Viceroy. Accordingly, in October 1876, the Vakil met the Viceroy and set out Sher Ali’s reservations, but was sent back with renewed instructions, agreeing to a meeting outside Afghanistan, but only subject to prior acceptance by the Amir of the proposal to locate British officers in his country. Should he not accept, the Viceroy ‘would be free to adopt his own course in his rearrangement of frontier relations, without regard to Afghan interests’. Afghanistan was, commented the Viceroy for good measure, in the position of an ‘earthen pipkin between two iron pots’.

These developments took place against the background of a deterioration in relations with Russia. As late as May 1876, Disraeli was still going as far as to say publicly that ‘far from being alarmed by Russia’s progress in Central Asia, I see no reason why Russia should not conquer Tartary as England had conquered India’. During the summer, however, the possibility of war between Russia and Turkey, which had been growing since the previous year, became acute, and the British Mediterranean Fleet was dispatched to Constantinople. At one point, the Cabinet believed that war with Russia was only weeks away. In parallel, London adopted a firmer line of policy over Central Asia, and began to take exception to Sher Ali’s habit of corresponding with General Kaufmann in Tashkent. This correspondence, which had started in 1870, was mostly of a courtesy nature. Sher Ali had shown it to the Indian government and had on occasion asked for advice on how to respond. At no point had the Indian government taken issue either with its contents or with the fact that it was taking place. Now, however, there were accusations of ‘intrigues’, and a confrontational diplomatic exchange ensued between London and Moscow. In Kabul, there was consternation at the Viceroy’s progressive tightening of the screws, supplemented as it was by action on the ground. In November, Quetta was permanently occupied as a British military base, while preparations were made to move British troops towards the Afghan frontier and the Indus was bridged for the purpose. At that point Sher Ali seems to have abandoned his objections to receiving a British envoy, but sent Nur Mohammed to Peshawar to set out his case. The discussions
with Sir Lewis Pelly, which started at the end of January 1877, lasted some six weeks, but made no progress. Nur Mohammed, no doubt exhausted by them, then fell ill and died, and Pelly, on Lytton’s instructions, broke off the negotiations. In the process, Lytton ignored a report that a fresh negotiator was on the way from Kabul with instructions to accept his demands. The conclusion can only be that he had decided on a rupture of relations with Sher Ali, regardless of anything the latter might now say or do, and the Vakil was withdrawn from Kabul.

In May 1877 the Near Eastern crisis once again deepened and war broke out between Russia and Turkey. Early in 1878, the Mediterranean fleet sailed to the Bosphoros and a detachment of 7,000 Indian troops was sent to Malta. The Russians then decided to take counter-measures in Central Asia. Kaufmann assembled a strong force in Turkestan, and in July 1878 a Russian envoy arrived at Kabul, with the apparent aim of concluding an alliance with Sher Ali. In Moscow, the report of a mission was at first denied, but it was not long before it was authenticated, the envoy in question being a General Stolietov. When the embassy was proposed, Sher Ali had apparently at first refused to accept it, but then felt that he had little choice. The British government had abandoned him, he was embarrassed by Khivan exiles who were using Afghanistan to continue to resist Russia, Russian armies were on the move in Turkestan, and there was the threat that the Russians might switch support to Abdur Rahman, his estranged nephew who some years earlier had sought asylum in Central Asia. Lytton took no account of Sher Ali’s predicament, nor of the distraction caused by the death in August of his favourite son, Abdullah Jan, but sent him a message demanding that he receive a British counter-mission. The Amir replied that he would receive the mission, but in his own time and not if it were forced upon him. In London, there was concern that no action should be taken until after a reply had been received to the protest over the Russian mission that had been made in Moscow, and Lytton was ordered not to move pending further instructions. Nevertheless, in defiance of orders, Lytton acted, and on 21 September an advance party of the mission, headed by a Major Louis Cavagnari, reached the Afghan post in the Khyber Pass. The Afghan commander had instructions to prevent Cavagnari proceeding, by force if necessary, and the latter was compelled to turn back.

The British Cabinet were predictably angry with Lytton, but conscious that British prestige was now involved. Opinion in the Cabinet was divided and stormy meetings took place, some urging that only limited action should be taken and others that no immediate action should be taken at all. Salisbury was now among the doves, but Cranbrook, his successor as Secretary of State for India, insisted, somewhat surprisingly, on strong action. The view of the military, both in London and in India, was also that the scale of military action must be such as to guarantee its success. The final decision, therefore, was in favour of war. An ultimatum was dispatched to Sher Ali on 31 October, giving him a mere three weeks in which to reply, an impossibly short time given the state of communications with Kabul. When no reply came, war was declared.

Sher Ali was not an easy man with whom to deal. As his father’s chosen successor, he was, not without justification, aggrieved that he had received no British support during the six years during which he had had to contend for the throne, and that when he had finally secured it, the British were not prepared to give him any formal assurances of support, nor indeed any assurances that did not leave them wholly free to decide whether to respond or not if called upon to fulfil them. However, as events were soon to show, he
was entirely justified in his contention that if he were to receive one or more British Agents, this would merely antagonise his people, weaken his own position and place the Agents themselves at considerable risk. On the British side, it was understandable that there were strong misgivings about Russian intentions towards Afghanistan, and that there should have been the feeling that the solution was not to be found in St Petersburg, where diplomatic representations seemed only to evoke lies and evasions, but in Central Asia itself. The dispatch of a Russian mission to Kabul was certainly highly provocative and could not reasonably be ignored. But to suppose that the posting of British Agents in Afghanistan would be a sensible and adequate response was seen by many at the time to be a grave mistake, and the determination to pursue it to the point of estrangement, and even war, was strongly contested, both in India and in London. Lytton’s precipitate rush to war, just when it seemed that Sher Ali might be prepared to make concessions, was seen as particularly foolish. Also defective were the military calculations. Even though only limited advances into Afghanistan were envisaged, the danger of being sucked into a costly and dangerous conflict over long and vulnerable supply lines should have been evident, if only from the experience of the First Anglo-Afghan War. Events were to justify not only Sher Ali, but also the critics of the Disraeli government’s overall policy.
In the wake of the Indian Mutiny, the Indian army had been reformed, but was still lacking effectiveness and professionalism. The proportion of British units had been considerably increased. Many ‘native’ companies, and even regiments, were now formed on an ethnic or caste basis, so that Sikhs lived and fought with Sikhs, Gurkhas with Gurkhas, and so on, with corresponding advantages in terms of cohesion and morale. However, the calibre of the officer corps remained uneven, with promotion still dependent on length of service rather than merit. With the exception of the Punjab Frontier Force, the army had done little campaigning, had never operated in large formations and was largely untried in battle. Many regiments were under-strength and the system of short-service engagements in the British regiments meant that many of the troops were inexperienced and unacclimatised. Intelligence gathering was still neglected and often inadequate. Above all, the army’s logistics organisation was appalling – some, indeed, maintained that there was no organisation at all. Although the railway now ran to the Indus, transport beyond it was still reliant on animals and, even with the denuding of northern India, their numbers were inadequate, they died in droves, and there was barely an operation that was not to some extent hindered by lack of transport. Although the numbers of camp followers was reduced, an army on the march was still burdened with a large baggage train and retinue of hangers on. Communications, however, with the introduction of the telegraph and heliograph, were now reasonably good. A submarine telegraph cable had been laid between Britain and India a few years previously, and armies on the march erected telegraph lines as they advanced. Command and control, therefore, was now, for much of the time, virtually immediate.

In terms of arms and equipment, the infantry were now equipped with breech-loading rifles, either the Martini-Henry or Snider. The Gatling Gun was just making its appearance, although it tended to jam. The artillery, however, was significantly inferior to that used in Europe and was even outmatched on occasion by its Afghan counterpart. On the Afghan side, Sher Ali had spent considerable efforts, with the help of Turkish instructors, to put together a respectable army. It amounted to some 50,000 men and was adequately equipped, particularly in terms of artillery. It fought several battles with the British, and the war was therefore much less asymmetric than its predecessor. The Afghan armies were, moreover, supported by large numbers of tribal irregulars, some paid by the government, some operating on their own account. They were mobile and aggressive, and caused considerable difficulties for the invading armies, not least by harassing their lines of communication.
Despite the long warning it had had, the Indian army was less than fully prepared for war. Intelligence on Afghanistan was lacking, transport problems had barely been addressed and the objectives of the war had not been thought through. Occupation of the whole country was out of the question and even an advance to Kabul would be extremely risky. Lytton was anxious to keep the scale of operations as small as possible, but Haines, his Commander-in-Chief, distrusted Lytton’s judgement and was insistent that the forces deployed should be of a size that, in his view, would be fully adequate to deal with the Afghan army on its own ground. The compromise that was eventually reached, after much argument and bad blood, was that the army should advance into Afghanistan on three fronts. To the north, a force of 16,000 men and 48 guns under General Sam Browne would advance through the Khyber. In the centre, General Frederick Roberts, the one man to make a name for himself during the war, was to occupy the Kurram Valley and Khost, with a force of 6,500 men and 18 guns. In the south, Quetta was to be occupied with 5,500 men and 18 guns, and an advance made on Kandahar under General Donald Stewart, with 7,000 men and 60 guns. Other units were to form a reserve and guard the lines of communication. It was hoped that these three advances would sufficiently overawe Sher Ali and bring him to terms.

Browne’s operations in the Khyber, which commenced on 21 November, were initially ineffective. All depended on the capture of the strategic fort at Ali Masjid, and his plans for a frontal attack, supplemented by a flanking movement, became unstuck when the flanking columns found the going unexpectedly hard and even lost their way. The frontal attack stalled, but when it was renewed the following day, it was found that the Afghans had fled. Three days after commencing his advance, Browne was at Dakka, at the western exit to the Pass, and by 20 December he was at Jalalabad. In the Kurram, Roberts had first to take the Peiwar Kotal, a steep and heavily defended pass at the head of the valley. He, too, decided on a flanking movement, but was careful to lead it himself. A succession of Afghan barricades were carried on the ridges protecting the pass, and a final movement directed by Roberts succeeded in turning the Afghan flank. A general retreat then took place and Roberts was left in command of the Pass, having outmanoeuvred a defending force that was, in numbers at least, superior to his own. With winter fast approaching, he advanced towards Khost, but was unable to hold the area in the face of tribal resistance and withdrew to Kurram for the winter. In the south, meanwhile, Stewart had
considerable difficulties in organising transport and communications along the route by which the Army of the Indus had marched in 1839, and it was not until the New Year that he was able to make his advance on Kandahar. After minimal fighting, he occupied the city on 8 January, having lost some 12,000 camels in the course of the advance.

In the face of the British successes on the Khyber and Kurram, Sher Ali lost all appetite for further resistance. Leaving his son Yakub Khan in Kabul as Regent, he departed for Mazar-i-Sharif on 13 December with the remnants of Stolietov’s mission. There, he received letters from Kaufmann rebuffing his request for the intervention of Russian troops and advising him to come to terms with the British. His request to plead his cause personally with the Tsar in St Petersburg was also rejected. Ill and totally dispirited, he died at Mazar on 21 February.

Lytton had now to decide what to do about Afghanistan. His troops were sitting at the end of long and vulnerable supply lines, Browne’s force in particular being harassed by the Pushtoon tribes between Jalalabad and the Khyber. Yakub Khan was not the man that his father or grandfather had been, but an Afghan leader was desperately needed, he was the only available candidate and he had already put out feelers for an end to hostilities. It was therefore decided to deal with him and a treaty was proposed, providing for the Khyber to be ceded to India, and for Kurram, together with Pishin and Sibi, two areas beyond Quetta, to be placed under British control. A regular subsidy would be paid, Britain would be responsible for Afghanistan’s foreign relations and British officers would be stationed in Afghanistan. Yakub Khan was unhappy at the prospective loss of

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Map 7.1 The Second Anglo-Afghan War: the invasion routes
territory, but was prepared to accept a British Agent at Kabul, and in May he came down to Gandamak, to which Browne’s force had now advanced. There, at the beginning of June, he signed a treaty which broadly incorporated the British demands. He made the concession over British Agents which his father had desperately resisted, and he lost territory. He may have felt that he had little choice, but he can have been under no illusions that both concessions would be bitterly resented by his people. For the moment, however, everything was settled. Browne immediately retired from Gandamak, his force suffering on the march from the heat and a virulent outbreak of cholera, while Stewart was to withdraw from Kandahar once the hot weather was over. Kurram having been annexed, Roberts’ troops held their ground. Louis Cavagnari was appointed Agent at Kabul and reached there, with a small escort, in the course of July. Lytton was triumphant and was warmly commended by both Government and Parliament in London. Honours and medals were distributed all round. Arguments continued about the ideal location of the ‘scientific frontier’, which Lytton had earlier put at the Hindu Kush:

The more I think over the geographical facts of our position, the stronger becomes my impression that the real key to it is Kabul … From Herat to the north-east extremity of Cashmere one great continuous watershed seems to indicate the natural defensive bulwark of India. I am inclined to think that, if we took our stand along this line, with a sufficient margin north of it to leave us in command of the passes on both sides, our position would be a sufficiently strong one for all defensive purposes.

Roberts, too, was one of those who believed that Herat should be occupied. There was, however, at least a plausible argument that with the main passes into Afghanistan now in British, rather than in tribal, hands, a ‘scientific frontier’ had been reached, and the ‘forward policy’ school made much of this. It was felt that the Russians had been worsted and the Disraeli administration believed that British standing in Europe had been enhanced. To a sceptical observer, it must have seemed all too reminiscent of the atmosphere after the capture of Kabul in 1839. So it turned out; and once again hubris was to be followed by nemesis.

Six weeks after Cavagnari had taken up his post in Kabul, six Afghan regiments arrived there from Herat. In a mutinous mood, they promptly demanded the arrears of pay owing to them and, when these were only partly forthcoming and they demanded the remainder, they were told to go to the British Residency and obtain them there. When they arrived at the Residency on 3 September, Cavagnari refused to listen to them and shots were fired. They then went off to collect their rifles and, accompanied by a city mob, proceeded to storm the Residency. In response to a plea for help, Yakub Khan sent down his Commander-in-Chief, but the latter was unhorsed and was fortunate to survive. Cavagnari was killed at an early stage and, after several hours’ stiff resistance, the Residency was burnt and all within it slaughtered. Of the 75-strong detachment of the Corps of Guides who formed Cavagnari’s escort, just seven, who had happened to be away from the Residency at the time, survived.

The news of the debacle reached Simla on 5 September and it was decided immediately that Kabul would have to be taken and retribution exacted, and that this had to be done quickly. Browne’s forces had long been dispersed and Stewart at Kandahar
was too far away. The only force remotely at hand was Roberts’ in the Kurram Valley. He accordingly left Simla on 6 September and six days later was back on the frontier, where a force of 6,600 men and 18 guns had been mustered. A swift advance was made over the Shutargadan Pass into the Logar Valley, where Roberts was met by Yakub Khan, who clearly had no stomach for a fight and may well have felt that his life would have been in danger had he stayed in Kabul. He tried unsuccessfully to persuade Roberts to hold back and ended by staying in the British camp, effectively as a prisoner. On 3 October, having squared the local chiefs and organised as much transport as possible, Roberts advanced on Kabul and two days later was at Charasiab, some six miles from the city. There he came up against a much more numerous force under the command of Nek Mohammed Khan, the Governor of Kabul, deployed on hills commanding a narrow defile through which the Logar River flowed. Delay would have been fatal, and so Roberts attacked. His troops managed to roll up the Afghan right wing and dislodge the Afghan force from their positions commanding the defile. Kabul was now within reach, but large numbers of Afghan troops and tribesmen still seemed likely to oppose the British advance. After a day of skirmishing, however, the Afghans again retreated and on 9 October Roberts occupied Kabul. He had gained his objective, but his position was still extremely exposed, with Afghan regulars in the city and on the surrounding hills, and hostile tribesmen gathering in increasing numbers. His communications through the Kurram had had to be abandoned and he was wholly reliant on the establishment of a fresh line through the Khyber, where a force under General Robert Bright was advancing on Jalalabad. By mid-November, the two forces had made contact and communications were opened with Peshawar. Meanwhile Roberts concentrated the bulk of his forces at Sherpur, a mile north of Kabul city, where Sher Ali had been constructing a large but still unfinished cantonment. Supplies, forage and fuel were collected, accommodation was constructed and work begun on the defences.

Roberts’ main task, however, was to exact retribution for the murder of Cavagnari, and his methods were harsh in the extreme. In this he was encouraged by Lytton:

> Every Afghan brought to death I shall regard as one scoundrel the less in a nest of scoundrelism. … Anyone found in arms should be killed on the spot like vermin … It is our present task to shed such a glare upon the last bloodstained page of Indian annals as shall sear the sinister date of it deep into the shamed memory of a smitten and subjugated people … To satisfy the conventions of English sentiment it will probably be necessary to inflict death only in execution of the verdict of some sort of judicial authority. But any such authority should be of the roughest and readiest kind … It is not justice in the ordinary sense, but retribution that you have to administer on reaching Kabul … Your object should be to strike terror, and strike it quickly and deeply … There are some things which a Viceroy can approve and defend when they have been done, but which a Governor General in Council cannot officially order to be done.3

Roberts was also to make haste ‘before the political weathercock at home has shifted … There will be more clamour at home over the fall of a single head than over a hundred heads that fall all at once’. Roberts proceeded not only to try to find and punish those
directly implicated in Cavagnari’s death, but also anyone who had opposed his march to Kabul and was thus ‘a rebel against the Amir’. Martial law was declared within a ten-mile radius of the capital and the death penalty decreed for anyone bearing arms within five miles. Rewards were offered for information given about culprits and two commissions were set up, one to investigate and the other to pass judgment. Sentences were given and carried out whether or not reasonable evidence had been forthcoming. The work of the commissions lasted more than a month, with daily hearings in the Bala Hissar. There is no way of knowing accurately how many were hanged: the Official History put the number as 87,\(^4\) while in reporting to Lytton, Roberts put it at 100.\(^5\) In his diary, Roberts’ Chief of Staff, Charles MacGregor, who participated in the proceedings, states that 76 had been executed, ‘all except about 10 for fighting against us’.\(^6\) What was happening soon became known in India and London, and Lytton came under sustained attack in Parliament, while even members of his own Council denounced the executions as ‘judicial murder’. Lytton then tried to shift the blame on Roberts and to suggest that it was a case of the military having ignored his instructions and got out of control. Given his communications to Roberts, his comment to the Secretary of State, Lord Cranbrook, that ‘privately, my impression is that the Kabul executions were unwise and that they may have tended to precipitate the recent hostile combination’, does not shed a favourable light on his character.\(^7\)

On the military front, Roberts’ position was still far from secure. His efforts to lay in supplies for the winter aroused strong resentment in the surrounding villages, some of which were demolished when they tried to resist. An insurgency developed, led by a prominent Sirdar, Mohammed Jan, and a mullah of great age and repute, the Mushk-i-Alam (Perfume of the Universe), who declared a jihad from his base at Ghazni. Yakub Khan having by now abdicated and left for India, his infant son was declared Amir. Whereas it had taken two years during the First Anglo-Afghan War for significant resistance to develop, this time it was only a matter of weeks. Partly, it may have been the effect of the executions and the depredations in the countryside, partly it may have been the influence of the Mushk-i-Alam, but equally it may have resulted from the fact that this time there was no Shah Shuja, no Amir with a claim of legitimacy, on the throne. Yakub Ali having gone, the British had formally assumed supreme authority and a British military governor had been appointed in Kabul. Early in December, with reports reaching him of movements of tribesmen towards Kabul, Roberts decided to reconnoitre in strength. Two columns were sent out to the west and south of the city, with orders to crush any advancing opposition before it could combine.

What Roberts did not know, his intelligence being faulty, was the size of the Afghan forces that were on the move. The two columns that he had sent out failed to locate them: instead, a small, separate contingent of 200 cavalry and four guns suddenly found itself confronted by a combined Afghan force of some 10,000 men. The contingent conducted a desperate fighting withdrawal and the guns had to be abandoned. At one point it seemed that the depleted cantonment might be overrun. However, first Roberts himself and then a regiment of Highlanders arrived on the scene, and the Afghan advance was halted at the Deh Mazang gorge just short of the city. Roberts then spent several days trying to dislodge the Afghans from the positions they had taken up on the hills overlooking Kabul, but sheer weight of numbers was against him and on 14 December he was forced to retreat and concentrate his forces in the cantonment. During the short period of
fighting, 81 of his men were killed and 213 were wounded, an unusually heavy toll. With these successes under their belts, the Afghans now turned their attention to the looting of Kabul. This was fortunate, as it gave Roberts a vital few days in which to strengthen the fortifications of the cantonment and work out a plan of defence. But he had only 7,000 men to cover an extensive perimeter and parts of it were still weak. He was sent an ultimatum demanding his withdrawal from Afghanistan, the restoration of Yakub Khan and the surrender of two officers as hostages, but had no hesitation in ignoring it.

Figure 7.1 Lord Lytton’s revenge (British Library, Eur E 218/171, courtesy of Knebworth House, www.knebworthhouse.com). In a letter to a friend, Lord Lytton vows to
avenge the murder of Major Cavagnari. He reports that four men had already been hanged on a gallows erected on the ruins of the Embassy.

Finally, on 22 December, he learnt that the Afghans had made up their minds to attack, and the defenders were therefore fully prepared when, shortly before dawn on the 23rd, the Mushk-i- Alam lit a bonfire to give the signal. Roberts’ estimate of the numbers opposing him was 60,000 and, even if this may have been an over-estimate, there can be no doubt that he was heavily outnumbered. The defenders were, however, able to bring enough firepower to bear to prevent the Afghans from breaching the defences. After some four hours, the attack slackened, and when it was resumed an hour later, it was not with the previous intensity. Roberts now sent out a force of cavalry and guns to take the Afghans in the flank in the most vulnerable sector. The Afghans began to retire and, in the face of further sallies, the retreat became total. When cavalry patrols were sent out the following day, it was found that the Afghans had melted away to their villages. Roberts reckoned that they had lost some 3,000 men, while his own casualties had been a mere five killed and 28 wounded. With reinforcements now arriving, he had more than 10,000 men under command and was able to turn his attention to a further strengthening of the cantonment and its surroundings. He also launched punitive raids on nearby villages and resumed his programme of courts martial and hangings. In Britain, criticism escalated and the policy of invading Afghanistan also came under strong attack. In his official report, Roberts tried to justify his judicial actions by claiming that they had controlled Afghan fanaticism and were essential for the safety of the British troops. But he was clearly less than candid in his assertions that nobody had been executed simply for fighting against the British, and the conclusion has to be that the strongest motive was revenge and that innocent men were hanged as an example to others. It all became an issue in the General Election that took place in the spring of 1880, and Gladstone made prominent use of it in what became known as his ‘Midlothian campaign’. Gladstone was, unusually, a firm believer in what, these days, would be called an ‘ethical foreign policy’. More particularly, he defended those whom he saw as oppressed peoples:

Remember the rights of the savage as we call him. Remember that … the sanctity of human life in the hill villages of Afghanistan among the winter snows is as inviolable in the eye of the Almighty God as can be your own. Remember that … mutual love is not limited by the shores of this island, is not limited by the boundaries of Christian civilisation, that it passes over the whole surface of the earth and embraces the meanest along with the greatest in its unmeasured scope.
Retreat

Although the attack on Sherpur had been driven off with little loss, it showed, in combination with the continued harassment of the Army’s lines of communication, the strength of the Afghans’ determination to resist the British occupation. As it has often been put, the British commanded the country only so far as the range of their guns, and they had never even seen most of it, let alone brought it under their control. No means of remedying this situation was in sight. Some 15,000 men were having to be deployed merely to secure the route from Kabul to the Khyber, while plans to mount operations in other parts of the country had had to be abandoned for lack of transport. The occupation was also proving to be a serious, and potentially crippling, burden on the Indian exchequer, and there was much concern for the morale of the ‘native’ troops as a result of their long campaigning away from India.

Therefore, everything pointed to the necessity of an early withdrawal, but the problem was how to ensure that Afghanistan could be retained as an effective buffer to further Russian encroachments. Lytton was not slow to be converted from his belief in the necessity of a ‘scientific’ frontier, and now argued that to remain in Afghanistan might provoke the Russians to make a pre-emptive advance in Afghan Turkestan, while a British withdrawal would remove that temptation. A Russian advance was not to be prevented by a British presence on the ground in Afghanistan, but by diplomatic action in St Petersburg. Not only did this line of reasoning not conceal the failure of his policy, it also left a key question unanswered, how to secure a strong and friendly Afghanistan on the British frontier. The best expedient that the Cabinet in London could find was to leave the country in three or more separate parts. Kandahar presented the least problem, since Yakub Khan’s nominee as Governor, Wali Sher Ali, had been recognised as such by the British, and could be supported, if not by a force in Kandahar itself, then from the base at Quetta. Herat could perhaps be left to the Persians (despite the earlier policy of keeping them out of it), and negotiations were opened in Teheran. For Kabul, there was merely a determination that in no circumstances would Yakub Khan be permitted to return, but neither was there an alternative ruler remotely in sight, despite assurances to the Afghans that Britain would accept anyone they might select as Amir. For Afghan Turkestan, there were not even the glimmerings of a solution.

To try to work something out, in February 1880 Lytton appointed a member of the Indian Government’s Political Department, Lepel Griffin, to go to Kabul as political adviser to Roberts. As a means of finding a ‘way out of that rat-trap’, he was instructed to ‘effect the withdrawal of our forces from Afghanistan by next autumn at the latest,'
making the best political arrangements that circumstances admit for carrying out this withdrawal and for the future administration of the country'.

Arriving in Kabul on 20 March, Griffin began consultations with leading Afghans, but found that he had been pre-empted: against all the odds, the choice of a new Amir had already effectively been made. On the abdication of Yakub Khan, the Russians had decided to lift their ban on Abdur Rahman’s participation in Afghan affairs, and they had now given him a small gift of money and arms, and had allowed him to leave Tashkent to try his fortune in his native country. He gathered a group of followers and by February 1880 had crossed into Afghan Turkestan. By 14 March, news of his progress was firm enough for Lytton to seek Cranbrook’s permission to recognise him as Dost Mohammed’s legitimate heir and offer him the throne. The proposal entailed the obvious risk that Abdur Rahman was merely a stalking horse for the Russians, and there were indeed rumours that there was a Russian adviser in his entourage. Cranbrook was accordingly sceptical, but gave Lytton permission to proceed. Early in April, therefore, Griffin sent a letter to Abdur Rahman by the hand of an Afghan intermediary, inviting him to declare his purpose in entering Afghanistan. The intermediary was also authorised to open discussions, making it clear that the British intended to leave the country and that the throne was there for the taking. Abdur Rahman’s response was friendly but noncommittal: he was indebted to the Russians, but equally hoped to establish a friendly relationship with the British. Might the solution not lie in a joint Anglo-Russian protectorate? In reply, Griffin insisted that this was unacceptable, but invited Abdur Rahman to come to Kabul, where no doubt a settlement could be agreed. The latter, who had meanwhile been journeying south without haste, was by now in a strong position, having made contact with numbers of Afghan chiefs and gathered widespread tribal backing. With or without British recognition, he was very probably assured of the throne. Even Lytton now realised that, realistically, it was more a question of Abdur Rahman dictating terms to the British than vice versa.

While continuing to gather support, he still did not hurry to Kabul, but asked for clarification on several issues, the position of Kandahar, the views of the British on his relations with Russia, the question of a resident British Agent, and what benefits and obligations he might expect as Amir. General Stewart, who at the beginning of May had arrived in Kabul from Kandahar and taken over command from Roberts, was doubtful of Abdur Rahman’s good faith and recommended that negotiations should be broken off. By now, however, a general election had taken place in Britain, Gladstone’s administration had taken office and a new Viceroy, the Marquis of Ripon, had been appointed in place of Lytton. Committed to a total evacuation of Afghanistan, the new government was anxious to keep the negotiations with Abdur Rahman going, even though Ripon, who saw him as ‘the most Russian of all the candidates’, was not overly happy. Further letters from Abdur Rahman were conciliatory, although urging that the boundaries of his state should be those settled with Dost Mohammed, i.e. including Kandahar and Herat. In early August, Stewart and Griffin held a durbar in Kabul at which Abdur Rahman was recognised as Amir, and Griffin then finally met him a few miles from the city. He made a good impression and was handed a letter conveying formal recognition. There was then a sharp dispute between Griffin and Stewart about leaving him the Sherpur cantonment intact and making him a gift of arms and ammunition. Stewart, who still distrusted him, thought this unwise, but was overruled.
The fortifications, 30 guns and 500,000 rupees were handed over. The settlement that was agreed included an assurance that Britain would not interfere in Afghanistan’s internal affairs, that no British envoy would be stationed at Kabul and that aid would be provided to help repel unprovoked aggression. In return, Abdur Rahman undertook not to have political relations with any country other than Britain, while Kandahar would remain independent and Britain would retain the territories ceded under the Treaty of Gandamak. After a brief meeting with Abdur Rahman on 11 August, Stewart and the British troops still in Kabul left for India. Despite the inevitable transport problems, the retreat was completed smoothly and without hostilities. By early September, all the 24,000 men involved had left Afghanistan.

In the south of the country, a very different story had meanwhile been unfolding. There, as part of the operations planned for the spring and summer, Stewart had left Kandahar for Kabul with his Bengal Army contingents, which were replaced by units of the Bombay Army under General Primrose. Stewart’s march to Kabul came close to disaster. With some 7,000 troops, an equal number of followers and 11,000 animals, he soon found his force being tracked by groups of armed tribesmen, while a ‘scorched earth’ policy adopted by the villagers along his route gave him considerable difficulty in procuring supplies. Three weeks into the advance and some 25 miles from Ghazni, he reached a point, at Ahmed Khel, where the hills came close to the road and the road itself crossed a spur. These heights were found to be occupied by a substantial force which was clearly going to oppose the advance. Stewart’s own troops were strung out over six miles of road, with only about half of them actually with him. Rather than wait for the remainder to catch up, he decided to advance with the units available, and was caught by some 15,000 enemy, horse and foot, who suddenly appeared over the hills and the spur and descended on his column. An onslaught by Afghan horsemen overwhelmed the British cavalry and forced them back on the infantry, who were left without time to deploy, or even, in some cases, to fix bayonets. The attackers came to within a few yards of Stewart and his staff, who drew their swords and prepared to defend themselves. However, the day was saved by the infantry, who managed to regain order and repulse the attack. By the end of an hour, the Afghans fled, leaving some 1,200 dead on the field. This was Stewart’s one and only battle, and he singularly failed to distinguish himself. His casualties were, however, light and he was able to resume his march, reaching Kabul just over a month after setting out.

Back in Kandahar, some 12,000 troops continued to sit on their bayonets, disturbed only by some small-scale skirmishing. In Herat, however, Yakub Khan’s brother, Ayub Khan, had been preparing to make a move and at the beginning of June he advanced on Kandahar with a force of 6–8,000 men, 36 guns and tribal irregulars. It was some days before it was realised that he was on the march, but towards the end of the month a force of some 2,500 men and six guns under General Burrows was sent out to meet him. Almost immediately, the British were in trouble. A force under Wali Sher Ali, which had earlier been sent to the west of Kandahar, mutinied, and the bulk of its men then defected to Ayub. Burrows at first retired, but then received orders that if at all possible, he was to try to bring Ayub Khan to battle, subject only to his judgement that he was strong enough to do so. The fear in British minds was that Ayub might be making for Ghazni and Kabul rather than Kandahar, and that if so, he might upset both the negotiations with Abdur Rahman and the plans for the withdrawal from the capital. Burrows accordingly
moved to intercept Ayub and the two armies met at the village of Maiwand. Burrows’ best course of action would have been to attack immediately, while Ayub Khan’s troops were still on their line of march. Instead, he drew up his units on open ground, to the right of which was a long, deep ravine, offering protection and concealment to the enemy. Both his flanks were unsupported and there was no reserve. An artillery duel then ensued, which became increasingly one-sided as Ayub’s guns were deployed and came into action. The British infantry were able to protect themselves to some extent by lying down, but the cavalry and artillery began to take casual ties. The British force was soon virtually surrounded and a sudden attack by irregulars, emerging from the ravine, threw the British infantry into confusion. A cavalry charge designed to restore the position failed, and what was left of the cavalry withdrew. After some four hours of fighting, the British force was in disorganised flight, which continued all the way to Kandahar. Many survived only because the Afghans gave up the pursuit in order to loot. Altogether, 21 officers and 948 men were killed, and 8 officers and 169 men wounded, not far short of half the force.

A number of factors contributed to the debacle. One was, again, the lack of reliable intelligence on Ayub’s strength, movements and intentions.

Another was the succession of tactical errors committed by Burrows. A third was the poor quality of many of the troops of the Bombay Army. From later accounts, it seems that the battle was a close-run thing, and that Ayub Khan’s infantry were close to collapse when the decisive irregular onslaught took place. The numbers of Afghan casualties were certainly many more than those suffered by the British, possibly of the order of 3–5,000. In the outcome, however, this was another ‘signal catastrophe’ and a decisive success for Ayub Khan and his men.

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Map 8.1 The Battle of Maiwand

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perimeter walls. Other than desultory shelling, little happened for some two weeks, but then the Afghans began to infiltrate into villages close under the walls and it seemed only a matter of time before an assault on the city would be made. In an attempt to forestall it, a major sortie was made on 16 August, but bad planning caused it to founder. The troops involved had to retreat under heavy fire, and some 100 were killed and a further 100 wounded. The sortie did, however, give the Afghans second thoughts about an assault, and a week later Ayub Khan abandoned the siege and took up positions some five miles from the city.

The news of the disaster at Maiwand necessitated some critical decisions in Simla and Kabul. Should the British troops still evacuate Kabul? Could Kandahar be relieved and, if so, by whom? It was quickly decided that it would be unwise to go back on the undertakings given to Abdur Rahman and that the evacuation should proceed as planned. While there were troops at Quetta that could be pushed forward to Kandahar, supply problems and tribal opposition in that quarter would be likely to cause delay. It therefore seemed preferable to dispatch a force from Kabul. Roberts, who had been chafing at his supersession there by Stewart, volunteered for the task and was given carte blanche to select the units who should go with him. His preference was for men of the ‘martial races’, Highlanders, Sikhs and Gurkhas, and he assembled a force of 10,000 men, with 18 guns, some 8,000 followers and 8,000 pack animals. Abdur Rahman, for his part, was not slow to realise the advantages of having the British deal with his likely opponent, Ayub Khan, and gave the expedition his full support. He sent out men in advance to help procure supplies and ease the way with the villagers along the route, with the result that Roberts had a trouble-free march. Nevertheless, from the point of view of discipline and organisation, the achievement was impressive. Taking minimal baggage, the force covered 300 miles in no more than 20 days. Picking up the garrison of Kalat-i-Ghilzai on the way, Roberts arrived at Kandahar on 31 August and made immediate plans for an attack on Ayub Khan’s army. This was mounted the next morning: a steady advance was made through villages, orchards and enclosures covering a gap between the hills to the west of Kandahar, and the force then wheeled right towards Ayub Khan’s camp. After much close quarters fighting, the camp was taken and the Afghans were soon in full retreat. However, the British cavalry failed to cut off the bulk of Ayub Khan’s force, and it succeeded in making good its escape. Ayub himself lived to fight another day.

It was now a question of tying up the loose ends of the war. The question whether or not to hold on to Kandahar revived the whole controversy in Britain and India between the adherents of a ‘forward policy’ and those of ‘masterly inactivity’. Both logistic and economic arguments favoured the abandonment of the city and a concentration on Quetta as the advance base guarding the southern approaches to India. Wali Sher Ali would clearly be unable to hold Kandahar on his own and the cost of maintaining a garrison there would be considerable. Opinions among both civilians and the military were divided, but these considerations, combined with the experience of the war and the Liberal Government’s own leaning in favour of a ‘close border policy’ decided the issue. Towards the end of 1880, Wali Sher Ali was persuaded to accept a pension in India and, early in the New Year, Abdur Rahman was told that Kandahar was his, provided that he could seize and hold it. Again, the gamble was considerable: there was no guarantee that he would succeed; Ayub Khan might well manage to take the city; and there was the real possibility that the latter might turn to the Russians for support. Once more, however, it
worked out better than the British had a right to expect. Having succeeded in establishing
his rule in Kabul, Abdur Rahman marched on Kandahar and defeated Ayub Khan in a
close-fought battle, at the same time sending a force from northern Afghanistan to take
Herat. He then ruled the country for all of two decades. His regime was brutal and
stultifying, and he had to ride out a succession of revolts across the country, but he
succeeded in holding it together and he died in his bed.

No reliable record exists of the casualties incurred in the course of the war. On the
British side, one calculation is that fatalities from hostilities and disease may have
amounted to some 10,000 in total and that, if sick and wounded were to be added in, they
may have amounted to as many as 40,000 in all. Afghan casualties are impossible to
calculate: all that can be said is that in set battles, even including Maiwand, they tended
to be many times greater than those of the British, while non-combatants, including
women and children, also suffered considerably. In terms of the economic costs, there is
also a murky picture. The original calculation was that the war cost £9.25 million of
which £3.75 million represented the cost of building a railway line to support Quetta.
Soon after, the figure was raised to £13.5 million, and later to £19.5 million. The main
reason for the discrepancies seems to have been the sheer weight of paperwork involved,
which entailed considerable delays in reconciling the accounts. Of the total, only £5
million was contributed from London, the remainder coming from Indian revenues. Once
again, India was denuded of transport animals and the economy suffered. The Afghan
economy was also disrupted and the country impoverished.

An interesting commentary on the outcome of the Second Anglo-Afghan war is a
memorandum by a member of the Viceroy’s Council, T. F. Wilson:

For 18 months the government has carried on a war for the establishment
of peace. Not a petty war, but one involving 50,000 men and more. This
has denuded India to a great extent of troops, and left our garrisons weak,
especially in European soldiers … The majority of the Viceroy’s Council
had protested against the war … Our Asiatic subjects see that we have met
with considerable difficulty and opposition, while the persistent drain on
the country for transport animals, such as bullocks, asses, mules, ponies,
and camels, has brought the matter home in a convincing manner to even
remote parts of India by the detrimental effect which it has more or less
exercised on agricultural industry … We have had to face extended
operations in Afghanistan, and a more or less prolonged occupation of the
country … (We) underestimated cost of war at 14 million, add to this
renewals required, pensions to Afghan collaborators – altogether no less
than 20 million. It is now nine months since we occupied Cabool – after a
resistance just sufficient to throw the Commander of the army off his
guard followed by the narrowest escape of his force from destruction; this
last resulting in a scare which has never been entirely shaken off. In fact,
the occupation of Cabool has been marked by three distinct epochs; the
first that of heedless audacity and misguided, unnecessary executions and
severity; the second by surprise and defeat, followed by timidity, want of
enterprise, and a general condonation of all offenses; and the third by
aimless, costly and weak attempts at diplomacy resulting in fruitless efforts to win over influential people to our interests.

Since early in January last, our force at Cabool has not been less than from 8 to 9,000 … yet it has never taken the initiative or ventured to do much more than hold the position of Sherpore … Seeing all this, and remembering how their foot soldiers captured our horse artillery guns, drove us into Sherpore, and plundered the city at their leisure under our eyes, is it to be wondered at that the Afghan nation continue elated and defiant? Kabul is 190 miles from Peshawar, 19 marches, but 15,000 men are barely sufficient to keep the line open … (We have) 57,000 men in the field, yet we command little more than the ground on which we stand. The creation of ‘the strong and friendly Government at Cabool,’ and our determination ‘to have an English Ambassador at the Doormanee Court,’ are now but dreams of the past, from which Englishmen turn to the thought of, How can we best get our army back to India? How can we best disentangle ourselves from the false position we occupy? We have recently based our hopes on Abdool Raheeman as the best candidate for the vacant masnud … [but] we must not forget that he has for years past been in receipt of a liberal pension, and an honored guest in Russian dominions … Whenever we withdraw care must be taken to avoid all appearance of precipitancy … the enemy should be prevented from following our troops. The last withdrawal awoke in India a belief that we had at last met with a nut we could not crack; and two legacies resulted – the long and severe struggle with the Punjab and the Mutiny. In every Native Court it will be said ‘the Feringhees could not hold Cabool’.

In strategic terms, the Second Anglo-Afghan War also achieved little. The tension with Russia remained and only a few years later, a crisis on the Afghan–Turkestan border brought the two countries to the brink of war. Another continuing legacy was increased hostility between the British and the Afghan tribes along the North-West Frontier, a state of affairs that continued until 1947.
Part IV
The Third Anglo-Afghan War
The Third Anglo-Afghan War differed from its two predecessors in several ways. It was instigated by the Afghans, not by the British; there were no diplomatic overtures; and it lasted no more than a month. But there was one similarity: when it ended, the advantage lay squarely with the Afghans.

Until the turn of the century, Abdur Rahman served British purposes well enough. He did little to discourage anti-British activity on the part of the Frontier tribes, but kept his word with the British and held aloof from the Russians. In this, he seems to have acted out of the conviction, recorded in his memoirs, that the British were ‘really anxious to see Afghanistan a strong independent government – a true ally and barrier’, whereas the Russians wished ‘to see Afghanistan divided into pieces and very weak, if not entirely cleared out of their way to India’. The British, for their part, respected his independence and rewarded him with substantial subsidies. During his reign, Afghanistan’s frontiers were demarcated by the British and Russians. The frontier between Afghanistan and British India, the Durand Line, divided the Pashtoon tribes into two, leaving many of them in British territory. This was to cause much trouble in the future.

Abdur Rahman’s successor, Habibullah, a milder and more conciliatory man, had difficulty in keeping in check the more belligerent members of his court, which included his brother, Nasrullah, and his sons Inayatullah and Amanullah. The two latter were greatly influenced by a descendant of another branch of the Mohammedzai dynasty, Mahmud Beg Tarzi, who was strongly pro-Turkish, anti-imperialist and pan-Islamist in his sympathies. The four formed the nucleus of a ‘war party’ who, particularly during the First World War, pressed for a more active anti-British posture. They were encouraged by the arrival in 1915 of a combined Turco-German mission, which tried to enlist Afghan support for an invasion of India. Habibullah, however, was careful not to allow words to be translated into deeds, and quietly assured the British that whatever might be said in Kabul, they could be confident of his neutrality and determination not to stir up trouble. At the end of the war, he asked for a reward for his restraint, in the form of complete independence and an end to the British conduct of his foreign relations. The British were slow to respond, so possibly signing his death warrant. In February 1919, he was assassinated while away from the capital on a hunting trip.

There was an immediate struggle for the succession. Nasrullah, who had also been on the hunting trip, was proclaimed Amir and was supported by Inayatullah, but Amanullah, who had remained in Kabul and therefore controlled the treasury, the arsenal and the Kabul garrison, held better cards. Nasrullah and Inayatullah submitted, and Amanullah was formally crowned on 27 February. Whether he was personally responsible for his father’s assassination is unknown, but it is entirely possible that he was, and that it was no accident that he was in Kabul at the time. At least it is likely that the responsibility lay
with one or more of the ‘war party’. Amanullah’s first step was to challenge the British government, by sending a letter to Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy of India, in which he described Afghanistan as ‘independent and free’, but offered to conclude treaties of a commercial nature ‘with every consideration of the requirements of friendship and the like’. He also proclaimed in a durbar on 13 April that:

I have declared myself and my country entirely free, autonomous and independent both internally and externally. My country will hereafter be as independent a state as the other states and powers of the world are. No foreign power will be allowed to have a hairsbreadth of right to interfere internally and externally with the affairs of Afghanistan, and if any ever does I am ready to cut its throat with this sword.

Amanullah’s letter put Chelmsford on the spot. It had been a cardinal feature of British agreements with successive Amirs that they were personal to the Amir and had to be renegotiated with each incumbent. As it was, therefore, difficult to refuse a request for a new treaty, Chelmsford chose to prevaricate, suggesting that it would not be appropriate to discuss new agreements during ‘this period of mourning’. He also referred to Amanullah as having been elected by ‘the populace of Kabul and its surroundings’, so implying that his control of the country was limited. Amanullah then issued a firman, alleging the existence of ‘great unrest’ in India and declaring a jihad against the British. In a further letter to Chelmsford, while declaring himself ready to conclude a treaty of friendship with British India, he asked that the Viceroy should recognise the ‘absolute independence, equal rights and freedom in all respects of the Government of Afghanistan’. He then sent three bodies of troops towards the Indian border, so precipitating war.

Amanullah’s motives, in Chelmsford’s view, were to divert Afghan attention at a time when his authority was tenuous and there was much resentment at the abasement and imprisonment of Nasrullah. This was at least a partial, and possibly a total, misreading of the situation. Following the first two Afghan wars, sentiment in Afghanistan was one of settled hostility towards the British. This sentiment had been periodically fuelled when, in response to unrest among the Frontier tribes, the Indian government had adopted a ‘forward policy’, mounting punitive expeditions and gradually extending its presence and control into the tribal areas. Feelings were also exacerbated as a result of the defeat of the Ottoman Empire and the British occupation of the Muslim ‘holy places’, as well as the belief that Afghanistan had, during the First World War, betrayed Islam by failing to engage in a jihad against Turkey’s enemy. Under the influence of Mahmud Tarzi, concepts of nationalism and self-determination had also permeated the ruling class in Kabul. Amanullah not only subscribed to these ideas himself, he could not, as a new monarch, afford to flout them, as his father had done.

Amanullah chose his moment well. Russia was in the throes of revolution and posed no threat from the north. Britain was seriously weakened by four years of debilitating warfare. Both British and Indian troops had been sent from India to Mesopotamia and other theatres of war, and large numbers were still overseas. Much of the army in India consisted of Territorials and garrison battalions, and was deployed on internal security duties. Demobilisation had begun and was further reducing its strength. There was much
war-weariness and morale was low. Within India generally, there was a good deal of unrest, particularly as it was becoming clear that Britain was not going to live up to the promises of political reform which it had made during the war. Amanullah no doubt received exaggerated reports of the situation, partly from Ghulam Haidar, the Afghan Postmaster in Peshawar, who was himself a focus of disaffection. He reported that India was on the verge of revolution and required only an Afghan invasion to set it alight. He himself was ready to launch a jihad, with supporters both within the city and in neighbouring villages. In Kabul, Indian exiles no doubt also encouraged Amanullah with exaggerated reports. More realistic, however, was the calculation that the frontier tribes would rise in sympathy as soon as the Afghans made their move. This was what the British feared most, and accounted for the conviction that decisive action was needed. Otherwise a conflagration might well occur, which might spread to India as well as along the frontier. If the Afghans were to make no headway, the tribes might stay on the sidelines or allow themselves to be bought off: if, however, the Afghans achieved an initial success, there was every likelihood that the tribes would join them, perhaps 20–30,000 in the Khyber area alone. On the British side, demobilisation was stopped and troops were mustered.

On 4 May 1919, an Afghan force moved to the head of the Khyber Pass, occupied the village of Bagh and threatened the water supply to the fort at Landi Kotal. In response, a battalion of troops was dispatched from Peshawar, but, in a counter-attack on 9 May, failed to dislodge the Afghans. In Peshawar itself, anticipating a rising organised by the Afghan Postmaster, British troops were deployed to all 16 gates of the town and cut off the water supply. This forced the townspeople to surrender the Postmaster and his associates, and the trouble was nipped in the bud. With stalemate in the Khyber Pass, however, tribemen were gathering and beginning to launch attacks on British units. The local tribal levy, the Khyber Rifles, was also showing disaffection and had to be disbanded. As soon as reinforcements arrived, therefore, a further attack was made on the Afghan positions. This was successful and on 13 May the army advanced a few miles beyond the Pass to the village of Dakka. The Viceroy’s plan was to press on to Jalalabad, but this aroused concern in London, where there were justifiable fears over the security of lines of communication and problems of supply, particularly given the dubious attitude of the tribes. Also, London did not relish the thought of the thoroughgoing war which such an advance would entail. In the event, a lack of transport, which was urgently needed elsewhere, precluded any further advance. The British forces stayed at Dakka, where they had to endure sniping, excessive heat, all-pervasive dust and the smell of rotting bodies of men and animals. The Afghan force was driven off, and did not resume its attacks.

If the position on the Khyber front had been stabilised without too much difficulty, matters were not so simple in the Kurram Valley, to the south. There the future Amir, Nadir Khan, advanced on the British post at Thal with a force of some 3,000 men and a tribal levy of perhaps double that number. Advanced military posts had to be evacuated and on 23 May, Thal came under siege. Under heavy artillery bombardment and with its water supply threatened, the post was in a precarious situation, but Nadir Shah did not press home his attack. When a 19,000-strong relieving force arrived a few days later, he speedily departed, leaving his camp to be plundered by tribesmen. The Afghans also lost out to the north, in Chitral and the Kunar valley, as well as opposite Kandahar, where a British force stormed and captured the fort at Spin Baldak. Altogether, fighting of
varying intensity took place over a 1,000-mile stretch of the frontier, from Chitral in the far north to the Seistan in the south-west.

On May 24, just three weeks into the war, Amanullah began to make overtures for a cease-fire. It seems that he was not so much discouraged by his lack of success on the ground as by the activity of the Royal Air Force. This possessed only a few antiquated aircraft in India, but these were able to mount several attacks on Jalalabad, where they caused considerable panic. Additionally, there was a single serviceable Handley Page V-1500, with sufficient range, given a following wind to boost it over the mountains, to reach Kabul. There it bombed the Royal palace and damaged Abdur Rahman’s tomb. The same day, Amanullah wrote to the Viceroy to protest that:

It is a matter of great regret that the throwing of bombs by Zeppelins on London was denounced as a most savage act and the bombardment of places of worship was considered a most abominable operation, while now we can see with our own eyes that such operations were a habit which is prevalent amongst all civilised peoples of the West.  

However, he went on to say that he had revoked his call for a *jihad* and suggested that an ‘honourable and dignified peace’ should be established. On 3 June the Viceroy responded, agreeing to a conditional cease-fire and suggesting a peace conference at Rawalpindi. On 11 June Amanullah agreed and nominated a delegation. Both the Afghan and British armies observed the cease-fire, although the British continued to be harassed by tribal irregulars. British and Indian casualties had amounted to 236 dead and 615 wounded, as well as 556 deaths from cholera and 334 of other diseases. Some 750,000 troops had been mustered for the war. In London, there was some surprise that the Viceroy had agreed so readily to call a halt to hostilities, but the latter was unrepentant. Amanullah having asked for a truce, British prestige, he argued, had been maintained. There was acute tension along the whole frontier and the British troops were having to endure intolerable heat and most unhealthy conditions. If Amanullah were to come to believe that Britain was determined to pursue the war, it might be prolonged indefinitely. The alternatives were either to treat with him or to subjugate him – there was no halfway house.

Peace negotiations started with each side trying to pin the blame for the war on the other. When they eventually got down to substance, the Afghans demanded that full independence should be conceded, that the arrears of British subsidy should be paid, and that the whole tribal territory should be ceded to Afghanistan, with a further subsidy to cover its administration. The British saw this as effrontery and were clear that the last two demands were non-starters, but the Viceroy was inclined to concede the first. He was hopeful, he reported, that ‘if we now surrender our hold on the shadow we may hereafter secure the substance of real control, such as we have never been able to exercise satisfactorily in the past’. He then went on to present the draft of a treaty, which the Afghans accepted. It contained several clauses that penalised the Afghans – they forfeited the arrears of subsidy and no further subsidy payments were to be made, the importation of arms through India was prohibited, the frontier as previously recognised should stand, subject to some fresh demarcation, and Afghanistan was put on good behaviour for six months, after which further discussions could take place if they had behaved themselves.
In a letter attached to the treaty, however, the British negotiator stated that ‘the … Treaty and this letter leave Afghanistan officially free and independent in its internal and external affairs’, the war having ‘cancelled all previous treaties’.15

London was most unhappy and saw the treaty as having ‘involved us in the surrender of prestige’. 16 The Viceroy, however, saw more clearly what was at stake. ‘We have’, he insisted,

to deal with an Afghan nation, impregnated with the world-spirit of self-determination and national freedom, inordinately self-confident in its new-found emancipation from autocracy and in its supposed escape from all menace from Russia, impatient of any restraint on its absolute independence. To expect the Afghanistan of today willingly to accept a Treaty re-embodying our old control over her foreign policy is a manifest impossibility. If we were to impose it at the point of the sword, to what end? The Treaty would have been torn to shreds the moment the point of the sword was withdrawn.17

While it was true, as the Viceroy pointed out, that the spirit of the times had changed, with nationalism, freedom and self-determination very much on the international agenda, a more crucial consideration was that India was in a very unsettled state. The weather was exceptionally hot, and the country was suffering from famine and an influenza epidemic. Cholera was also rife among the troops. Strikes and riots were threatened, and the infamous Amritsar massacre of April 1919 had served to focus Indian discontents. The official British report on the war admitted that the Southern Punjab ‘practically rose in rebellion’.18 Amanullah, for his part, was triumphant. He had lost his subsidies and British protection, and had been forced to abandon his territorial ambitions along the frontier. The need to recognise the permanent loss of Peshawar was a particularly bitter pill. But he was able to present the outcome as a defeat for British arms and he had gained full independence for his country. The Viceroy’s hopes that Britain might still be able to influence him were not to be realised. In November 1921, after long and difficult negotiations, a substantive treaty was concluded, confirming the relationship between the two powers as one of ‘neighbourly relations’ between two fully independent nations. 19

The frontier tribes were not, however, pacified and continued to give trouble until the British withdrawal from the subcontinent in 1947.

The Third Anglo-Afghan War has features of interest in the context of asymmetric warfare. While superior in numbers, discipline, organisation and weaponry, the British suffered from the lack of reliability of the tribal militias that were their first line of defence on the frontier. All but two, the Chitralt Scouts and the Kurram Militia, which were formed from locally recruited tribesmen, deserted or had to be disbanded. Amanullah, although militarily very much the weaker party, was able to bring to bear the threat of a tribal uprising to persuade the British that a prolonged war was inadvisable. He took the initiative at a time when British India was weakened and the balance of advantage not so heavily against him. On the other hand, the British were able – just – to bring technical superiority to bear in the form of air raids on civilian centres, which made it unacceptable for Amanullah to continue the war. The military underestimated the role played by the RAF, and it received only a brief mention in the official report of the war,
but it was undoubtedly the decisive factor. It is of interest that one of the pilots was ‘Bomber’ Harris, the Head of Bomber Command in the Second World War, and that his belief in the efficacy of strategic bombing was fired by this pioneering example. The British had also by now learnt that to send an army into so wild and remote a country, and against so militant and warlike a people, was not a sensible undertaking. It was a lesson that the Soviet Union failed to heed 60 years later.
Part V

The Soviet–Afghan War
The Communist takeover

The chain of events that led eventually to the Communist takeover in Afghanistan in 1978 stretched back over more than half a century. After Amanullah had won independence, he tried to modernise Afghan society, with disastrous results. The tribes rose in revolt in 1929 and he was forced into exile. Several months of anarchy followed, until the Musahiban brothers, from another branch of the Durrani dynasty, invaded the country from India and re-established the monarchy. After the eldest brother, Nadir Shah, was assassinated in 1933, his son, Zahir Shah, ascended the throne. However, the government was effectively run by his uncles and, from 1953 onwards, by his cousin, Sardar Mohammed Daud.

Over several decades, Musahiban rule was both conservative and isolationist. Some dealings with the Axis powers apart, foreign entanglements were avoided and it was, in general, a time of stability and peace, both internally and with the country’s neighbours. Beneath the surface, however, Afghanistan was changing. During this period, there was, particularly in Kabul, a slow expansion of educational institutions, and young Afghans also went abroad to study. The result was that, over the years, an increasing gap opened up between the traditional society of the tribes and the countryside on the one hand, and, on the other, a small, but educated and increasingly sophisticated urban elite. Another reason for the growing separation was that, at the same time, the state apparatus avoided interference in the countryside as much as possible. Since the tribes could not easily be controlled, they were best left alone. This meant that tribal ways remained largely intact and that, outside the main urban areas, there was little development or modernisation.

During the constitutional period, 1963–73, the King having made no attempt to give the force of law to the Provincial Assemblies and Municipalities Acts, the provincial and local administrations imposed by the centre remained corrupt and ineffectual, and were largely ignored by local power structures. Financial relationships were also affected: in the first two decades of Zahir Shah’s reign, taxes on land and livestock, which had traditionally formed the bulk of state revenue, declined to a mere 14 per cent of the total, and were replaced in large measure by taxes on foreign trade. Following the Second World War, external aid also began to fund a large proportion of state expenditure. Across the spectrum, therefore, the traditional divorce between the central government and the country at large became even more marked. The consequence was that when, in the late 1970s, strenuous efforts were made by the Communist regime to impose state control over the countryside, the popular reaction was extreme.

Between 1946 and 1952, a period of relatively relaxed rule under the youngest Musahiban brother, Shah Mahmood, there was something of a flowering of liberal views. Political prisoners were released and a parliament was elected, many of whose members were progressive in outlook. A free press flourished and a students’ union appeared at
Kabul University. Many reformists joined a movement known as *Wikh-i Zalmaiyan* (Awakened Youth), and other radical groups also appeared. In 1952, however, the royal family became alarmed at the signs of growing dissent, closed the students’ union and arrested many of its critics. The government then passed into the hands of Daud, who at that time also held reformist views but realised that if the country was to modernise, both economic and military assistance would be required from abroad. In particular, a strong army would be needed to suppress any opposition to reform, as well as to face up to Pakistan, with which Afghanistan was at odds over the issue of Pushtoonistan, the concept of an independent state for the Pushtoon tribes living across the Durand Line in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province. Daud began by sounding out the Americans, but found that Afghanistan did not fit into their plans for the southern ‘containment’ of the Soviet Union, which were centred on Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. With some reluctance, therefore, he was forced to go to the Soviet Union for the support he needed. Conversely, the Soviet Union could not but be concerned with a country with which it shared a border of some 2,500 kilometres, particularly when the United States was busy constructing military alliances in the region. A watershed was crossed with a visit in 1955 by the Soviet leaders Nikita Khruschev and Nikolai Bulganin, in what was seen as a pioneering initiative to engage directly with the Third World. Whereas Stalin had dismissed all Third World regimes as ‘lackeys of imperialism’, his successors saw advantage in the Cold War context in detaching them from Western influence, and Afghanistan became something of a test case. As Khruschev put it:

> At the time of our visit there, it was clear to us that the Americans were penetrating Afghanistan with the obvious purpose of setting up a military base … The capital which we’ve invested in Afghanistan hasn’t been wasted. We have earned the Afghans’ trust and friendship, and it hasn’t fallen into the Americans’ trap … The amount of money we have spent in gratuitous assistance to Afghanistan is a drop in the ocean compared to the price we would have had to pay in order to counter the threat of an American military base on Afghan territory. Think of the capital we would have had to lay out to finance the deployment of our own military might along our side of the Afghan border.1

The Soviet Union then not only supported Afghanistan’s case over the Pushtoonistan issue, but accelerated assistance, both economic and military. With Soviet arms came military training, and a succession of military officers went to the Soviet Union for this purpose, where attempts were routinely made to indoctrinate them. By 1973 around a quarter of the Afghan officer corps on active duty had been trained in the Soviet Union; by 1979, the cumulative total was not far short of 4,000.2 Many did not respond, or responded only half-heartedly, but Afghanistan’s armed forces gradually came to possess a cadre of committed Marxists. In the economic sector too, Soviet concepts of planning and development were adopted, and with them came Soviet advisers and technical staff. Two significant items of aid, an all-weather road over the Hindu Kush from the Soviet border to Kabul, and a military base at Bagram, north of Kabul, were later to be used by the Soviets for their invasion of the country. By 1979, Soviet economic aid to
Afghanistan (insofar as these figures are meaningful) had totalled some $1.25 billion, and military aid was around much the same figure.\(^3\)

While Soviet influence was thus spreading, both overtly and covertly, within key sectors of Afghan society, subversive trends were also developing, particularly within the educational system, to which appreciable resources were devoted in the 1960s and 1970s. During the 1960s, the royal family realised the threat to a traditional monarchy which was posed by progressive and republican sentiment, and an effort was made at constitutional reform. In 1963 Daud was dismissed, a parliament was elected and a new constitution passed. The relatively relaxed atmosphere that ensued contributed to a mushrooming of political organisations, which were to an extent tolerated, even if they were not strictly legal. The focus was Kabul University, and it is ironic that this institution, to which the United States extended considerable aid, both human and financial, should have become a hot-bed of extremism, of both left and right. On the right, an Islamic movement developed at the University, drawing much of its inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and the Pakistan Jamaat-i Islami under Abul Ala Maududi. The guiding spirit was the Dean of the Theological Faculty at the University, Ghulam Mohammed Niazi, while a clandestine Islamic council, the Jamiat-i Islami (Islamic Association) was formed among the University staff, its chairman being a lecturer in the Faculty, Burhanuddin Rabbani. Within the student body itself a students’ branch, the Jawanan-i Musulman (Muslim Youth), was formed, of whom a founding member was an engineering student from northern Afghanistan, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. However, the Islamists soon ran into trouble. When, in 1973, Daud deposed the King and again seized power as President, the movement was ruthlessly suppressed. Many, including Niazi, were arrested and several hundred were reportedly executed, while Rabbani, Hekmatyar and others fled to Pakistan. There, they were given asylum and support, being seen by the Pakistanis as useful assets over the Pushtoonistan issue. They received training from the Pakistan security organisation, the Inter-Service Intelligence Agency (ISI), and in 1975 they and the Iranian intelligence service, Savak, which was also active in support of right-wing groups, tried to incite uprisings in several regions of the country. However, all failed miserably and further executions and arrests followed.

Also during the 1960s, parties of the left began to be formed. At the extreme was a Maoist group recruited largely from non-Pushtoons, who briefly published a periodical, Shu la-i-Jawid (Eternal Flame), from which they derived their name, Shu lais. They attracted strong support among the student body at the University and were also active in several rural areas, in particular among the Hazaras. But they soon fractured into several small groups which were eventually targeted and vigorously suppressed. Majid Kalakani, the charismatic leader of the most active of the groups, was executed in 1980. The problem for the Shu lais was that although they followed the Chinese Communist line with dedication and enthusiasm, they were unable to look to China for any effective support. Another Maoist party was the Sitem-i Milli, (Against National Oppression) headed by Tahir Badakhshi. It was essentially an anti-Pushtoon, minority party, and, like Shu la-i-Jawid, was able to make little headway in the absence of external support.

For the pro-Soviet communists, however, outside support was not lacking. From small beginnings as a number of secret ‘study groups’ in the 1950s, a Moscow-supported political party, the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was formed in 1965. Its first leader, Nur Mohammed Taraki, was a Ghilzai Pushtoon who was born in
1917 in a village in Ghazni Province. Unusually, he managed to secure an education and left his village to work as a clerk, first in Kandahar and then in Bombay, where it is possible that he may have had some contact with the Communist Party of India. After returning to Afghanistan in 1937, he took a degree and embarked on an administrative and journalistic career. In the 1940s he was active in the Wikh-i Zalmaiyan, and in 1951 he became a Soviet agent, with the codename ‘Nur’. Subsequently, he served as Press Attaché at the Afghan Embassy in Washington. On his return, he eked out a living doing translation work and founded a Marxist group known as the Khalq (People). On 1 January 1965, he hosted a meeting at his house of 28 young Afghans and together they founded the PDPA. Taraki then visited the Soviet Union, where he made a good first impression and was advised how best to conduct himself and run the Party. The CPSU proceeded to fund the PDPA and Taraki was given 50,000 Afghani for his election campaign that year, as well as a personal allowance. In return he advised the KGB Residency on the situation in the country and gave it leads to potential agents.

Taraki’s deputy in the PDPA was a younger and altogether more sophisticated man, Babrak Karmal. The son of a Major-General in the Afghan army, he became a left-wing activist at Kabul University and was jailed between 1953 and 1956. On his release, he worked as a civil servant, while forming a left-wing group under the name of Parcham (The Banner). He too was recruited by the KGB and, indeed, never made a secret of his links with the Soviet Embassy. In 1965 and again in 1969 he was elected to parliament from a Kabul constituency.

An accomplished orator, he was able, in contrast to the unworldly Taraki, to ‘work the system’. While he and Taraki shared a Marxist view of the ‘bourgeois’ nature of Afghan society, they differed fundamentally not just in their backgrounds and characters, but also in their revolutionary approach. Taraki, with his tribal and rural roots, was the doctrinaire hardliner; Karmal, the upper-class cosmopolitan, was more inclined to seek his ends through manoeuvre and compromise. His Parcham faction was known in some quarters as the ‘Royal communists’. A third member of the PDPA hierarchy was Hafizullah Amin, who had earlier joined Taraki to form the Khalq. An energetic, brutal and uncompromising man, he was a teacher by training and twice went to study in the United States, where it is said that he acquired his Marxist beliefs. By the early 1960s he was Principal of the Kabul Training College and was elected to parliament in the 1969 election.

Although the PDPA was, in all but name, the Communist Party of Afghanistan, Moscow considered it desirable that it should retain its cover, and so, somewhat to Taraki’s chagrin, did not treat it publicly as such. The party soon found it quite impossible to retain its unity, and in 1967 Taraki and Karmal went their separate ways, Amin staying with Taraki’s Khalq faction. The split between the two factions, which was never to be resolved on other than a temporary basis, derived not just from their differences over revolutionary methods and tactics. Class and ethnicity also played a significant role, Khalq finding its support largely among the Ghilzai and eastern Pushtoons, Parcham largely among the urbanised, Persian-speaking elite. Much of Khalq’s support came from army officers who, with their Russian background, tended to be discriminated against when it came to promotion. But the most important factor was probably personal ambition, Karmal in particular never being reconciled to taking second place to Taraki.
By the early 1970s, the King’s constitutional experiment was in trouble. While he was prepared to tolerate a democratically elected parliament, he could not bring himself to permit the overt establishment of political parties, which meant that the governments he appointed had no political support, but had to deal with a confrontational legislature. Corruption and nepotism were endemic in the bureaucracy, and advancement in the armed forces was too often dependent on ethnic and tribal alignments rather than merit. In the years 1971–2, there was also a severe famine in the country, the effects of which were worsened by governmental corruption and incompetence. In July 1973, therefore, Daud, who had remained in limbo during the constitutional period, re-emerged and took power in a virtually bloodless coup. He was supported by two groups of people, Karmal’s Parcham faction and a cadre of military officers, many of whom had received training in the Soviet Union and had links with the Soviet military intelligence agency, the GRU. The officers saw Daud as able to provide the strong nationalist leadership they wished to see, while Karmal saw his collaboration with Daud as a stepping stone to power. Several of the Parcham faction were appointed to Ministerial office, most importantly in the Ministry of the Interior.

Daud’s assumption of power was welcomed by the Soviet government, although there is no suggestion that they had actively supported it. He had earlier facilitated their growing presence in the country, and he was now supported by elements over which their influence was strong. They offered an additional $600 million in economic aid and no doubt calculated that Daud, now an elderly man, would soon be succeeded by a government with whom they would have a close and sympathetic relationship. Conversely, Daud’s return to power and the apparent growth of Soviet influence caused concern in Pakistan, Iran and the United States. In 1974, with American encouragement, the Shah of Iran proceeded to offer Daud an attractive aid package, and took the initiative in trying to resolve the Pushtoonistan issue, which Daud had once again stirred up following his seizure of power. It remains unclear why Daud was persuaded to alter course, but by mid-1974 he was beginning to purge his government of Parchamis and by late 1975 had not only dismissed the remaining Parcham ministers in his cabinet, but had also removed Parchamis from other official positions. A hard-line anti-communist, General Kadir Nuristani, took over as Minister of the Interior. In the armed forces, Moscow-trained officers were dismissed or moved aside, Soviet military training was scaled down and military training places were taken up in Egypt, India and the United States. By 1975 Daud also started to take steps to resolve his differences with Pakistan, and then accepted an offer of a $2 billion Iranian credit, $1.7 billion of it for a railway linking Kabul with the Persian Gulf. By 1976, the relationship with Pakistan, while not wholly settled, was relaxed, while internally, a one-party state was established, so outlawing both Parcham and Khaql. In April 1977, Daud paid a visit to Moscow, where he was taken to task by Brezhnev for allowing Western ‘spies’ to work in Afghanistan under the guise of technical experts. Daud responded angrily that Afghanistan would employ whomever it pleased and rejected Brezhnev’s strictures as an ‘unacceptable interference’ in his country’s domestic affairs. He then marched out of the room and cancelled the remaining meetings. Some concluded that in doing so, he effectively signed his own death warrant.

The Soviets now stepped up their efforts to consolidate internal opposition to Daud. Using the Iranian and Indian Communist Parties as intermediaries, they managed in July
1977 to persuade the Khaqlq and Parcham factions to reunite. Taraki became General Secretary of the PDPA and Karmal his deputy and First Secretary, while positions in the Central Committee were shared equally between the two factions. In terms of military support, however, Khaqlq was predominant, due partly to successful recruitment efforts made by Amin and partly to disillusionment among sympathisers in the military at Parcham’s collaboration with Daud. Many of the military were also disaffected as a result of Daud’s practice of awarding promotions on the basis of nepotism and tribal affiliation. Despite Parcham opposition, Amin became responsible for the PDPA’s relations with the military. It remains unclear what Moscow’s ambitions for Afghanistan were at this stage. There is little doubt that they wished to see the end of Daud and that they were aware of plans being made by the PDPA for a coup. It seems, however, that they also urged restraint on the PDPA and in any case it is unlikely that they wished the PDPA to take power alone. The evidence suggests that their aim was to encourage the formation of a more broadly based regime, in which the PDPA would play a part. In the event, however, the change of regime that took place was unplanned, and was sparked by the murder in April 1978 of a prominent Parchami, Mir Akbar Khyber. The responsibility for the killing has never been established, the two most probable candidates being Daud’s Interior Minister, Nuristani, or Hafizullah Amin, both of whom might have had reason to fear the efforts that Khyber was making to recruit military officers into Parcham. The PDPA proceeded to turn his funeral into a large demonstration, alarming the Daud regime to the point of arresting the PDPA leadership, including Taraki, Karmal and Amin. Amin’s later story was that, not having been arrested immediately, he was able to send his plan for a coup to his military colleagues and order them to mount it. It is more likely, however, that the military were well aware of what had happened and of the risk to themselves, and that they needed no orders. In any event, on the morning of 27 April, a force of T-62 tanks, headed by a Khaqlq sympathiser, Major Mohammed Aslam Watanjar, attacked the Ministry of Defence and the Presidential Palace, where Daud and his cabinet were deciding the fate of the imprisoned PDPA leadership, while later in the day air support came from the Bagram air base, organised by a Parchami, Colonel Abdul Qadir Dagarwal. The coup was a bizarre and chancy affair: as one observer put it, ‘foul-up followed foul-up, and the side with the fewer foul-ups won’. It took place on a Thursday, when the population of Kabul was leaving work at the start of the Muslim weekend. As tanks manoeuvred through crowded streets, traffic police tried vainly to move them to one side. Daud sent his Chief of Army Staff, General Rasuli, to rally support, but the latter broke his arm in a traffic accident and was in considerable pain for the rest of the day. The units he contacted were engaged, on orders from above, in celebrating the arrests of the PDPA leadership, and so there was a general lack of good order and military discipline. One unit refused to move in the absence of its commanding officer; another did start to march on Kabul, but disintegrated as a fighting force when it was attacked from the air. Two aircraft that were summoned by the regime from the base at Shindand had fuel for only a few minutes over Kabul and were unable to identify targets in the time available. Daud refused to surrender and resistance lasted until he, his family and all who were with him were finally killed early the following morning. Essentially this was a military coup and a ‘Revolutionary Council of the Armed Forces’ was immediately formed. Three days were to pass before it was replaced by a ‘Revolutionary Council of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan’, of which Taraki
became the President and Prime Minister, Karmal Deputy President and Deputy Prime Minister, and Amin Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Qadir became Minister of Defence and Watanjar Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Communications. The KGB reckoned that at the time of the coup, the PDPA had less than 1,000 members in the armed forces, together with some 2,000 ‘supporters’. Among civilians, the membership was no more than 11,000. Not for the first, nor for the last time, the vulnerability of a relatively primitive state apparatus to a coup mounted by a small dissident minority was comprehensively demonstrated.
Initially, the Soviet response to the coup was one of scepticism and concern. When warned of its imminence, Alexandr Puzanov, the Soviet Ambassador, expressed fears that it might be the work of provocateurs and might lead to the ‘defeat of the progressive forces in the country’.1 According to one source, ‘the [KGB] Residency, the Embassy and the Moscow leadership had little knowledge of the situation in the country, misinterpreted the situation and were hedging against the possibility that the attempted coup would not succeed’. 2 Over three days, the news agency, TASS, explicitly referred to the events of 27 April as a ‘military coup d’état’,3 a clear indication that Moscow did not see it as a ‘popular revolution’, and still less as a revolution that it had itself actively promoted. What happened behind the scenes between the military and the civilians is unclear, but when Taraki met Puzanov, the Soviet Ambassador, on 29 April and assured him that he was in charge and that the regime would ‘belong to the socialist camp’,4 the Soviet Union extended formal recognition and bent its efforts towards ensuring that it would succeed. Puzanov’s view at that stage was that the regime should help strengthen the Soviet position in the country, while conceding that factionalism was a major problem. 5 The main focus of the initial Soviet efforts was, therefore, to try to ensure that the regime should be united and broadly based.

The support given by the Soviet Union for a broad-based Afghan regime was to be consistent and continuing, and reflected the thinking prevalent there at the time. While some took the view that there was no non-communist country that was not ‘ripe for socialism’,6 more saw it as unwise that in Afghanistan, there should be a direct transition to a regime committed to building a Marxist-Leninist state. In doctrinal terms, as one academic remarked, it was ‘absolutely foolish’, indeed ‘impossible’, to try to do in a few years what would take at least 20 and possibly half a century.7 The transformation of a traditional society could only be achieved extremely slowly, and certainly not by wrecking its existing structure and relationships. Even in the Soviet Union, there had been the ‘great mistakes’ of the 1920s and 1930s. A Soviet official in Moscow was also reported as saying that ‘if there is one country in the world where we would not like to try scientific socialism at this point in time, it is Afghanistan’.8 The PDPA leadership itself to some extent realised that Afghan society did not fit the mould, there being scarcely any ‘peasants and workers’ who, according to the orthodox ideology, would naturally form the backbone of a communist state. The peasants were still set in their traditional tribal ways, while the workers were few in number and no less lacking in political awareness. From first to last, no PDPA Central Committee was ever to contain any genuine peasant
or worker representative. The reality was that the PDPA were too impatient to wait. As Hafizullah Amin put it: ‘If we had waited to follow the same class pattern of working-class revolution through a national democratic bourgeoisie, then we would have followed such a long and thorny road that it would have required not only years but centuries’.  

The PDPA rationalised the anomaly with the specious contention that a ‘working class party does not mean that the majority is constituted by workers, but rather that the members are equipped with the ideology of the working class’.  

In practice, most of the PDPA’s support came from a small following of intellectuals, mainly students, school-teachers and low-level civil servants, supplemented by recruitment from within the armed forces. Hafizullah Amin, for one, maintained that in Afghan conditions, it was both necessary and legitimate for the communist leadership to recruit the military in order to short-cut the revolutionary process.  

The regime realised that it would be wise to tread carefully in the initial stages, if only in order not to antagonise domestic or international sentiment. It did not, for example, call itself ‘communist’, and it insisted that its international stance was non-aligned. However, under pressure from Taraki and Amin, the leadership of the regime was drawn solely from the PDPA, and the intention was to create a socialist state as quickly as possible. As Pravda later suggested, the PDPA showed a ‘striking desire to skip natural stages of socio-economic development, and an underestimation of public opinion and of Afghan nationalism’.  

The Soviet Union was now to reap the consequences of the duplicitous, two-track approach it had adopted towards Afghanistan since the Khruschev–Bulganin initiative of 1954. Up to Daud’s final few years, Soviet influence over Afghanistan had been predominant and its position as an independent nation, non-aligned but clearly within the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence, had worked wholly to the latter’s advantage. It would probably have been inevitable, given the country’s backwardness and the shortcomings of successive Durrani regimes, that a progressive – even radical – opposition would sooner or later have emerged. But the Soviet policy of preserving ostensibly friendly relations while promoting an indigenous Marxist-Leninist movement and subverting the armed forces served only to produce a regime that lacked both the competence and the popular support required to rule the country. In imposing a ‘revolution from above’, the PDPA failed to take account of the fact that, partly because Afghanistan had never been colonised, the state apparatus was extremely weak and was confined mainly to the major centres of population. While, therefore, it could easily be subverted, it had only limited influence over the tribal and religious power centres which had traditionally flourished largely beyond the limits of state control. The new regime relied, instead, on terror and repression, and refused to heed advice that it might compromise or exercise restraint. Almost immediately, the Soviet Union found that the monster that it had created was out of control.

The die having been cast, however, Soviet support for the new regime was, from the outset, extensive. KGB representatives were dispatched to help set up the regime’s security organisation, AGSA (Service for the Protection of Afghan Interests), and to assist it to deal with the large number of persons who were being imprisoned. These included members of the extended royal family, civil servants, professional and business men, former MPs, religious leaders and military officers. At Pul-i-Charkhi prison outside Kabul, executions were said to be running at some 50 a night. Soviet advisers also flooded the country and within a year, 1,000 or so were working in the armed forces and
between 2,000 and 2,500 in civilian posts. Despite Soviet efforts, however, within the space of a mere two months, the regime again split into its Parcham and Khalq factions, each trying to enlist Soviet support against the other. By July, the KGB Residency had become greatly concerned, and from then on its reporting on the Khalq regime was heavily critical. At this juncture, its view was that

the struggle for the leadership of the PDPA had not only split the leadership but also affected the lower ranks of the party. Taraki and Amin, having finished their reprisals against right-wing reactions, had started an active attack on the Parchamists. They had abandoned the democratic methods first adopted and begun a real terror against them. The persecution of the Parchamists could have serious consequences, and if it continued could lead to fighting between the factions and even to civil war. The issue was, however, quickly resolved in favour of Khalq, which had the most adherents and a predominance of support within the armed forces, and Karmal and several other Parcham leaders were exiled as Ambassadors, Karmal to Czechoslovakia. During August, an ‘anti-revolutionary network’ was discovered in the armed forces, and Qadir and others were arrested. Parchamis were purged and the exiled ambassadors ordered home. All chose instead to disappear, some taking their Embassy’s funds with them. According to the KGB Residency:

There was a purge of the party and state apparatus, accusations of conspiracy, arrests and torture. … Prisons were over-full and basic human rights were flouted. This was all done in the name of the Revolution, for the sake of its further development and strengthening. The practice of excessive sycophancy and of constantly extolling and praising Taraki and Amin became the norm…. Nepotism, string-pulling and time-serving assumed the utmost importance. Positions and spheres of activity were allotted on the basis of devotion to the leader. The nation’s wealth was plundered. Groundless slander and denunciations flourished. Respectable and honest people were subjected to repression by the police. The country was turned into a mass torture-chamber. People were executed without any investigation or trial. A vast chasm formed between the people and the regime which relied on force and the support of the security organs, the army and the police. … The leadership of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan had shown itself incapable of finding a solution to the urgent political and socio-economic problems facing society and of using the available possibilities to stabilise the country. The internal struggle and intrigues within the PDPA had been and still were the main stumbling block preventing the PDPA from becoming a mass political organisation firmly based on Marxism-Leninism. This organisation should have been capable of becoming the leading and directing force of Afghan society and the force behind its organisational and ideological rebirth. Instead, a process began which transformed the PDPA into a sect of people chosen
and devoted to their leader and connected to each other through family relationships and their interest to retain power for their own personal aggrandisement. 17

A visit in September by Boris Ponomarev, Director of the Foreign Department of the CPSU Central Committee, failed to halt the purge of the Parchamis. Taraki thanked him for his advice, but nothing changed. Ponomarev’s perception was that repression had ‘taken on mass proportions’, and that its ‘negative inferences’ were being underestimated by the regime. 18

In the United States, opinions were divided. Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s National Security Adviser, favoured taking a strong line and cutting off relations with the regime, while Cyrus Vance, the Secretary of State, urged that the attempt should be made to keep relations normal and seek to avoid driving the regime into a ‘closer relationship with the Soviet Union than it might wish’. 19 This ‘wait and see’ line was strongly advocated by the newly appointed US Ambassador in Kabul, Adolph Dubs. It was not until February 1979, when Dubs was abducted by members of the Sitem-i-Melli and killed in the shoot-out that followed, that American attitudes began to swing against the regime.

Having secured the ascendancy, the Khalq faction began to implement draconian economic and social policies. Between May and December 1978 it issued four decrees. The first was relatively anodyne, encouraging the use of all Afghanistan’s indigenous languages, rather than giving predominance to Dari and Pushtu. A principal aim seems to have been more easily to promote Russian as the common language of those Afghans who managed to acquire an education. The second decree abolished or reduced indebtedness and mortgages on land, and set up – in theory – an Agricultural Development Bank to replace them. Allied to it was a decree providing for the confiscation, without compensation, of all large land holdings and their redistribution to landless peasants. The consequences of these two decrees were resistance and chaos. In practice, the mortgage decree wrecked the whole rural credit system, exploitative and unjust though it often was, and farmers were unable to acquire finance for the inputs they needed. The land decree was also resisted, not just by landowners, tribal chiefs and mullahs, but also by those who might have benefited, who saw it as un-Islamic to receive something that had been taken from another. There were, moreover, few accurate records of who owned what, and some land that was nominally in the hands of community leaders was, in fact, communally owned. Agreements between creditors and debtors were also normally oral, and no records of them existed. Some have maintained that if the reforms had been introduced carefully, using the mechanism of tribal jirgas, they might have proved acceptable. 20 When, however, efforts were made by Khalq activists, supported by the police and army, to impose them by force, resistance was the norm. Arrests, beatings and executions followed, and about a third of agricultural land went out of cultivation.

To these decrees was added a fourth, which attempted to reduce the payments traditionally made on marriage by a bridegroom’s family to that of the bride, and to set minimum ages and freedom of choice for marriage. While enlightened in theory, the decree struck at the roots of traditional familial relationships and attracted keen resentment. There was also strong opposition to the regime’s literacy and educational
campaigns, particularly over their secular and Marxist content and the regime’s insistence that women and girls should attend. Further provocative measures included a 20-year Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union which was concluded in December 1978 during a visit to Moscow by Taraki and Amin, and the replacement of the traditional Afghan flag with a red, communist-style, banner. The status of the regime as a ‘state of socialist orientation’ and a Moscow dependency was thus clearly revealed.

Across the country, opposition to the regime began to grow, fuelled by the conviction that Islam was under attack. Pressure for a *jihad*, a holy war, became increasingly insistent. Starting with minor revolts in Paktia and Nuristan, armed resistance spread to most Afghan provinces during the winter of 1978–9 and desertions from the army escalated. In Peshawar, the exiles came together in a National Rescue Front and guerrilla training camps began to be formed. In Kabul, Amin resisted Soviet attempts to broaden the government and slow down the reforms. For both the Afghan and the Soviet governments, the moment of truth came in March 1979, when a violent uprising took place in Herat. The main causes were apparently an announcement of a compulsory women’s literacy campaign, and the presence of numbers of militant, unemployed Afghans who had returned to the city from Iran following the fall of the Shah. A demonstration which assembled on 15 March quickly went out of control. Government officials were attacked, and Soviet advisers and their families were hunted down and tortured, possibly 100 or more being killed. Their heads were then paraded on poles around the city. Two days later, mutinies took place in the 17th Division, led by one of their officers, Ismail Khan, who subsequently became well known as one of the commanders of the mujahidin, those waging the *jihad*.

In Moscow, the Politburo met in emergency session on three successive days, 17–19 March, to discuss what to do. They were acutely aware that their information was limited: they knew of the mutiny, but not of its extent, and they put the problem down to the infiltration of armed ‘saboteurs and terrorists’ from Pakistan and Iran, who had combined with ‘religious fanatics’ in the city. Curiously, there is no indication that they knew of the attacks on Soviet advisers. Gromyko reported that he had spoken on the telephone to Hafizullah Amin, who had assured him that all was under control. Taraki, however, in something of a panic, had summoned Andrei Alekseev, the Soviet Chargé and General Gorelov, the Chief Military Adviser, and had asked for assistance, including ground and air support.

At their first session, the Politburo were clear only about one thing; that in no circumstances could Afghanistan be lost. They were, however, less clear whether they should support the Afghan Government militarily. Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin, in particular, was strongly critical of Taraki and Amin, who, he complained, had ruled by executing anyone who did not agree with them: they had even ‘killed almost all the leaders – not only the top leaders but also those of the middle ranks – of the Parcham party’. It was agreed that two divisions should be deployed to the Afghan border, and decisions were taken to increase economic aid and speed up consignments of military equipment. Before going further, however, Kosygin was authorised to discuss the situation with Taraki.

The following day, Kosygin reported that Taraki had spoken to him in alarmist terms. Without assistance on the ground, Herat would fall and, if that happened, the revolution was doomed. He had asked that tanks and armoured cars should be sent to
Herat, manned by Russian soldiers in Afghan uniforms. Kosygin said that he had turned the idea down flat, not least because it would be impossible to conceal the fact of direct Soviet involvement. Between the two meetings, the members of the Politburo seem to have given more thought to the advisability of deploying troops into Afghanistan, and to have concluded that this was out of the question. As Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko put it:

The army there is unreliable. Thus our army, when it arrives in Afghanistan, will be the aggressor. Against whom will it fight? Against the Afghan people first of all, and it will have to shoot them. … All that we have done in recent years with such effort in terms of détente, arms reduction, and much more – all that would be reversed. China would be given a nice present. All the non-aligned countries would be against us. … We must keep in mind that from a legal point of view too, we would not be justified in sending troops. Afghanistan has not been subject to any aggression. This is its internal affair.

Gromyko was later to warn that if the Soviet Union were to invade:

we would be largely throwing away everything we have achieved with such difficulty, particularly détente. The SALT II negotiations would fall by the wayside, there would be no signing of an agreement (and however you look at it, that is for us the greatest political priority) … Our relations with Western countries, particularly the FRG, would be spoiled. There would be no meetings with President Carter. It would be very doubtful if Giscard d’Estang would pay us his visit.

The mood in the Politburo combined a sense of exasperation with a belated realisation that it had been wholly unwise to support a communist revolution in a country like Afghanistan. As Andrei Kirilenko, the Chairman of the Central Committee, put it:

We have given it [Afghanistan] everything. And what has come of it? It has come to nothing of any value. They have ended by executing innocent people for no reason and try to justify themselves by telling us that we too executed people during Lenin’s time. So you see what kind of Marxists we have found.

KGB chief Yuri Andropov was more measured:

It’s completely clear to us that Afghanistan is not ready at this time to resolve all of the issues it faces through socialism. The economy is backward, the Islamic religion predominates, and nearly all the rural population is illiterate. We know Lenin’s teaching about a revolutionary situation. Whatever situation we are talking about in Afghanistan, it is not that type of situation. Therefore I believe that we can suppress a
revolution in Afghanistan only with the aid of our bayonets, and that is for us entirely inadmissible. We cannot take such a risk.

At yet another meeting on 19 March, with Brezhnev in the chair, there was, again, full agreement that military action was out of the question, and it was decided that Taraki should be summoned to Moscow the following day to be informed. When he came, he met both Kosygin and Brezhnev, and was told bluntly that Soviet military intervention was ruled out. Military equipment and extra advisers would be supplied urgently, and enhanced economic aid would be extended, including 100,000 tons of wheat and increased prices for Afghan natural gas. But Brezhnev also gave him a stern lecture on his government’s shortcomings. They must widen their support base and try to form a single national front. Confidence had to be rebuilt within the army and stability within it restored. ‘Many commanders, seeing their colleagues arrested and disappearing, begin to feel unsure of their own future.’ Repression was ‘a very sharp weapon’ and must be used ‘with the utmost caution’. Political work, particularly among the clergy, was badly needed. And more in the same vein.

In the event, the Afghan regime was able to subdue the Herat uprising, although it took them several days of fierce fighting to complete the task. The city was bombed from the air and attacked by an armoured column from Kabul, causing several thousand civilian casualties. There were reports that the attacking aircraft were either manned by Russians, or were Russian from bases in Central Asia. However, in the light of the Politburo discussions, this has to be seen as improbable. Ismail Khan and his men left the city and formed a strong guerrilla force in the region. A month later, having learnt nothing from the experience, the regime sent a force into the village of Kerala in Kunar province and, as a punishment for aiding guerrillas, killed in cold blood every adult man they could find, well over a thousand in all. Soviet advisers were said to have been with the attacking force. In Moscow, the Politburo set up a special commission on Afghanistan, consisting of Gromyko, Ponomarev, Andropov and Defence Minister Dmitri Ustinov. A report dated 1 April 1989, which this commission produced, reviewed the growth of ‘reactionary forces’ in Afghanistan, and their shift from covert subversive activity to open warfare. The PDPA, for its part, had failed to attract support throughout the country, whether within the masses or among the clergy and tribal leaders, and it was itself weakened by internal dissension. Advice tendered by the USSR had been ignored, while intervention from outside the country was growing. Unjustified oppression had provoked opposition, most critically within the army, where there was much dissatisfaction and the risk of further mutinies. It was right to rule out military intervention, but everything possible should be done to support the regime and persuade it to alter its ways.

While the report was accurate enough in analysing the situation, it failed to address the problem of the limited leverage that the Soviet Union had over the PDPA and its policies, despite all the advice and assistance it had given. In lecturing Taraki, Brezhnev might indeed have saved his breath, since the Afghan President was no longer effectively in charge of affairs. He managed to appoint three of his supporters to key posts, Aslam Watanjar to the Defence Ministry, Sherjan Mazdooryar as Interior Minister, and Asadullah Sarwari as head of AGSA, and he was also supported on the Revolutionary Council by another military officer, Syed Gulabzoi. Amin, however, relying on his own
support within the military, managed at the end of March to pressurise Taraki into appointing him First Minister, Taraki himself retaining only the Presidency. A Soviet diplomat, Vasily Safronchuk, was sent to Kabul to try to broker the formation of a more broadly based government, possibly headed by a former Prime Minister, Nur Ahmed Etemadi, but Amin would not hear of it. In discussions with diplomats in Kabul, Safronchuk openly expressed his frustration at the regime’s refusal to broaden its base, and hinted that Moscow might be looking for ways to replace it. During April, General Yepishev, the head of GLAVPUR, the central political office of the Soviet armed forces, visited Kabul. It seems that he was appalled by the low levels of morale and commitment in the Afghan military and recommended improved political indoctrination. In July and August, both Taraki and Amin continued to press for a Soviet military presence, but this was again rejected, although an airborne battalion was sent secretly to Bagram and a contingent of KGB special forces to Kabul. Also in August, Gorelov and Ivanov, the KGB Resident in Kabul, were summoned to Moscow for consultations. Gorelov gave it as his view that the Afghan army would be able to cope, but Ivanov was less optimistic. ‘Unfortunately’, Gorelov noted later, ‘Ivanov’s opinion … seemed more convincing to our political leadership’. Meanwhile, the situation in the country at large continued to deteriorate, despite the increasing involvement of the Soviet military advisers and additional deliveries of weaponry, including helicopters. Thousands of troops defected, including some entire units, and several battles with the insurgents were inconclusive or were lost. Early in August, a mutiny by the Afghan garrison in the Bala Hissar fortress in Kabul had to be crushed. In Kunar and Paktia provinces, the army was forced on the defensive, despite the use of helicopter gunships. Overall, the regime was now probably in control of no more than a quarter of the country. Ponomarev was again sent to try to ease the situation and was followed by a 60-man mission headed by the Vice-Minister of Defence, General Ivan Pavlovsky, the man who had led the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Arriving in August, he stayed two months, but, like Ponomarev, was unable to achieve anything significant. It is possible that his main task was to reconnoitre the ground and assess the need for military intervention: if so, his advice to Moscow seems to have been that this should not be attempted.
12
The decision to invade

At the end of July, the inevitable showdown between Amin and Taraki finally took place, Amin openly accusing Taraki of responsibility for the regime’s failures. Taraki countered by accusing Amin of nepotism, but could not prevent a reshuffle of portfolios, with Amin taking that of Defence from Watanjar. Taraki himself was isolated from the outside world, and all interviews with journalists and others were taken by Amin. The KGB Residency in Kabul now began to conclude that drastic action was needed and on 1 September gave its formal advice to Moscow. The regime, it reported, was losing its authority and people were becoming increasingly anti-Soviet. Moscow’s advice that the regime should work to give itself a broad social basis had been almost totally ignored and it was relying solely on military force and punitive measures to hold on to power. The man responsible for this policy was Amin and a way should be found to remove him from the scene. Political prisoners should then be released and Taraki persuaded to establish a broad coalition government. Babrak Karmal should be brought back into the frame. This advice was accepted and when on 9 September Taraki passed through Moscow on his way back from a non-aligned conference in Havana, Brezhnev gave him what was in essence an instruction to get rid of Amin. Less certainly, Karmal may have been produced and an agreement reached between him and Taraki on the formation of a more broadly based government.

In Kabul, meanwhile, Amin had managed to survive an assassination attempt organised by Sarwari and had also probably heard what had transpired in Moscow, either from Shah Wali, the Foreign Minister, or Daoud Tarun, Taraki’s aide, both of whom had travelled with Taraki and were close to Amin. When Taraki returned, Amin demanded the dismissal of Sarwari and the other members of the ‘Gang of Four’, but, far from implementing Brezhnev’s instructions and forcing the issue, Taraki prevaricated, no doubt realising that he did not possess the necessary leverage. On 12 September, on instructions from Moscow, Puzanov and other senior Soviet representatives asked for a joint meeting with the two men and strongly urged the necessity of avoiding a rift in the leadership. Both assented and assured the Ambassador that they had buried the hatchet. Nevertheless, further discussions between them failed to reach agreement and Taraki plotted with Sarwari to invite Amin to the Presidential Palace on 14 September and have him killed on his arrival. Amin was suspicious and only agreed to come when Puzanov, who was with Taraki, gave him his personal assurance on the telephone that he need have no fears for his safety. However, when Amin arrived, he was fired on and Tarun, who was with him, was killed. Amin escaped, put together a small force and invested the
Palace. Despite strong and repeated Soviet pleas for moderation, he summoned the PDPA Central Committee and had Taraki stripped of all his posts, it being announced that he had resigned them on account of ‘ill health’. Amin was then appointed Secretary General of the PDPA and Chairman of the Revolutionary Council. On 9 October Taraki was murdered and it was announced the following day that he had died of a ‘serious illness’. To avoid the purge that followed, three of the ‘Gang of Four’ were given refuge by the KGB and were eventually smuggled out of the country. In an attempt to blacken Taraki, Amin published a list of 12,000 persons who he alleged had been murdered by the Khalq regime. However, his own reign of terror continued unabated, under the direction of a new security organisation, KAM (Workers’ Intelligence Agency), headed by his nephew and son-in-law, Asadullah Amin. The Soviet leadership reckoned that in the immediate aftermath of Amin’s takeover, more than 600 persons, members of the PDPA, military personnel and others, were executed.

Moscow’s embarrassment was further increased when, at a meeting with the Ambassadors of the ‘socialist countries’, Shah Wali explicitly accused Puzanov of being party to the plot to kill Amin. There followed a long exchange of recriminations, during which Puzanov and his colleagues denied that he had ever called Amin on the telephone. However, Amin was not prepared to retract the allegation and demanded Puzanov’s replacement, which was, after a delay, conceded. The Soviet Government were now left with the worst of all possible worlds. The man whom they considered to be at the root of all the trouble in Afghanistan was firmly in control, having eliminated his opponents and surrounded himself with relatives and supporters. He had become wholly distrustful of the Soviet Union and appeared to be making moves to re-insure with Pakistan and the West. Evidently not realising the effect it would have in Moscow, he asked the United States to renew aid to Afghanistan and had several meetings with the American Chargé d’Affaires, J. Bruce Amstutz (although the latter did not detect any hint that he might wish to ally himself with the United States). Amin also pushed hard for a visit by the Pakistan Foreign Minister, Agha Shahi, and an eventual meeting with President Zia ul-Haq.

At the same time, the resistance was continuing to pick up steam. In October, an army division stationed at Rishkor, close to the capital, mutinied and was only quelled with difficulty. Pessimistic accounts were also being received from Soviet military advisers on the progress of the fighting in Paktia and elsewhere. Armoured convoys were having to be used to ensure safe movement along major roads. Reports from the KGB Residency during October suggested that Soviet citizens and advisers were being harassed. Meetings were being held between members of the regime and representatives of the Muslim opposition. Overall, the Residency concluded that ‘everything suggested that Amin was unwittingly or unwittingly working towards a collapse and defeat of the Revolution and that he was serving reaction and imperialism’. Late in October, Ustinov ordered preparations and training to take place to enable an invasion of Afghanistan to be mounted, in case it were to be concluded that this was necessary. The suspicion in Moscow was that Amin was preparing to ‘do a Sadat’, by removing Afghanistan from the Soviet orbit and aligning himself with the United States. A memorandum prepared by the Politburo’s four-man Special Commission dated 29 October concluded that Amin intended to pursue a ‘more balanced policy in relation to the Western powers’ and that ‘representatives of the United States are coming to the conclusion that it is possible to
change Afghanistan’s political line in a direction favourable to Washington’. The report recommended, however, that the Soviet Union should ‘not give him ground to believe that we do not trust him or do not wish to work with him’. That would help ‘expose his true intentions’ and enable ‘supplemental proposals about measures from our side’ to be made, should he ‘turn in an anti-Soviet direction’.

The responsibility for the invasion of Afghanistan that eventually took place in late December 1979 lay primarily with Ustinov and Andropov. The prime mover seems to have been Ustinov, who appears to have been influenced by fears that the United States might intervene in Iran. If the Americans were prepared to project their power so far from their country, right next to the Soviet Union’s borders, why should the Soviet Union not ‘defend their positions in neighbouring Afghanistan’? Andropov, for his part, was perhaps over-influenced by his own KGB, who:

on the one hand exaggerated the danger for the USSR of Amin’s continuation in power, because he was being portrayed as an American agent, and on the other hand, exaggerated the power of the USSR to change the situation in the desirable direction.

Andropov began by making efforts to remove Amin and replace him by Karmal, predicated on the dubious assumption that the latter would be sufficiently acceptable to the Afghan people. The KGB mounted at least one assassination attempt, on 17 December, in which Asadullah Amin was seriously wounded. Karmal was apparently flown into Bagram to take over once Amin was removed. However, Amin survived and Andropov was left only with the option of using military force. His plan was for a coup de main – troops would be flown into Kabul airport, Amin removed from the scene and Karmal substituted. However, Ustinov seems to have taken the view that this would be too risky, particularly if Afghan army units should resist, and he insisted on a full-scale invasion, which he also believed would be necessary to guard against intervention from Pakistan or Iran. Andropov appears, perhaps reluctantly, to have agreed. The next, essential, step was to win over Brezhnev, but this seems not to have been difficult. The latter was ailing, suffering from alcoholism and barely functioning, and the emotion uppermost in his mind was anger that Amin, that ‘dirty fellow’, had dared to kill Taraki immediately after he, Brezhnev, had received him in Moscow – ‘How should the world be able to believe what Brezhnev says, if his words do not count in Afghanistan?’

In early December, Andropov sent Brezhnev a handwritten memorandum, warning him of a ‘possible political shift’ by Amin towards the West. Promises of such a shift were being made to tribal leaders and attacks were being made on Soviet policy and the activities of Soviet experts. Anti-Soviet sentiment was growing and there was a danger of losing the gains of the April revolution and creating a ‘threat to our positions in Afghanistan’. The Parcham faction, who were living in exile, had a ‘plan for opposing Amin’ and had appealed for assistance, including military assistance, if needed. ‘We have two battalions in Kabul that could render such assistance … entirely sufficient for a successful operation. But, as a precautionary measure against unforeseen complications, it would be wise to have a military group close to the border.’ This was not an explicit recommendation of military intervention, but it came very close to it and probably had a strong influence on Brezhnev. On 8 December, Andropov, Ustinov and Gromyko met
with Brezhnev and discussed the situation at some length. They seem to have considered some alarmist scenarios, that the CIA were intent on creating a new ‘Ottoman Empire’, which would include the Soviet Union’s southern Republics, that the United States might station Pershing missiles in Afghanistan, which would threaten several vital Soviet sites, including the space centre at Baikonor, and that Pakistan might go so far as to occupy northern Afghanistan. In the outcome, they agreed to develop Andropov’s and Ustinov’s options, the removal of Amin by KGB agents and his substitution by Karmal, and the introduction of Soviet troops. When Ustinov informed Marshal Ogarkov, the Chief of General Staff, of the decision, the latter was ‘surprised and outraged’. He was promptly summoned to meet the four Politburo members and argued strongly against their proposals, urging that a political solution should be found, that the Afghans did not tolerate invaders and that the Soviet Army might well have to fight. He was overruled and on 10 December, orders were given to prepare the invasion.

The final decision to invade was taken at a meeting of the Politburo on 12 December, and seems to have been influenced by reports received shortly beforehand from Ivanov in Kabul. Their content is unknown, but they evidently lent force to the contention that an invasion was the right answer. General Zaplatin, the Chief Political Adviser to the Afghan Army, was summoned to give his views, but these, which seem to have been much the same as Ugarkov’s and at variance with those tendered by Ivanov, were disregarded. It is ironic that the consistent view of the Soviet military seems to have been that the issue should be resolved by political means, while it was the KGB which pressed for a military solution. The Politburo’s decision to invade was recorded in a memorandum written out in longhand by Konstantin Chernenko, Brezhnev’s aide, entitled ‘Concerning the situation in “A”’. This approved ‘the evaluations and measures’ proposed by Andropov, Ustinov and Gromyko, and authorised them to make ‘the necessary adjustments’ to carry the measures out. No doubt in an effort to preserve secrecy, there was no explicit mention anywhere in the document of Afghanistan or military invasion. The three were to report back to the Politburo ‘in due time’ concerning progress over the fulfilment of the measures. The nine members of the Politburo who were present then signed their names diagonally across the document, with Brezhnev’s at its foot. Three other members added their signatures later. A notable non-signer was Kosygin, who was ill at the time. Known to be opposed to an invasion, it is on the cards that it would not have been decided upon had he been fit and present.

What were the Politburo’s motives in taking this action? Why did they now disregard the cogent objections that Gromyko and others had put forward the previous March? The reasons were varied, and it is not a simple matter to sift them out. But the primary motive was undoubtedly the one on which they had all insisted when the Herat crisis arose, that ‘in no circumstances can Afghanistan be lost’: this for reasons of doctrine, prestige and security. An unshakeable conviction held by the Soviet leadership was of the historical inevitability of socialism and the unacceptability of any retreat. This was enshrined in Brezhnev’s own doctrine, set out when the Czechoslovak uprising had taken place in 1968. Afghanistan had been recognised as a socialist state and met the criteria. Also, to have allowed the country to revert would have gravely damaged Soviet prestige and would have risked arousing unrest within the Soviet Union’s other satellites and non-Russian Republics, who would have seen grounds for hope that their own state of submission might not be irremediable.
Moscow had no reason to fear that the Afghan regime was facing military defeat. There was certainly a good deal of resistance across the country and some infiltration of mujahedin from Pakistan. Brzezinski later boasted that he had persuaded President Carter to authorise covert assistance to the Afghan resistance in July 1979, in the expectation that this would bring pressure to bear on the Soviet Union to invade. But the assistance was small-scale and may even have been wholly non-military in nature, and there is no evidence for the view that either the United States or Pakistan had at that time any interest in overthrowing the Kabul regime. The Khalq officer corps was, in general, still loyal to Amin and district centres were under the regime’s control. The considered judgement of the US Embassy in Kabul was that there was no danger of the regime falling. According to the Chargé, Archer Blood: ‘I don’t think that the government of Afghanistan was in that much danger of being toppled … I mean, they weren’t very close to a military defeat.’ Rather, the fear in Moscow was that Amin might ‘declare independence’ and turn against them. There is no known basis for the KGB’s allegation that he was a CIA agent, which seems to have been principally by his having spent time in higher education in the United States. But there was the fear that if he were to ‘defect’, not only would the large numbers of Soviet advisers working in Afghanistan be at risk, but the very considerable political and financial investment that Moscow had put into the country over the years would be lost. Also, there were the security considerations relating to Soviet Central Asia, which the USSR had always viewed with a degree of paranoia. They had, ever since the so-called basmachi revolts that had taken place there soon after the Bolshevik revolution, been nervous over the security of their southern borders. The frontier with Afghanistan had been sealed off by an ‘iron curtain’ complete with watchtowers, cleared strips and a prohibition on settlement within 70 kilometres. Fresh uncertainty had now arisen as a result of the overthrow of the Shah of Iran. The setback to the United States had been welcome, but there was now a hostile Islamic regime in place in Teheran which might have designs on Afghanistan and which, although Shia in complexion, might infect the Muslim populations of the neighbouring Soviet territories. If Afghanistan were no longer under Soviet control, that country would be an even greater threat, given its mostly Sunni complexion and the fact that its northern peoples, Uzbek, Turkman and Tajik, were of the same ethnic stocks as their neighbours in Soviet Central Asia. This paranoia no doubt underlay Ustinov’s concern that the United States might itself intervene in Iran, or, if given the opportunity, try to replace its lost position there by establishing itself in Afghanistan.

From the Soviet point of view, the international situation militated less against invasion than it had earlier in the year. Salt II was blocked in the American Congress, and NATO was, in response to the deployment of Soviet SS20 missiles in Eastern Europe, about to counter-deploy Pershing II rockets and Tomahawk cruise missiles. ‘Detente was, for most purposes, already dead.’ There were no effective sanctions that the international community could deploy in the event of an invasion. The United States appeared demoralised by its Vietnam experience and was currently distracted by the hostage crisis in Iran. Conversely, the Soviet Union had achieved some success in its interventions in Angola and Ethiopia, and this was encouraging. As seen from Moscow, what its leaders termed the ‘correlation of forces’ was shifting in their favour. The Third World might be affronted, but could be disregarded: in any case, memories were likely to be short.
All these considerations suggest that the Soviet motives were essentially defensive in character. This has not, however, been a unanimous view. Some have seen the invasion as an
audacious but carefully planned act of rapine, an advance of the Soviet Union’s strategic power to within 500 miles of the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz – a logical extension of earlier Russian moves towards the Indian Ocean and of later ones towards the oil resources of the Persian Gulf.30

Such views were often accompanied by criticisms of American diplomacy in allowing the Soviet Union to establish a predominant position in Afghanistan in the first place.31 In Washington, the Defense Intelligence Agency produced a report suggesting that

the key motivation that propelled Moscow’s move was to bring its long-standing strategic goals closer within reach. Control of Afghanistan would be a major step towards overland access to the Indian Ocean and to the domination of the Asian subcontinent.32

The prospect of an advance to the Indian Ocean was certainly dangled before Moscow by Taraki and Amin, 33 who saw it as fitting in with their own Pashtoonistan ambitions. They were, however, told firmly that the first priority was to consolidate in Afghanistan. While it is conceivable that the Soviet leadership might have had at the back of their minds the prospect that if they were to succeed in Afghanistan, strategic benefits might flow, it is clear from the evidence that this was not their essential motivation. Reports from the US Embassy during the summer of conversations with Safronchuk and Schweisau, the East German Ambassador, show that, at that point, the Soviets were extremely anxious to find a political solution in Afghanistan, and that they were fully aware of the likely international consequences of a military intervention.34 Nevertheless, by the end of the year, the leadership had convinced itself that the revolution in Afghanistan was sufficiently in danger, and that the consequences of its reversal would be so severe, both regionally and globally, that a military intervention was necessary.

In the last resort, as so often, it was largely a question of personalities. The decision to invade was taken by a small group of geriatric Stalinists, Brezhnev, Gromyko, Ustinov and Andropov, all of whom had spent their long careers in the Soviet apparatus within the straitjacket of Marxist-Leninist doctrine. For the near-senile Brezhnev, it was also a matter of personal honour and prestige. The rest of the Politburo rubber-stamped the decision, exemplifying the dysfunctional way in which the Soviet Union was governed at the time. The Politburo was a self-perpetuating oligarchy and advancement was dependent on patronage, a feature that ensured that the more junior did not step out of line. The other organs of the Soviet State were not consulted. The military were overruled, no formal policy analysis was undertaken, specialists on Afghan affairs were ignored. Public opinion was irrelevant: the facts could be concealed or manipulated. Dissidence was well controlled by the KGB: Andrei Sakharov, who publicly denounced the invasion, was sent into internal exile in Gorky. The costs, whether human or financial, were not considered. Karmal and his associates in exile, having been moved to Moscow, were pressing for intervention. With little understanding of Afghanistan and of the influence of Islam among its peoples, it was not realised how desperate the resistance to an invasion was likely to be. It was not envisaged that the Soviet Army would have to fight – it would merely hold urban areas and strategic points, and give the Afghan army
logistic support until it could cope by itself. It was not expected that this would take long. ‘The temptations were great; the risks minimal and serious opposition seemed unlikely. The undeclared war against the Afghan people had begun.‘35

In addition to the mobilisation and training which Ustinov had ordered in October, further measures were taken in the course of November in anticipation of the Politburo’s decision to invade. The 40th Army, consisting of all the troops involved, was formed under the command of Lt. General Tukhaniov, while the overall commander of the invasion, Marshal Sokolov, established his headquarters at Termez. Towards the end of November and in early December, two further battalions of the 105th Airborne Assault Division (AAD) and a motorised infantry battalion were deployed to Bagram to reinforce the battalion already there, and a spetznaz unit was air-lifted to Kabul. On 18 December, units from Bagram moved north to the Salang Pass, the key point on the road between Termez and Kabul. Aircraft were mustered across the Soviet Union and four motorised rifle divisions (MRD) were brought to a state of readiness in Turkestan.

Late on 24 December, troops from the 105th Guards AAD began arriving at Kabul airport, while other AAD units flew into Shindand, Bagram and Kandahar. Late on 25 December, the 360th MRD crossed the Amu Darya at Termez and drove towards Kabul, while the 5th Guards MRD crossed the border at Kushka and made for Herat. By the evening of 27 December, about 5,000 troops had flown into Kabul airport on some 250 to 300 flights and were ready to move into the city. The Kabul telephone exchange was quickly knocked out and other key posts occupied. There was little Afghan resistance, due principally to the activities of Soviet military advisers, who had locked up Afghan officers and had made sure, by various means, that tanks and other heavy equipment were out of commission. Meanwhile a spetznaz unit, in Afghan uniforms, headed for Amin’s headquarters in Darulaman, a few miles out of Kabul, and, after storming the building, succeeded in killing him. The need for the assault (Operation Agat) was due to the failure of a final KGB plot to put him out of action, this time by rendering him unconscious by having his Russian cooks poison his lunch.36 The idea seems to have been to remove him into Soviet custody and then give him the option of exile or service under Karmal. Members of his family succumbed, but Amin himself regained consciousness, leaving the assault as the only remaining option.

During the evening of 27 December, a statement by Babrak Karmal was broadcast on the Radio Kabul frequency, announcing that Amin had been overthrown. Unfortunately, there had been some resistance at the radio station and it had not been taken at the time of the broadcast. This had, in fact, come from a transmitter in the USSR and cut into Radio Kabul’s normal programmes. Karmal himself was not seen in Kabul until 1 January, having apparently ridden in from Bagram in a Soviet tank. A broadcast on Kabul Radio on 28 December claimed that the PDPA Revolutionary Council had that day elected Karmal as President, while a second broadcast announced that the new government had requested military aid from the Soviet Union and that the request had been accepted. This immediately raised the question of the legitimacy of the invasion, since it had already been under way for several days. Karmal later tried to maintain that he had entered Afghanistan secretly at an earlier date and had organised an anti-Amin majority on the Council. He was not, however, at all consistent about when he had returned, nor did he explain how, having done so, he had managed to avoid Amin’s attentions. Another inconsistent story was that Amin had himself requested the invasion, but this left
unanswered the question why the invaders had killed him. Also, the dates later given for
the requests, 26 December in the case of Amin and 27 December in the case of Karmal,
again postdated the beginning of the invasion.

All this left the Soviet Union without a credible cover story. Had one of their earlier
attempts to kill or incapacitate Amin succeeded, it is possible that they might have
finessed a transfer of power and appeared to have responded to a legitimate request for
assistance. As it was, the alibis were patently false and the international community
outraged. President Carter’s reaction was emphatic and reflected his exasperation at a
further Soviet inroad into the Third World, on top of those, earlier in the decade, in
Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia and Honduras. He described the invasion as ‘one of the
most serious threats to peace since the Second World War’, which had made a
‘dramatic change’ in his opinion of the Soviet Union’s ‘ultimate goals’. He described
Brezhnev’s response to his message calling for a withdrawal as ‘completely inadequate
and completely misleading’. On 23 January 1980, he announced what became known as
the ‘Carter Doctrine’, that any attempt to gain control of the Persian Gulf would be
regarded as an assault on American vital interests and would be repelled by any means
necessary, including military force. A Rapid Deployment Force would be set up to
counter any threatening move in the Middle East. Carter also announced a clutch of
measures intended to penalise the Soviet Union, including a halt to SALT II, various
restrictions on trade and a boycott of the Moscow Olympics.

In addition to its anger over the Soviet invasion, the Carter administration was also
much exercised by what it saw as an intelligence failure, in that until very late in the day,
no warning had been given by the US intelligence community that a major invasion was
imminent. The problem was not that the community had failed to spot the various
components and stages of the Soviet military build-up. On the contrary, they had detected
practically every move, starting shortly after the Herat crisis with unusual activity on the
part of two MRDs near the Afghan border, the two divisions whose movement the
Politburo had authorised on 17 March. The deployments to Bagram in July and
December, as well as other military activity, including mobilisation and training, had also
been seen and reported. The problem lay rather in the area of interpretation and analysis.
Here, with few exceptions, the analysts could not bring themselves to believe that the
Soviet Union would be prepared to mount a ‘major intervention’, with all the adverse
global consequences that would follow, nor did it seem to them that the number of units
involved would be sufficient for that purpose. What was expected was either ‘incremental
growth’ in Soviet military involvement, or limited action to protect Soviet lives. The
purpose of the deployments, as it seemed to them, was to bolster the regime against the
insurgents, not to overthrow it. Even when an analysis was prepared on 19 December,
when the build-up for the invasion was well under way, the conclusion of the large
majority of the intelligence community still was that a ‘major military intervention’ was
not about to be launched. Rather, it was seen as an ‘augmentation’ and ‘substantial
reinforcement’ of the units already introduced. It was not until word came out of the
killing of Amin on 27 December that it was realised in Washington that, in Brzezinski’s
words, ‘a major watershed’ had been reached.

The intelligence analysts were, however, right about two things. One was in their
assessment of the political costs of the invasion, which subsequent evidence has shown
was shared in several quarters in Moscow; the other was that the levels of forces
involved would not be sufficient to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan. A joke circulating in the CIA following the invasion was that it was the analysts who got it right, and the Soviets who got it wrong (although the language used was somewhat more colourful). The question whether advance public warnings might conceivably have alerted Amin, even if they might not have deterred Moscow, remains moot.

If the Soviet leadership had ignored or rejected the advice of its military and civilian experts in reaching its decision to invade, it can also be said that the Carter administration made little or no attempt to analyse Soviet motives and base policy on informed estimates of what these might be. Still less did it consider the possible implications and consequences of the invasion, or how best to defuse its effects. The earlier indications given to the US Embassy in Kabul of extreme reluctance to resort to military intervention were not recalled. Under Brzezinski’s influence, Carter took an unremittingly hard line and was motivated by a single determination to ‘make them pay’. Nor was any thought given to the possible effects of the various sanctions that were put into effect. ‘Not only did the [administration] go overboard in tossing everything movable onto the sacrificial bonfire of sanctions, but it tied the whole to the obviously unattainable maximum of getting the Soviets to withdraw.’ The American failure to perceive that the Soviet move was essentially defensive in nature induced them to take steps, notably assistance to the mujahidin, which merely enhanced Moscow’s security concerns and reduced the likelihood of an alteration of course. Knowing the limited extent of their own aims, the

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Map 13.1 The battlefields in Central and Eastern Afghanistan

Source: Afghanistan: A New History, Martin Ewans (RoutledgeCurzon 2002)
Soviet leadership could only conclude from the American over-reaction that Washington was set on removing the vestiges of détente and pursuing a global anti-Soviet offensive.

It was not only the United States that was profoundly concerned by the invasion. Acute disquiet was also registered globally, the Third World in particular having seen one of their number invaded by a major power. Resolutions condemning the Soviet Union were passed by overwhelming majorities in the United Nations General Assembly, the Islamic Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement. In some quarters, however, particularly in Europe, there was the feeling that President Carter had over-reacted, particularly since it was believed that all protest and sanctions were bound to be futile and that there was no prospect whatever that the Soviet Union could be persuaded to backtrack. Indeed, a general supposition at the time (which was shared by this author) was that when the winter was over, the Soviet forces would have little difficulty in at least containing the Afghan resistance, even if they could not suppress it altogether. The extent and ferocity of the resistance was not foreseen, nor was there any appreciation of the Soviet Army’s limitations. Nor, finally, was there any expectation of what was probably the critical factor in the whole affair, the role that was to be played by Pakistan. Afghanistan soon disappeared from the headlines and the war that ensued was mostly fought in the shadows. The remoteness of the battlefields and the censorship imposed, for a long time successfully, by the Soviet Union combined to make the struggle of the Afghan people an exceptionally lonely one.
The Soviet invasion was carried out with precision and efficiency. The two initial MRDs were followed by two more, the 54th and the 16th, which were deployed to Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif respectively. Within a few weeks, the total numbers making up what Moscow called its ‘Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan’ (LCSFA) were of the order of 85,000, with some 30,000 in support roles across the frontier. From then on, however, things did not go according to plan. The Soviets found that the Afghan army was in greater disarray than they had expected. Many of its soldiers had joined the resistance, others had simply deserted, and numbers had dropped from the 100,000 or so prior to the 1978 revolution to some 30–40,000, of whom probably less than half could be safely committed to battle. The invasion itself stimulated further defections, particularly among the officer corps. The expectation that it could fight the resistance alone, with Soviet troops providing logistic support and holding urban areas, strategic points and key routes, was soon belied. In March 1980, Moscow ordered the LCSFA to commence ‘joint operations’, the first being launched in Kunar the same month and the second in Paktia during June. When the attack on Kunar was launched, armoured units totalling some 5,000 men, preceded by an intense bombardment, trundled up the road through the main valley and ran into repeated ambushes. They managed to disperse the defenders and relieve the Afghan garrison at Chaga Serai, but their gains were only temporary. Unable to remain for logistic reasons, they withdrew, leaving the guerrillas free to return. In Paktia, the attacking force had helicopter support, but an entire battalion was ambushed and destroyed. The Soviet troops stayed in their vehicles and were massacred when their ammunition gave out. Along the main roads, ambushes took place, two of which, near the Salang Pass and on the road between Kabul and Jalalabad, were witnessed by the Times correspondent, Robert Fisk. It was evident to him that the Soviet troops involved had very little idea how to react. In July 1980, the Afghan 14th Armoured Division at Ghazni mutinied, and during the same month there was a revolt at the Pul-i-Charki base outside Kabul. Fighting also took place in Logar, on the strategic road between Kabul and Paktia, as well as around Herat and Kandahar.

On the civilian front, matters were little better. Once installed in Kabul, Karmal released all the prisoners at Pul-i-Charki, claiming, certainly falsely, that they had amounted to some 15,000. More probably, they had totalled less than 3,000. Soon, however, the prison was substantially repopulated, until, by the beginning of 1983, some 30,000 were being held in appalling conditions, while executions continued. Karmal also declared what he called a ‘new phase’ of the Afghan revolution and tried to present his
regime as moderate and broadly based. The ideology was softened, with the Afghan regime no longer being categorised as ‘socialist’, but as ‘national-democratic’. Karmal paid lip service to Islam, reintroduced the old Afghan flag, attempted to co-opt *mullahs* as supporters and established several ‘front’ organisations, including a National Fatherland Front and youth and women’s organisations. He also substantially increased the PDPA membership by including armed forces and security personnel, and by offering inducements to the urban populations. However, the reality was that he headed a puppet regime. Some 6–8,000 Soviet advisers ran the civil and military establishments, Safronchuk dictated foreign policy and the economy was overwhelmingly dependent on Soviet support. The regime itself continued to be rent with factionalism, a problem that it never managed to overcome, while Karmal, a heavy drinker, proved incapable of directing affairs. Nor were the Afghans deceived – nothing could shake their conviction that their country had been invaded by a godless power and that a *jihad* was obligatory.

Shortly after the invasion, a succession of remarkable demonstrations took place in Kabul and other cities. At nightfall, virtually the whole population came out on their rooftops and chanted the refrain *Allah-o Akbar*, ‘God is great’. Street demonstrations followed, in which numbers of students participated. In late February, there was a five-day strike in Kabul, while in April and May, further student demonstrations resulted in a number of deaths and hundreds of arrests. Altogether, there could be no mistaking the Afghan peoples’ determination to resist. As early as February 1980, Ustinov was warning the Politburo that the Soviet Army would have to stay in Afghanistan for as long as a year or even 18 months. Brezhnev wondered whether more troops might not be needed, while Gromyko warned that some form of guarantee against external aggression would be required before withdrawal could become a possibility.¹

It did not take the Soviet military leadership long to realise that the units that they had sent into Afghanistan were ill-equipped to deal with the resistance that they were, unexpectedly, meeting. The inability of the Soviet Army to conduct counter-insurgency operations was brutally exposed. This was no longer the prestigious Red Army that had fought with such tenacity, and ultimate success, in the Second World War. Three-quarters of it was conscripted and its ethos of brutality and bullying (*dedovshchina*) meant that its morale was low. As conscription was for two years, there was a turnover of a quarter of each unit every six months, with the result that the most experienced men were regularly lost and raw intakes had to be trained. Many came to Afghanistan with little or no prior training. Having been told that they were coming to fight Chinese or American mercenaries, the realisation that their opponents were Afghans fighting for their freedom came as a shock. The knowledge that the Soviet Union at large had no idea of the situation in which they were placed also caused much dissatisfaction. The officer corps was prepared to serve in Afghanistan in order to acquire battle experience, but the one aim of the majority of the rank and file was simply to survive and return home. Reflecting the miserable conditions with which the Soviet troops had to contend, drug abuse became rife and weapons and equipment were sold to finance the habit. Medical facilities were grossly inadequate and casualties from disease and illness high. The MRDs that were initially deployed to Afghanistan consisted mainly of Central Asian reservists, an indication that they were not expected to have to engage in serious fighting. Many of them proceeded to fraternise with their Afghan ethnic counterparts, and a brisk trade in Korans, proscribed in Central Asia, as well as in narcotics, developed. Their
presence also antagonised the Pushtoons. Ethnic Russians were soon brought in as replacements.

Both operationally and tactically the LCSFA was unprepared for the conditions it encountered in Afghanistan. It had been trained and equipped for large-scale, fast-moving warfare in Europe or Central Asia, and guerrilla warfare in mountainous terrain was outside its experience. Much of its heavy equipment, which was to a great extent useless in Afghan conditions, was repatriated, the number of tanks being reduced from around 1,000 to some 300. There was also a problem with the Soviet Army’s rigid, centralised structure, which stifled front-line ability to react quickly, essential in the type of guerrilla warfare that was developing. Junior officers and NCOs lacked skills and experience, and were unused to exercising initiative. Support elements, aviation, artillery and so on, were not deployed in direct response to the requirements of the units that were doing the fighting, but were controlled at higher command levels. In general, the control of artillery fire and air strikes was poor. In time, several units were disbanded or restructured, and greater flexibility was achieved through the formation of two independent rifle brigades and two independent motor rifle regiments, with their own supporting arms. The number of helicopters was increased from 60 to 300, and many more fixed-wing aircraft were introduced. The helicopter, in particular the M-24 Hind, became an important weapon and was greatly feared by the mujahidin. Logistic support was also improved, a permanent bridge was constructed over the Sri Darya at Termez and a fuel pipeline laid from the border to a large logistics facility at Pul-i-Khumri. However, the LCSFA failed throughout to adjust adequately to the requirements of the war it was having to wage. While its counter-insurgency operations became more flexible and effective, and it was never in danger of defeat, most of the country remained outside its control and it had to fight repeated engagements against a committed and
elusive enemy. The Soviet Union learnt nothing from the British experience in Afghanistan, nor even from its own significant partisan experience during the Second World War. It had also forgotten its experience of fighting asymmetric wars in the Caucasus and Central Asia, against peoples very similar to the Afghans.

The pattern into which the war settled was to remain remarkably constant over the decade of the occupation. The LCSFA, which by 1985 had been increased to some 120,000 men, was never reinforced to the point where it might have achieved a decisive ascendancy over the resistance. On the contrary, its strategy was limited to the holding of key localities and routes, with periodic operations aimed at clearing the mujahidin from areas in which they were becoming unduly threatening. The crucial task, from the Soviet point of view, was to safeguard the integrity of the capital, which was repeatedly subject to guerrilla infiltration. Other urban centres, Mazar-i-Sharif, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Herat, together with key air bases at each of these cities and at Bagram and Shindand, had also to be protected. Of vital importance was Highway 2, between Termez and Kabul, and a great deal of effort had to be devoted to keeping this route open. Beginning in September and November 1980, no fewer than nine offensives were mounted in the Panjshir Valley, where guerrillas headed by Shah Ahmed Massoud, the man who was to become the best known, and most admired, of the mujahidin commanders, threatened the security of the route, as well as of the nearby Bagram base. In May 1982, an assault by 15,000 Soviet and Afghan troops, supported by tanks, APCs, artillery and helicopter gunships, launched a six-week campaign. It had no decisive effect, and the Soviets suffered some 3,000 casualties and as many as 1,000 Afghan soldiers may have defected.\(^3\) The following year, however, Massoud had to agree to a year’s truce in order to reduce the pressure on him, and by the time the Soviets launched their seventh attack on the valley in April 1984, he had managed to evacuate it and had established a wider basis of cooperation with other northern commanders.

In following an essentially defensive strategy, the Soviets appear to have had three principal constraints. First, they wished to keep the war profile low and hold casualties to a minimum. Second, the logistics were such that it would have been virtually impossible to maintain a significantly larger force in Afghanistan: it was difficult enough to maintain it as it was, especially given the immense effort that had to be put into supplying the Afghan civilian population, particularly in Kabul. Third, even with a substantial reinforcement, it would still have been unlikely that the LCSFA would have been able to achieve the essential requirement; that of sealing the Pakistan border against the mujahidin. Because they were unwilling, possibly on account of the international repercussions, to mount attacks against mujahidin bases and supply lines in Pakistan, neither were they able to deal with the problem at source. As early as the end of 1981, a Soviet assessment revealed the consequences of these limitations.\(^4\) Only some 15 per cent of Afghanistan’s 35,000 villages were under government control, much the same number as a year previously. Not one province had been fully ‘liberated’. The army’s operations had failed to bring about any permanent clearance of the mujahidin: as the army withdrew, they returned. Kabul itself was vulnerable to incursions, in which top officials and officers were assassinated, as well as to rocket attacks.

For the Afghan people the consequences of the Soviet strategy were dire. Because the LCSFA was never sufficiently strong to hold territory other than on a temporary basis, it employed excessively brutal tactics. It is of the nature of counter-insurgency operations
that there is no possibility of conducting them without harm to civilian populations. The most humane – and effective – way to minimise this harm is to segregate the population as much as possible, often into ‘protected villages’, so keeping it away from the battlefield and at the same time depriving the guerrillas of the support – food, shelter and intelligence – that a populated countryside can provide. A fierce battle can then be fought with the guerrillas and a ‘hearts and minds’ operation with the civilians. In Afghanistan (and, later, in Chechnya) the Soviet Army made no effort at all to adopt such a strategy. Beginning in 1983 it made deliberate attempts to depopulate the countryside, principally by means of extensive air bombardment and shelling of villages, the sowing of mines and a ‘scorched earth’ policy on the part of ground forces. All this amounted to what has been termed ‘migratory genocide’5 and to widespread violations of international humanitarian law. From first to last, the Soviets had no regard whatever for loss of life among the Afghan population.

The other objective of Soviet strategy, the building up of the Afghan army, went through a number of phases. From the outset, considerable efforts went into conscription, but came up against what became known as the ‘revolving door’ syndrome – conscripts deserted, with their weapons if possible, as soon as they had the chance. The turnover was said to amount to some 20,000 a year.5 By the end of 1980 the Afghan army was even less effective than it had been at the time of the invasion. The officer corps was further depleted, and morale and efficiency remained low. Later in the war, however, some stiffening and growth was achieved, and it proved possible for Afghan units to replace Soviet in combat operations. Increasingly, Afghans were found to be doing the fighting and the Soviet role was reduced. Supplementary assistance was provided by sarandoy, para-military police, and informal militias. When the Soviets finally withdrew, the Afghan army, then amounting to some 100,000 in number, proved able, against all expectations, to hold its own against the mujahidin.

An effective role in the conflict was played by Karmal’s new security organisation, KhAD (State Information Service), set up with a tough and competent Parchami, Najibullah, at its head. It succeeded in recruiting appreciable numbers of operatives and informers, induced by a combination of high pay, exemption from military service and other benefits. Modelled on, and extensively advised by, the KGB, its main tasks were to enforce loyalty to the regime, keep a grip on urban areas, subvert the resistance and undertake operations in Pakistan. One of its most effective tactics was to create ‘false bands’ which, by purporting to be members of the resistance, succeeded in sowing much dissension in the latter’s ranks.7 Particular efforts were made to subvert, or buy off, tribal leaders and resistance commanders, some of whom accepted weapons and money in return for support for the Kabul regime and attacks on resistance supply lines. KhAD’s methods were ruthless in the extreme and it earned extensive condemnation by the United Nations, as well as by Amnesty International and other human rights organisations.8

Prior to the Soviet invasion, some 400,000 Afghans had crossed over to Pakistan as refugees. Following the invasion, numbers quickly escalated. No demonstrably accurate figures have ever been produced, but by the end of 1980, Pakistan was probably sheltering nearly 2 million refugees. By the late 1980s, there were probably some 3–3.5 million in Pakistan and another 2–2.5 million in Iran. Many others became internal refugees, fleeing the countryside for the greater security of the towns. The population of Kabul grew to over 2 million, who had to be supplied with food and fuel over the tenuous
road link with the Soviet Union. At a rough estimate, therefore, between a third and a half of Afghanistan’s pre-war population became refugees. The influx into Pakistan caused grave problems for the authorities, and clashes ensued between the refugees and Pakistanis over available resources and political and other issues. All things considered, however, Pakistani tolerance and hospitality was, with the help of the UNHCR and other agencies, remarkably generous and effective. While organised into camps, the refugees were never corralled and were able to compete with Pakistanis in the labour market. Most importantly, the camps provided secure bases where the mujahidin could find respite from the battlefield and leave their families in comparative safety.

The Soviet invasion transformed the fortunes of the Islamist and other Sunni leaders who had fled Afghanistan during the Daud era. From heading small and largely ineffectual groups, they now acquired supporters, funds and weaponry. The two main factions, which developed from the original groupings at Kabul University, were Rabbani’s Jamiat-i Islami (Islamic Society) and Hekmatyar’s Hizb-i Islami (Islamic Party), but others also proliferated. There was a break-away Hizb-i Islami, headed by a mullah, Yunus Khalis, with strong tribal support in Nangarhar province. Among the less doctrinaire parties were Gailani’s Mahaz-i Milli-i Islami (National Islamic Front), Mujadidi’s Jabha-i Najat-i Milli (National Liberation Front) and the Harakat-i Inquilab-i Islami (Islamic Revolutionary Movement) led by Maulvi Mohammed Nabi Muhammedi, who attracted many of the traditional religious leadership.

In 1979 and 1980, largely at Saudi insistence, efforts were made to combine the various Peshawar groups into a united front under the leadership of a more recent arrival from Afghanistan, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. However, Hekmatyar refused to cooperate and the remainder found Sayyaf too author itarian for their liking. Sayyaf then founded his own group, the Ittihad-i Islami (Islamic Union), which received considerable Saudi funds and backing. This brought the total of the main Peshawar parties to seven, at which number, early in 1981, it was frozen by the Pakistanis. The restriction was enforced by requiring that every refugee family had to be registered with one of the groups in order to draw rations. Iran was also engaged in supporting Shi’a mujahidin operating in the centre and west of the country, but the scale of its assistance was much smaller and, unlike Pakistan, it received no outside support.

Realising that in the Cold War context, the United States, initially under President Carter, but then, more enthusiastically, under President Reagan, was keen to support and strengthen the Afghan resistance, the Pakistan government handled their relationship with Washington with considerable astuteness. President Zia started by permitting the Americans to establish electronic monitoring facilities to replace those they had lost in Iran, so creating an initial indebtedness. He was then able to lay down a number of conditions, principally that the United States would turn a blind eye to his nuclear weapons programme and human rights abuses, and offer him a substantial military and economic aid programme. Under the terms of the Symington Amendment, the United States had in 1978, in response to Pakistan’s efforts to acquire a nuclear weapons capability, cut off aid, but this policy was now reversed. Zia was, moreover, able to stand out for a substantial programme. He initially dismissed an offer by the Carter administration of a $400 million programme as ‘peanuts’ and ‘not even a drop in the ocean’, but in 1981 accepted President Reagan’s offer of a six-year $3.2 billion programme of economic and military aid. This enabled him to achieve several
objectives. He could pursue his nuclear ambitions unhindered and acquire new armaments, including F-16 aircraft, to bolster him in his confrontations with India and counter any threat that the Soviet Union, now occupying a contiguous territory, might present. Moreover, he was able to stipulate that all the weaponry supplied to the mujahidin should be channelled through the ISI. 10 This meant that all American responsibility ended when the arms were delivered, often via Saudi Arabia, either at Karachi or at a military air base outside Islamabad. No Americans were allowed to have direct contact with the mujahidin, and still less were they permitted to go into Afghanistan. All training of the mujahidin was carried out by Pakistanis, having themselves been trained by the Americans.

This arrangement, combined with a policy of not supplying weapons of United States origin, suited the Americans, who were anxious to pursue a policy of ‘plausible deniability’, making it appear that the Afghan resistance was home-grown, using only weapons that had been captured in Afghanistan or which had been brought across by deserters. From the Pakistani viewpoint, it also had several advantages. It meant that the ISI had the exclusive responsibility for planning the war, training the mujahidin and deciding what operations should be launched. They could keep a firm grip on the resistance groups and channel arms and funds as and where they chose. Having seen at first hand the problems caused for Jordan by the presence there of a unified PLO, Zia was determined not to tolerate anything similar in Peshawar. There is, for example, evidence that a majority of the refugees might have preferred unity under the aegis of the former King, who was widely seen as a symbol of national unity, and a poll conducted among Afghan refugees in July 1987 indicated that a majority were favourably disposed towards him. However, the Pakistanis made sure that no royal representative was permitted to make contact with the refugee community. Brigadier Yousaf, the ISI officer in charge of the Afghanistan operation, has insisted that the resistance groups received arms and money in more or less equal measure, according to their effectiveness in the field. 11 It is highly doubtful if this was so and, in any case, substantial Saudi funds went direct to the Islamist parties. The result was that these parties received the bulk of the assistance – some 75 per cent – with some 50 per cent going to Hekmatyar. His group did relatively little fighting and he was more concerned to manoeuvre himself into a position where he would be able to dominate an eventual Afghan government. He accordingly accumulated arms and money, invested in drugs operations and conducted assassinations within rival groups. His good fortune was that his politico-religious outlook was the one that was most in tune with that of Zia, who felt that if and when the resistance triumphed, Hekmatyar would be the man who would be most likely to further Pakistan’s objectives in Afghanistan. Zia, in fact, had his own far-reaching agenda. As he put it:

We have earned the right to have a very friendly government in Kabul. We won’t permit it to be like it was before, with Indian and Soviet influence there and claims on our territory. It will be a real Islamic state, part of a pan-Islam revival, that will one day win over the Moslems in the Soviet Union, you will see. 12

In sum, therefore, the shape and scale of the Peshawar resistance strongly reflected the ideology and ambitions of Zia and the Pakistan government, with the United States,
Saudi Arabia and others providing the necessary support. That the Islamist organisations which received the bulk of the aid had little popular following within Afghanistan was barely a consideration.

In Afghanistan itself, a number of commanders operated resistance groups of varying size and effectiveness. Some groups were small and part-time, others large, well organised and more or less permanently in the field. To receive arms and funds, the Pakistanis made it a condition that the commanders should ally themselves with one of the Peshawar-based organisations. This was usually one with which the commander in question felt ideologically sympathetic, or on which he could rely for a reasonable supply of weaponry. In general, the mujahidin were ideal guerrilla fighters. They were exceptionally tough, having been reared in a harsh environment and a society that emphasised the virtues of courage and endurance. They had an intimate knowledge of the country. A rifle was part of the customary accoutrement of an Afghan tribesman and most were naturals when it came to handling weaponry. They had a fervent belief in their cause and the inevitability of its triumph. To fight and, if necessary, die, fulfilled what they saw as their obligations as Muslims. They also possessed several of the other advantages that are indispensable for a successful guerrilla conflict. The terrain over which they fought was extensive, rugged and difficult to penetrate. They had their secure bases in Pakistan and were increasingly supplied with the weaponry and supplies they needed, together with training and operational advice. What they lacked was unity – indeed they tended all too often to be at each others’ throats. Yet, up to a point, this was an advantage, as there was no overall command, or chain of command, that the Soviets could target, nor was intelligence on their movements and intentions easy to obtain. Indeed, their own intelligence about their Soviet and Afghan opponents was far superior to its converse. The ISI was also able to plan operations using satellite intelligence passed to them by the Americans.13

For several years, Zia was careful to ensure that the aid should be kept to a level that would not entail the risk of Soviet retaliation. As he often put it, the object was to keep the pot boiling, but not risk its boiling over into Pakistan. However, external aid to the mujahidin gradually grew. If the United States had not begun to arrange for the supply of arms before the Soviet invasion, it certainly started to do so immediately thereafter. The first supplies were mainly of .303 Lee-Enfield bolt-action rifles dating from the World Wars: while accurate and reliable weapons, they were old technology compared with the Soviet AK 47, which the mujahidin at first acquired only from deserters or through capture. By 1983, the CIA weapons operation was running at a level of $15 million a year, to which the Saudi government had agreed to add a further matching $15 million. As well as the .303 rifles and ammunition, SA-7 anti-aircraft missiles, acquired from Poland, were being added to the inventory.

The story of the transformation of this modest initiative into what was to become the CIA’s largest and most successful operation ever is largely the story of a brash, larger-than-life playboy Congressman from Texas, Charles Wilson.14 Under the hell-raising image, Wilson was an unusually committed and forceful politician. Elected to Congress on the Democratic ticket in 1972, he managed to manoeuvre himself on to the powerful House Appropriations Committee, which had the responsibility for the oversight of the whole Federal budget, and then on to its Foreign Operations and Defence Appropriations Subcommittees. As a result, he was able to bring influence to bear not only on the State
Department and Department of Defence, but also, crucially, on the CIA. Known at first principally as a champion of Israel, he developed a relationship with a prominent Texan socialite, Joanne Herring, who, somewhat improbably, had been appointed as the Pakistan Honorary Consul in Houston and, even more improbably, enjoyed a close rapport with President Zia. In 1982 she persuaded Wilson to visit Pakistan at the end of a visit to Israel, with the result that, having been to Peshawar and seen the plight of the Afghan refugees and met some of the mujahidin, he became totally committed to their cause. The priority, as he saw it, was to obtain for them some form of anti-aircraft weapon, to counter the Mi-24 helicopter gunships, as well as more modern and effective weapons generally. Quite illegally, he began to negotiate with the Egyptian and Israeli governments over arms supplies, and in 1983 he managed to obtain the agreement of the Appropriations Committee to the earmarking of an extra $40 million for the CIA programme, $17 million of it specifically for an anti-helicopter weapon.

At first, the CIA were aghast at this intrusion. It would be likely to blow the American cover, particularly if, as Wilson wished, it were to involve the purchase of the Swiss Oerlikon anti-aircraft cannon. In their view, the escalation would invite Soviet retaliation and endanger the security of Pakistan, although here Wilson was able to outflank them, having met Zia and secured his support for an enlargement of the programme. Strategically too, it would mean doing more than just keeping the Soviet wound bleeding, and involve an escalation which they believed would be bound to be futile. They did not see any prospect of the Soviet Union being defeated in Afghanistan – the most that could be hoped for was a slow erosion of its military and political strength, which, in the CIA’s view, was the object of the exercise. Wilson, on the other hand, saw it as immoral purely to arm the mujahidin with inferior weaponry and then send them to lay down their lives in the face of huge odds. They should be given everything possible to secure victory.

Wilson’s view gradually prevailed. He had the advantage of being able to manipulate Congress, which meant that he could not only secure the appropriations he wanted, but threaten the Administration with damage to their own pet programmes if they were to try to thwart him. In October 1984 a resolution was passed in both Houses of Congress urging the United States to ‘encourage and support the people of Afghanistan to continue their struggle’. Sentiment in President Reagan’s Administration was also gradually moving his way. Within the CIA itself, the Pakistan programme came under the direction of an officer, Gust Avrakotos, who saw things in much the same light as Wilson. In the spring of 1984, he suggested to Wilson, breaking practically every rule in the CIA book, that the latter might secure a further appropriation of $50 million, and Wilson was happy to oblige. With Saudi money to match, business flourished. Without much difficulty, the Chinese were persuaded to manufacture Soviet-type arms, and produced AK 47s, Dashika 12.7-mm machine guns, anti-tank RPGs, ammunition and mines, using $37 million of the $50 million. Of the Saudi money, $44 million was used to buy British Blowpipe anti-aircraft missiles. The Egyptians meanwhile set up production lines for 122-mm Katyusha rockets, AK 47s, .303 ammunition and mines. Quantities of arms were also purchased from Israel, mostly from stocks captured during its incursion into Lebanon in 1982. Within the CIA, careful planning produced a useful mix of weaponry and supplies, with logistics to match, even including the supply of mules to carry the weapons into Afghanistan. By 1985, the Afghan budget was running at $250 million, over half the total CIA operations budget, matched dollar for dollar by the Saudis, who
were happy to pay up without questions asked. Inevitably, corruption took a toll of the programme. Although Brigadier Yousaf has asserted that this only occurred either before the armaments reached Pakistan or after they had been delivered to the mujahidin, there is little doubt that the facts were otherwise. A proportion of the weaponry was retained by the Pakistanis themselves and more by the mujahidin leadership, who used them to enhance their own leverage within the resistance and stock up for an eventual power struggle. An apparently common practice was for the resistance parties to sign for more weapons than they had received, they and the ISI then splitting the proceeds from the sale of the balance. Possibly some 20–30 per cent of the total went astray, as did much of the direct funding provided by Saudi Arabia and other backers.

As the war progressed, the CIA refined and expanded its programmes, concentrating on a core of 150,000 mujahidin, for whom it provided, through the ISI, intensive training courses on the use of weaponry and guerrilla tactics. At the same time, what was to be known as the Cross Border Humanitarian Aid Programme was launched, with an initial budget of $6 million. This was revolutionary, as it meant that American medical and other staff were now, for the first time, openly working with the Afghan refugees in Peshawar and along the border, training Afghan counterparts and helping to set up clinics and schools. The objective was not purely humanitarian, but was designed, in response to the Soviet ‘scorched earth’ policy in the border areas, to encourage Afghans to remain in their homes, rather than become refugees. Thereafter, the programme grew almost exponentially. In 1986, the budget amounted to $15 million, in the following year, $30 million, in 1988, $45 million, and in 1989, $90 million. It, too, was depleted through extensive corruption and only a proportion of the aid reached its intended beneficiaries.

The year 1985 was also significant for President Reagan’s Directive that ‘all means available’ should be used to drive the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. Ten million dollars of Pentagon money was used on a ‘Weapons Upgrade Programme’ under which novel forms of weaponry were developed, including a mortar that the mujahidin could aim accurately using satellite positioning technology. It was also realised that there was provision for acquiring a large variety of surplus Pentagon equipment, boots, tents, medical supplies, heavy coats and so on, for ‘humanitarian purposes’. This was ferried into Pakistan on C-5A transports, on flights which had in any case to be flown in order that the pilots could maintain their ‘flight proficiency’. Wounded mujahidin were carried to the United States on the return flights for specialist medical treatment. Just prior to the end of the fiscal year, Wilson discovered that there was a spare $300 million from a Pentagon programme, which would be lost were it not used. Within a space of little more than a week, Congress approvals had been obtained for the diversion of this money to the CIA’s Afghanistan programme, outside the normal budgetary control constraints, and contracts had been signed. Again, a matching Saudi contribution was obtained.

There were several surprising aspects to this escalating activity, which was by 1987 costing over $700 million and which was eventually to run to some $3 billion in all. One is that Zia was prepared to authorise it, notwithstanding the risk of Soviet retaliation. At one point, in 1986, he even authorised mujahidin attacks into Soviet Central Asia, although they were called off the following year in face of threats of Soviet reprisals. Zia presumably reckoned that the game was worth it, since he was attracting American military and civilian aid on a substantial scale, to the point where the Pakistan programme was the third largest worldwide after Israel and Egypt. He was also being
enabled to pursue his nuclear weapons programme with impunity, although he had more
than one close shave when his agents were discovered trying to obtain crucial equipment
or materials for it in the United States. His confidence also no doubt grew as time went
by and Moscow continued to show no inclination at all to increase the numbers of its
troops in Afghanistan. Consequently, the LCSFA was never able seriously to threaten
Pakistan territory, although frequent border violations and harassments took place.
Another curious aspect is that the whole campaign, with its extensive American
involvement, went virtually unnoticed by Congress and the American media. Very few
reporters were prepared to make the long and dangerous journey to the remote areas
where the mujahidin were fighting. On the Soviet side too, virtually nothing was heard,
and few Russians realised that their troops were becoming increasingly bogged down in
an unwinnable war.

The culmination of the CIA’s weapons supply programme was the supply to the
mujahidin of the Stinger ground-to-air missile. Throughout the war, Soviet air activity
in general, and the Mi-24 helicopter gunship in particular, remained a major threat to the
mujahidin and a constraint on their activity. Other weaponry, notably the SA-7 and
Blowpipe missiles, had failed to produce an adequate answer, as had Charles Wilson’s
attempts to introduce the Oerlikon cannon. As early as 1983, therefore, the United States
administration began to debate the pros and cons of introducing the latest technology, the
simple, man-portable and highly effective Stinger. The United States Army was strongly
opposed, on the grounds that it needed the weapon to equip its own forces, while it and
others in the Administration were concerned that the technology might be compromised,
or that Stingers might pass into terrorist hands. There was also concern that this would be
the first overtly US piece of weaponry to be introduced, and so undermine the doctrine of
‘plausible deniability’, as well as increase the risk of major Soviet retaliation against
Pakistan. Even after Zia had asked for the missile in November 1984, the debate
continued for another 18 months before approval was finally given. It was not until 26
September 1986 that the first Stingers were deployed near Jalalabad airbase and three Mi-
24s were shot down as they came in to land. Thereafter, so far as accurate figures are
available, the weapon achieved a more than seven out of ten success rate and a United
States Army analysis concluded that it had shot down 279 aircraft and helicopters by the
end of the war. Until the Soviets were able to introduce tactical and technical counter-
measures, it remained a potent weapon and greatly eased the pressures on the mujahidin.
The irony is that if it had been introduced earlier, it might have made a measurable
difference to the course of the conflict. As it was, Mikhail Gorbachev had already come
to power in Moscow in March 1995 with an agenda for resolving the Afghanistan
impasse.
Once they had realised the extent of the quagmire into which they had stumbled, it was not long before the Soviet leadership began to look for ways to extricate themselves. Following the uprisings in Kabul in February 1980 and the need for the LCSFA to undertake operations, the Politburo discussed the possibility. They had, however, a number of concerns, principally the loss of prestige that a withdrawal would entail, and the need not to be seen to be conceding anything to the United States and other opponents of the invasion. They also continued to fear the possible destabilisation and loss of Afghanistan, and the consequent risk of a growth of Muslim extremism on the Soviet Union’s borders. It was, therefore, concluded that a decision should be put off to a later date. When, nevertheless, the following month, they had before them an offer from Fidel Castro to try to mediate between Pakistan and Afghanistan, this appeared to them to have some merit, if perhaps only as window-dressing. Brezhnev’s reply was encouraging, but the initiative turned out to be a non-starter, given his insistence that any negotiations should be bilateral, between Afghanistan, Pakistan and possibly Iran, in order to avoid ‘internationalising’ the issue, and that they should address only the question of ‘external interference’ in Afghanistan. In April, a report by the Politburo’s four-man Afghanistan committee concluded that a withdrawal could only be considered ‘when the situation in Afghanistan stabilises, and the situation around the country improves, and only upon a request from the [Afghan] leadership’. Again, however, this did not prevent the Politburo from prompting Karmal the following month to put forward, ostensibly as his own initiative, a ‘programme of political settlement’. Because it continued to insist on direct negotiations, it again went nowhere, but it did contain key elements of the settlement that was ultimately achieved, non-interference in Afghanistan’s affairs, backed by Soviet and United States guarantees, the return of refugees and the withdrawal of Soviet troops ‘in the context of a political settlement’. The question of Afghan self-determination was sidestepped, in order not to prejudice the survival of the Soviet Union’s Afghan clients, but this helped, rather than hindered, the later negotiating process, it being the conviction of the Pakistanis and others that the regime would inevitably fall once the Soviet troops had gone. The absence of a commitment to some process of self-determination thus suited both sides.

Other than an abortive attempt by the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington, acting on behalf of the European Union, to get negotiations going by means of an international conference (an initiative privately characterised by the Politburo committee as ‘absolutely hopeless’), little or nothing was achieved prior to November 1980, when
the UN General Assembly passed a second resolution condemning the invasion. This time, besides consolidating the substantial anti-Soviet majority, it expressed the hope that the UN Secretary-General would appoint a ‘special representative’ to pursue the possibility of a settlement. The following February, Waldheim announced the appointment of a senior UN official, Perez de Quellor, but only as his ‘personal representative’, the downgrading of status being a concession to appreciable opposition to the proposal. During 1981 Perez de Cuellar shuttled between the various capitals, but was unable to establish a basis for negotiations. Early in 1982, when he became UN Secretary-General, he in turn appointed an Ecuadorian, Diego Cordovez, to succeed him in the Afghanistan appointment.

The road that Cordovez had to tread was a long and stony one. After several rounds of consultations with the governments involved, in June 1982 he managed to secure agreement to the holding of ‘proximity talks’ between the Afghans and the Pakistanis. Because the Pakistanis refused to do anything that might imply recognition of the Kabul regime, the delegations assembled separately in Geneva and Cordovez shuttled between them. The Iranians refused to participate, but agreed to be kept informed. The mujahidin organisations were not represented, either separately or collectively. At the end of the talks, while no substantive agreement was reached, Cordovez’ view was that ‘tentative progress’ had been made.

In November 1982, Brezhnev died and was succeeded by Andropov. While the latter’s role over Afghanistan remains a matter of controversy, the general view is that he saw the need for a withdrawal but was overtaken by illness before he could create enough momentum. This is not, however, the picture that emerges from the minutes of a Politburo meeting on 10 March 1983. This shows that Gromyko was pessimistic about the situation on the ground in Afghanistan and advised that ‘we must do everything possible to find a mutually acceptable agreement’, even if ‘for now we cannot give Pakistan consent on concrete time periods for the withdrawal of our troops’. Andropov, on the other hand, remarked merely that the problem was not Pakistan, but ‘American imperialism. That is why we cannot back off’. On the other hand, Andropov did start by talking to President Zia in conciliatory terms and by orchestrating an unprecedented degree of publicity about the war, seemingly in an effort to give urgency to the need for a political solution. When Perez de Cuellar and Cordovez met him in Moscow at the end of March, he assured them that the Soviet Union had no intention of keeping its forces in Afghanistan. Ticking off the reasons on his fingers, he listed them as the considerable expense, internal problems in the Soviet Union, problems with the United States, the Third World and the Islamic World, and problems with the other states involved. He insisted that he sincerely wished to ‘put an end to this situation’. He also summoned Karmal to Moscow and made it plain that the Soviet presence in Afghanistan was not open ended. The Soviet response to the ‘preliminary draft of a settlement’ which Cordovez had produced in advance of the next round of proximity talks, which were held in April 1983, was also favourable, and the talks themselves went well. Cordovez reckoned that he had achieved ‘95 per cent of the text of a draft comprehensive settlement’. By the time the next round, due in June of that year, took place, however, the atmosphere had changed.

The causes of the change, and the consequent stalling of Cordovez’ efforts, seem to have lain principally in Pakistan. There, the mujahidin were becoming more confident of...
their chances of forcing a military victory and were strongly opposed to any compromise. The Pakistani military were also extremely sceptical about the prospects of a Soviet withdrawal and saw advantage in continuing to support the resistance, not least because they were still hoping to secure their regional goals and were continuing to attract considerable American military and economic aid. In the United States, too, opponents of a settlement were in the ascendancy. The influence of Reagan’s Director of the CIA, William Casey, was growing: not only was he a strong critic of the UN initiative, he was also an enthusiast for arming the resistance and making life as difficult as possible for the Soviets. Many in Washington in any case doubted whether the Soviet Union would withdraw under any circumstances. With Andropov’s hospitalisation in August 1983 and his death early the following year, all sense of urgency on the Soviet side also lapsed, a state of affairs that continued under Chernenko up to March 1985. Cordovez found himself faced by two main roadblocks, the Soviet Union’s refusal to set any timetable for their withdrawal, and the Pakistanis’ refusal to move on the question of ‘outside interference’ until a timetable had been agreed. Meanwhile, American assistance to the mujahidin increased, the war continued, and casualties on both sides mounted. During 1984, Soviet battle casualties doubled over those of 1983 and were the highest of any single year of the war.

With Chernenko’s death in March 1985, Gorbachev became General Secretary of the CPSU. He had earlier enjoyed Andropov’s patronage and, in 1982, had become the senior personnel secretary of the Central Committee, a position that enabled him to influence appointments of likeminded reformists. He surrounded himself with intellectuals and specialists of independent views and, by the time he became General Secretary, he had an informed grasp of the reforms that the country needed. While his conclusion was that a solution to the Afghanistan problem was the first essential step, the paradox was that in the immediate aftermath of his appointment, the scale of Soviet military activity increased. It is not clear whether an escalation had been decided upon in Moscow before he came to power, or whether he himself conceded that it would be necessary to give the military one more chance to settle the war. A prestigious commander, General Zaitsev, was put in charge and given his head, although he was not allocated the increases in troop numbers that the military apparently wanted. Gorbachev’s problem was that until he was firmly established in power and had put allies and supporters in key positions, he was unable to challenge those in the KGB, the CPSU, the foreign policy hierarchy and the military–industrial complex who were committed to the war. He did, however, take some immediate steps. Censorship was relaxed and the Soviet public began to learn some of the more bloody and discreditable aspects of the war that was being fought in their name. In October, Gorbachev had a meeting with Karmal and informed him that by the summer of 1986 he would have to be ready to do without Soviet troops. Reporting to the Politburo on 17 October 1985, Gorbachev said that Karmal had been dumbfounded – he had expected Soviet troops to stay there ‘for a long time, if not forever’. 15 Gorbachev then read out to the Politburo a number of ‘heartbreaking’ letters from parents and relatives of soldiers who had served in Afghanistan, and finished by asserting that ‘with or without Karmal’s consent, we’ll take a firm line on the matter of our rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan’. He was supported by Marshal Sokolov, now the Defence Minister, and the Politburo adopted a resolution committing itself to an ‘early’ withdrawal of Soviet troops,
provided that a ‘friendly’ regime remained in Kabul. Strong ‘recommendations’ were sent to Karmal that he should widen and liberalise his regime.

Meanwhile, the attitude adopted by the Soviet Union at the June round of Geneva negotiations became much less rigid. In effect, Moscow committed itself to serious negotiations, over both a withdrawal and outside guarantees of an eventual agreement. In November, at a summit meeting with President Reagan, Gorbachev gave the impression that there might be flexibility in the Soviet position. The following February, he went public. In a remarkable passage in his report to the Central Committee at the CPSU’s 27th Party Congress, he declared that

counter-revolution and imperialism have turned Afghanistan into a bleeding wound. The Soviet Union supports this country’s efforts which are directed at the defence of its own sovereignty. We would like in the near future to bring the Soviet forces – situated in Afghanistan at the request of its government – back to their homeland. The time scale for the step by step withdrawal has been worked out with the Afghan side, as soon as a political settlement has been achieved which will provide for a real end to and guarantee of a non-renewal of the outside interference in the internal affairs of [Afghanistan].

Soon afterwards, Soviet dissatisfaction with Karmal came to a head. He had done little to implement the ‘recommendations’ and had tried to hinder progress on the Geneva negotiations, in particular over the question of discussions of a withdrawal timetable. In March 1986, Gorbachev lost patience. When Karmal came to Moscow for medical treatment, he was pressured to stand down as PDPA General Secretary in favour of Najibullah, although retaining the largely honorary Chairmanship of the Revolutionary Council.

On 13 November 1986, the decisive debate took place in the Politburo. Gorbachev was now able to show that the military approach had failed, and started with an incisive statement:

We have been fighting in Afghanistan for six years already. If the approach is not changed, we will continue to fight for another 20–30 years … Our military should be told that they are learning badly from this war. Can it be that there is no room for our General Staff to manoeuvre? We have not selected the keys to resolving this problem. Are we going to fight endlessly as a testimony that our troops are not able to deal with the situation? We need to finish this process as soon as possible.

At the end of a long discussion, Marshal Akhromeyev described the position on the ground in pessimistic terms. Kabul and the main provincial centres were under control, but elsewhere the regime had no authority: ‘we have lost the battle for the Afghan people’. The army could hold the present situation indefinitely, but could not resolve it. First Deputy Foreign Minister Vorontsov added that the Afghan peasantry, who made up 80 per cent of the population, had failed to benefit from the revolution: indeed, those who lived in the regions controlled by the counter-revolution had, in general, done somewhat
better. The PDPA leadership lacked initiative, Najibullah, a ‘talented and decisive man’, being the exception. The Politburo accepted Gorbachev’s summing up; that a withdrawal of Soviet troops must take place within two years at the outside, and that Najibullah must be persuaded to ‘take the key decisions’ and ‘widen the social base’ of his regime.

Najibullah was accordingly summoned to Moscow, where he was told that Soviet troops would be withdrawn within 18 months to two years. Clearly unhappy, he tried, like Karmal, who was now removed from Kabul altogether, to drag his feet, no doubt encouraged by the opposition to withdrawal that continued to be expressed in Moscow. According to Schevernadze, who had replaced Gromyko as Foreign Minister in July 1985, with a specific remit to deal with the Afghan problem, there was ‘considerable resistance’ within the Party, as well as within the military and the KGB.18 The key focus of controversy was the survival of the Najibullah regime, some believing that he would in any case survive, others fearful that he would not and insistent that the war should continue, yet others believing that a coalition would be necessary, either with the PDPA still in control, or with it reduced to a minority status. No amount of effort by Cordovez or Moscow succeeded in resolving this issue. Although Najibullah did introduce policies of ‘national reconciliation’, these did not go very far, and he and the PDPA remained effectively in power.

The American attitude also caused considerable problems, greater, according to Gorbachev, than those he faced internally or with the Afghans.19 In Washington, there was strong resistance to the idea of a settlement, some continuing to believe that the Soviet Union would never withdraw and that negotiations were therefore futile, others insisting that, whether or not it was realistic to talk of a settlement, life should be made as difficult as possible for the Soviets and nothing should be done to let them off the hook. American obstruction took a number of forms: insistence that the outcome should be a genuine ‘neutral, non-aligned Afghan government responsive to the wishes of the Afghan people’, a refusal to consider a guarantee of a settlement, and, at the end of 1987, a reversal by President Reagan of an earlier apparent commitment to halt aid to the resistance at the commencement of a Soviet withdrawal. President Zia also insisted that he would only sign an agreement with a coalition Afghan government.

Gradually, however, the log jam started to move. In May 1986, after eight rounds of proximity talks in Geneva, the Afghan delegation at last offered a withdrawal timetable, stipulating a four-year period, with all aid to the resistance stopping at the outset. This was seen as wholly unrealistic, and the Pakistanis countered with the offer of six months. Gradually the difference was whittled down, until, at the end of 1987, the Afghans were offering a year and the Pakistanis eight months. But with other issues still unresolved, it was not until Gorbachev made a decisive move that the issue was settled. On 8 February 1988, he announced that provided that a settlement was reached by 15 March, Soviet troops would begin withdrawing on 15 May and all would have gone by February 1989.20 This irrespective of the question of the nature of the Kabul regime, which was a ‘purely internal Afghan issue’. Neither the Pakistan government nor the mujahidin was happy at this, not least because the refugees would not return unless there was a change of regime in Kabul, but eventually the Pakistanis acquiesced. With some difficulty, the US government modified its stand on the cessation of outside interference by enunciating a policy of ‘symmetry’. When the Soviet Union stopped its military aid to the Kabul regime, American aid to the mujahidin would also cease. Otherwise, there would be
‘positive symmetry’, continuing US military supplies corresponding with those coming from the USSR. This, of course, was in direct contradiction of the American commitment to ‘non-interference’, and it would also necessarily mean that Pakistan would violate its own parallel commitment. As on other occasions, Zia was prepared to use the lie direct. He had earlier flatly denied the existence of the Pakistanis’ nuclear weapons programme and, when tackled by Gorbachev about his support of the mujahidin, had looked him in the eye and denied that there was any. Now he was prepared to stick to a denial of interference, lying being ‘permitted under Islamic custom’. Gorbachev, for his part, was so convinced that a withdrawal was a necessity that he was prepared to overlook the point, and he set about building up the Afghan government’s military strength. Najibullah was, with great difficulty, pressured into accepting what were to be known as the Geneva Accords, it having been made clear to him that the Soviet troops would be leaving, whether an agreement was signed or not. President Reagan was persuaded to agree to the settlement on the assurance that the Najibullah regime would be bound to fall. The Accords were signed on 14 April 1988, and came into effect a month later. They covered non-interference, the return of refugees, the withdrawal of Soviet troops and a ‘declaration on international guarantees’. Inevitably, the obvious determination on the part of the Americans and Pakistanis to continue supporting the mujahidin gave the Accords an ‘unreal quality’. In Peshawar, the mujahidin refused to be bound by them, while in Kabul there would be no generally acceptable government. The sole outcome was that the Soviet Union was enabled to withdraw its troops with some semblance of respectability.

The Soviet withdrawal took place on schedule, if not without incident. Half the LCSFA were gone by mid-August, but in November, Moscow called a temporary halt in response to ‘flagrant violations’ of the Accords on the part of the Americans and Pakistanis. After a short delay, the withdrawal resumed, with the most difficult stage, the final move through the Salang Pass and the Hindu Kush, having to be made in the depths of an exceptionally hard Afghan winter. The route came under mujahidin attack and was only kept open after recourse to the final Soviet atrocities of the war, the razing of villages along its length by means of air attacks and artillery bombardment. Several hundred villagers were killed. On 15 February 1989, General Gromov, the commander of the LCSFA, followed the last troops to leave across the bridge over the Amu Darya, declaring that the Soviet Union had ‘fulfilled its international duty to the end’.
The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had three broad sets of consequences – consequences for Afghanistan itself; consequences for the Soviet Union; and consequences for the world at large.

**Afghanistan**

The Soviet departure brought no let up to the sufferings of the Afghan people. Against all expectations, the Najibullah regime did not collapse, the war continued and very few refugees were able to return to their homes. There were several reasons for Najibullah’s survival. One was that he was able to assert that the *jihad* was over and that the time had come for national reconciliation. While the steps he took in support of this thesis were largely cosmetic, they did have some limited effect. He laid the groundwork even before the Soviet departure, by holding elections in areas controlled by the regime and promulgating in 1987 a new constitution which provided, in theory, for freedom of the press and a multi-party system. This was followed in 1990 by a revised constitution which stressed the country’s Islamic character and abolished the PDPA as a specific institution of state, the party then changing its name to *Hizb-i Watan* (Homeland Party). Marxism was abjured and non-party figures were brought into the government. Behind the façade, however, Najibullah’s grip on power was only minimally diluted, against a background of continuing factionalism within the regime and a determination on the part of the resistance to see him removed.

More important for his survival was the immense amount of aid, both military and economic, which the Soviet Union extended to his regime, and which contributed towards what has been called the ‘high intensity civil war’ that followed the Soviet departure. The military assistance, which included SCUD missiles and MiG-27 fighter bombers, has been valued at some $1.4 billion in the first six months following the withdrawal.¹ Because the Salang Pass was no longer safe, a massive airlift was mounted, with 3,800 cargo flights arriving up to September 1989.² During 1990–1, economic aid totalled some $1.2 billion, while the military aid supplied by the Soviet Union post-withdrawal has been estimated at the equivalent of $2–3.5 billion in 1989 and $3 billion in 1990.³ Without this aid, there is no doubt that the regime would have fallen in short order – even with it, Kabul suffered grave food shortages each winter.
Najibullah was also strengthened as a result of the perceptions that were held of the mujahidin. It was feared that if they won, there would be bloody reprisals in Kabul and elsewhere, and that the country would be subjected to Hekmatyar’s variety of extreme Islamism. The resistance had also demonstrated that it had no interest in taking prisoners, and this increased the Afghan army’s readiness to fight. During the Soviet withdrawal, when the mujahedin had taken Kunduz, they had murdered, in the process, a considerable number of government officials, while, when the Afghan garrison at Torkham on the Khyber Pass surrendered in November 1988, they were turned over to Khales’ mujahidin, who executed 74 of them. At the same time, Najibullah was able to strengthen the military resources at his command by signing up (with payments in dollars) various militia groups, including one headed by the Uzbek, Abdul Rashid Dostum, based in Mazar-i-Sharif.

Other factors also worked in Najibullah’s favour. One was the destruction in April 1998 of the whole weapons arsenal held by the ISI for the mujahedin at Ojhri, near Rawalpindi. Also, because the Americans expected Najibullah to fall, unlike the Soviets they called a halt to arms supplies to the mujahedin and did not resume them until the following winter. Incompetence and in-fighting among the mujahedin groups also contributed to Najibullah’s survival. Following the Soviet withdrawal, strenuous efforts were made by the Pakistanis and Saudis to induce them to form a united front. To the accompaniment of substantial pressure and bribery, a shura was held in February 1989 which reached a tenuous agreement on a provisional government headed by Sibghatullah Mojadedi. However, few governments recognised it, the majority deciding to wait until it had established itself in Afghanistan and was seen to enjoy popular support. The ISI accordingly decided to organise an all-out assault on Jalalabad, mounted principally by Hekmatyar’s guerrillas. After four months of fighting and some 4,000 mujahedin fatalities, the assault was called off, following a belated realisation that it had been a mistake to commit guerrillas to a head-on attack on a fortified town. In March 1991, the mujahedin did capture Khost, but failed to capitalise on the success by taking Gardez. In-fighting among the Peshawar groups continued and, in one notorious episode, Hekmatyar’s men ambushed and killed 36 of Massoud’s commanders. Massoud then proceeded to try and hang four of the leading culprits. Efforts by the United Nations, the Soviet Union and other parties to broker a ceasefire and political settlement meanwhile came to nothing.

Once again, it was a unilateral decision in Moscow that broke the impasse. Following the failure of the coup against Gorbachev in August 1991, the Soviet government decided that it could no longer afford to prop up Najibullah. It negotiated with the American government an agreement on ‘negative symmetry’, and all its aid to Kabul, both military and economic, ceased. This, finally, was the death knell for Najibullah’s regime. In April 1992, with continuing support from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the mujahedin marched on Kabul, Massoud allying himself with Dostum in an attack from the north, and Hekmatyar advancing from the south. Najibullah fled to the UN compound in Kabul, and the victorious mujahedin entered the city. With immense difficulty and under strong pressure, the leaders in Peshawar then agreed on a form of transitional government, which formally took power on 28 April, 14 years after the initial PDPA coup. This was, however, by no means the end of civil strife, which was to continue to wrack the country for another decade.
The consequences for Afghanistan of the Soviet ten-year occupation were horrific. Due largely to the indiscriminate Soviet bombardment of villages and the mining and devastation of the countryside, civilian deaths were of the order of 1.25 million. Agriculture, on which the bulk of the people relied, was largely ruined, together with what little industry and infrastructure the country possessed. Some 4 million mines were sown countrywide, covering an estimated 780 square kilometres, causing not only many thousands of deaths and injuries, but major population displacements and the lasting pollution of roads and agricultural land. The planting of landmines was indiscriminate, and few minefields were marked or recorded. Over eight years, a mere 146 square kilometres have been cleared, and those remaining are a major obstacle to rehabilitation and development activity. Casualties have continued ever since, with some 50 per cent of those injured dying for lack of medical facilities.

The Soviet Union

A judgement on the role played by Afghanistan in the break-up of the Soviet Union hinges on a variety of factors: economic, social, military and political. The direct military costs of the Afghan war were relatively small. At the height of the war, only a little over two per cent of the Soviet armed forces were deployed there. Of the Army’s 173 divisions, a mere six or so were stationed in Afghanistan at any one time. Added to this were the sums spent on servicing and maintaining the Afghan regime. Estimates of the total costs are necessarily imprecise, particularly when an attempt is made to express them in dollar terms, but figures ranging from 5 billion to 10 billion roubles a year, giving a total of between $76 billion and $152 billion overall, have been suggested. At the time, the Soviet economy was far from enjoying rude health – indeed, it was failing. Even so, these sums should, in themselves, have been supportable. The significance of the involvement in Afghanistan lay not so much in the direct costs, burdensome as they were: the problem was, rather, that until the Soviet Union had disengaged itself from Afghanistan, there was little that Gorbachev could do to achieve perestroika, the thoroughgoing reform of the Soviet economy and society that was desperately needed. The conflict was delaying any relaxation of the Cold War, and therefore perpetuating the burden on the Soviet Union’s sclerotic economy, caused principally by an overblown military–industrial complex. The social disintegration that the economic decline was entailing was also going unremedied. The traditional social contract, which gave the people cheap housing, medical facilities and secure employment, was failing to bring improvements in living standards and hence was breaking down. As a result, worker morale and productivity were falling, and indiscipline and apathy becoming serious problems. That the leadership were gravely concerned is shown by the despairing efforts made by Andropov and, later, Gorbachev to encourage responsibility and a healthy work ethic. But measures such as raising the price of vodka proved futile, and the malaise intensified. By the time the Soviet Union had extracted itself from the Afghanistan morass, it was too late.

The war in Afghanistan itself exacerbated the social problems, mainly on account of its effects on the soldiers and their families who were caught up in it. In the early years of the conflict, there was officially no war in Afghanistan. The ‘Limited Contingent’ was
engaged in ‘training exercises’ or ‘humanitarian aid’ and strict censorship was imposed on all reports of combat operations or casualties. Bodies were repatriated in unmarked coffins and no mention of Afghanistan was allowed on memorials. The most that could be said was that the men concerned had died doing their ‘international duty’. The wounded were dispersed to remote localities for treatment. Until Gorbachev launched his policy of glasnost (openness) in 1985, there was, except marginally under Andropov, barely any mention of the realities of the war that was being conducted against the Afghan people. Inevitably, however, word gradually leaked out and the truth began to dawn, not just about the war and the casualties, but also about the cynicism with which the Soviet leadership had tried to cover them up. Those who had done the fighting, the Afgantsi, were particularly aggrieved. Overall, they numbered rather more than a million and, according to official Soviet figures, of these 14,454 had lost their lives, although the true number, later admitted by the Soviet General Staff themselves, was probably approaching double that number. About 50,000 had also been wounded and 11,600 maimed or invalidated. No less than 400,000 were admitted to have contracted illnesses of one sort or another, mostly of an infectious nature. Many were corrupted, traumatised or became drug addicts. Almost all were disaffected, partly at the concealment and, later, lack of recognition, of what they had been through. They found, on return, that they attracted scant popular sympathy and received little assistance in finding jobs, housing or medical care. They started to come together and, unprecedentedly, formed non-Party organisations that campaigned not only for their rights but also for wider social ends. The presence of, and pressure from, the Afgantsi contributed to, and aggravated, the general slide into social disintegration. Non-Russian Afgantsi also fuelled disaffection within the non-Russian Soviet republics, believing that they had been compelled to contribute more than their share of the LCSFA and had suffered disproportionate casualties. Accordingly, across the republics, draft-dodging, protest and alienation grew.

The emergence of the Afgantsi also adversely affected the reputation and morale of the Soviet Army. More generally, it became clear at the end of the 1980s that not only had the army not fought an effective war, it had been forced into an ignominious retreat from a small, poor, backward and divided Third World country. In effect, it had been defeated. Its ethos was also seen to be deplorable. Its policies of ‘migratory genocide’ were increasingly reported. Stories proliferated of murder, torture, corruption and looting on the part of its soldiers. Conscription to it had been avoided by the use of influence or bribery, the going rate being of the order of $3,200 to $4,800. The perception thus spread that the Soviet army might no longer be capable of enforcing the Soviet Union’s hegemony over Eastern Europe and the non-Russian republics. The Brezhnev Doctrine had also been discredited and discarded, so realising the fears of the 1979 Politburo. In December 1989, the Congress of People’s Deputies produced a report condemning the invasion of Afghanistan, while, in order to strengthen the case for withdrawal, Gorbachev and his ministers exposed the circumstances in which the decision to invade had been taken. It did not seem likely that he and his supporters were the men who would order fresh invasions. The weakness of the Soviet economy and society, the discrediting of the Soviet army, the abandonment of the ideological basis for military intervention and the attitude of the new leadership all pulled in the same direction. With alienation growing in the non-Russian republics and in Eastern Europe, it did not seem possible that the Soviet Union would, or indeed could, any longer intervene to prevent secessions. The dominoes
thus quickly fell. In May 1989, Hungary opened her border with Austria; the following month Solidarity was elected to power in Poland; in November, the Berlin Wall came down. In 1991, the Soviet Union itself ceased to exist.

It would be excessive to assert that Afghanistan was the cause, or even the main cause, of the break-up of the Soviet Union. The essential causes were the systemic problems of the Soviet economy and society, and the pressures exercised on it by the Cold War. But Afghanistan prevented a timely grasp of these problems and itself contributed to their worsening, and it might not be too much to say that it was the catalyst that led to the Soviet Union’s dissolution. To draw a parallel with Vietnam would be an over-simplification. But it could be said that the main difference lay in the fact that the United States survived Vietnam and the Soviet Union did not survive Afghanistan, even though the scale of the conflict there was so much smaller.

The international community

During the period of the Soviet occupation, a stream of foreign volunteers arrived in Pakistan in order to participate in the Afghan jihad. They came mainly, but by no means exclusively, from Arab countries, the main sources being Algeria, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Known generally as ‘Arab Afghans’, they were representative of the extreme end of the Islamic spectrum, and their militancy was not always welcome to their Afghan hosts, who often saw them as no more than a disruptive influence. Some came to do purely humanitarian work, but most came to fight, and did so with commitment and fanaticism. Reliable estimates of their numbers are hard to come by, but suggest that there might have been a minimum of 15,000 and a maximum of 35,000. A generally accepted ball-park figure is 25,000.\(^\text{11}\) In many cases, their objective was not simply to fight, but to acquire military skills that could be put to use back home or in a wider context. Initially, their recruitment was largely the work of a Palestinian lawyer and academic, Abdullah Azzam, who in the early 1980s moved to Peshawar to support the jihad. There, he founded a ‘Services Office’ which started to recruit volunteers. One of his first associates was a charismatic young Saudi millionaire, Osama bin Laden, who in 1984 also set up office in Peshawar and started to finance and support the volunteers. Much of his assistance took the form of construction work, and in 1986 he started to set up camps within Afghanistan, the first being at Jaji, which was the objective of a Soviet assault during April 1987. Bin Laden and his fellow Arab Afghans were, after some days, forced to withdraw, but the engagement put him firmly in the public eye. In 1989 he founded al-Qaeda, but after the Soviet withdrawal he returned to Saudi Arabia, where he was initially greeted as a hero.

There has been a good deal of misconception underlying the many reports that the Arab Afghans were funded, armed and trained by the CIA. In the direct sense, this is simply not true, since, as we have seen, the Pakistanis made sure that the CIA had no dealings whatever with the Afghan resistance, and this fitted in with the Americans’ policy of ‘plausible deniability’. As Brigadier Yousaf put it:

The foremost function of the CIA was to spend money. It was always galling to the Americans, and I can understand their point of view, that
although they paid the piper they could not call the tune. The CIA supported the *Mujahideen* by spending the American taxpayers’ money, billions of dollars of it over the years, on buying arms, ammunition and equipment. It was their secret arms procurement branch that was kept busy. It was, however, a cardinal rule of Pakistan’s policy that no Americans ever become involved with the distribution of funds or arms once they arrived in the country. No Americans ever trained, or had direct contact with, the *Mujahideen*, and no American official ever went inside Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{12}

Much of the funding of the Arab Afghans came from the Saudi and other governments and from individuals such as bin Laden. But the Arab Afghans also benefited indirectly from the CIA’s funding, through the ISI and the resistance organisations, of weapons, training and general support. In the early stages of the Afghan-Soviet war, it was understandable that the CIA should have deferred to the ISI, who clearly knew much better who was who in the Afghan *jihad*. But at least in the later stages, when the concept of ‘plausible deniability’ had long outlived its usefulness, it was precisely the failure of the CIA to monitor how their funds were used that resulted not only in the undue preponderance, both during the resistance and subsequently, of Khalis, Sayyaf, Hekmatyar and the other more extreme Afghan leaders, but also the growth of the Arab Afghan contingent. Funds provided by the CIA were used by the ISI to train and arm groups such as Hekmatyar’s which were rabidly anti-Western in outlook and had Arab Afghans in their ranks. In Washington, everything was subordinated to the harassment, and later the defeat, of the Soviet Union, and no thought was given to the risks of strengthening the extremists who were among the recipients of American aid.
Part VI
The American intervention
With the defeat of the Communist regime in Afghanistan, it might have been thought that the mujahidin groups would have been sensible and responsible enough to combine in an effort to secure the country’s recovery and reconstruction. True to form, however, they did no more than contend with each other for power. They were divided by personal animosities and ambitions, as well as by tribal, ethnic and religious antipathies. Fighting soon broke out in and around Kabul, which was progressively reduced to ruins. Alliances were formed and reformed, cease-fires negotiated only to be broken. Efforts by the United Nations to broker a settlement proved futile. Afghanistan no longer being of interest in a Cold War context, nor indeed in any particular context at all, the international community did virtually nothing to assist. Afghanistan was left to stew in continuing strife and suffering.

In 1994, the Pakistanis adopted a fresh approach. They still clung to Zia’s vision of an Islamic Central Asia under their influence, and were particularly attracted by the hope that a stable and peaceful Afghanistan would give them access to the region’s commerce, as well as to Central Asian oil and gas. Both American and Saudi interests joined them in the latter aspiration, hoping to construct a pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan. The Pakistani drug and trucking mafia were also strong proponents of free access to Afghanistan and the routes to Central Asia. The ISI’s policy of support for Hekmatyar having patently failed, Benazir Bhutto and her ministers began to support an incipient movement, the Taliban, the main focus of which was a network of religious schools that had proliferated in the frontier region. These had been supported by the Jamiat-i- Ulama-i-Islam (JUI), a religious party which, in 1993, had become a partner in the Pakistan Government, as well as by Wahhabi interests in Saudi Arabia. The Pakistan Government proceeded to train, arm, finance and support the Taliban, which was drawn mainly from Afghan and Pakistani students from these schools. The Taliban’s strength quickly grew, until within six months as many as 20,000 fighting men may have mobilised. In the winter of 1994–5, a Taliban force, including numbers of Arab Afghans, began to advance through Afghanistan. With the help of extensive bribery of Afghan warlords and tribal leaders, they took Kandahar without difficulty and by February 1995 they had taken Ghazni and were at the gates of Kabul. After fierce battles with Ismail Khan’s mujahidin, in September of that year they took Herat. Fighting around Kabul, meanwhile, had ended in stalemate, with the Taliban rocketing the city from their positions nearby. In August 1996, however, they turned their attention to eastern Afghanistan and within a few days captured Jalalabad. Government confidence suddenly collapsed and at the end of September the Taliban took Kabul. Altogether, it had been an
impressive performance, and many Afghans welcomed the prospects for peace and stability that the Taliban victories seemed to promise. The US government, with oil interests in mind, also gave it an initial welcome. However, the Taliban’s successes did not extend to northern Afghanistan, where fighting continued. Both Mazar-i-Sharif and Taloqan changed hands several times. While the Taliban controlled the bulk of the country, they were unable to subdue the Northern Alliance, a loose grouping mostly of Uzbek, Hazara and Tajik ethnicity that was formed during 1996. The Pakistan objective of establishing Afghanistan as a stable and friendly country was consequently never realised. Despite its relative eclipse, the Northern Alliance government under President Rabbani continued to be recognised by the United Nations as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

Across the world, the Taliban soon became notorious for their adherence to rigorous Islamic practices, their human rights abuses and their oppression of women. Of greater international significance, however, was their willingness to allow Osama bin Laden to re-establish himself in the country. Soon after returning to Saudi Arabia in 1990, he had become estranged from the Saudi Government, following their decision to allow US troops into their country in order to fight the Gulf War. For him, as for many Muslims, the presence of infidels in the ‘Country of the two Holy Places’ was wholly repugnant, and no compromise was possible. The Saudi Government restricted his movements, but during 1991 he managed to leave, via Pakistan, for the Sudan. There, he built up a flourishing group of companies and established training camps for his al-Qaeda adherents. He seems to have had a hand in the disaster that overtook the Americans in Somalia and to have sent funds and volunteers to a number of countries, including Chechnya, Bosnia and the Philippines. Ramzi Yousef, convicted in connection with the World Trade Center bombing of 1993, was a close associate. In 1994 the Saudi Government stripped bin Laden of his citizenship and in 1996, pressures were brought to bear on the Sudanese Government by Saudi Arabia and the United States to have him expelled. He then returned to Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda had remained active in the intervening years and its training camps had stayed in use. There, the Taliban allowed him to settle and he continued to plot a global jihad. In February 1998 he formed an ‘International Islamic Front’ in association with the Islamic Jihad, led by the Egyptian activist, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and, although not remotely having the necessary religious credentials, issued a fatwa calling for the killing of Americans. Evidence of his involvement in terrorist activities came at a trial in the United States of four of those involved in the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on 7 August 1998, in which 247 people were killed.

During this whole time, the CIA and other intelligence organisations failed comprehensively to get to grips with al-Qaeda. Although, as a loosely organised transnational organisation, with members of a particularly strong religious orientation, it was, and remains, singularly hard to penetrate, little effort had been made. The problem of how to take effective action against it once its responsibility for terrorist attacks against the United States had been demonstrated was thus almost insurmountable. The Pentagon, too, had barely started to study the issue and the options it was able to offer President Clinton were correspondingly limited. ¹ One was to mount an airborne assault
by special forces, a second was to bomb Kandahar, a third was to attack al-Qa ida’s training camps with unmanned cruise missiles, and a fourth was to mount a larger raid using aircraft as well as missiles. With the disastrous 1980 Desert One operation in Iran in mind, the first option was ruled out as too risky, and the second on the grounds that it would involve civilian casualties. The difficulty about the fourth was that overflight permissions had not been obtained. This left the missile option, which was put into effect on 20 August 1998, when 66 cruise missiles were fired at the training camps. The problem with all the options was that there was no reliable information on bin Laden’s movements. While he was expected to be at a meeting at one of the training camps at the time of the attack, the intelligence turned out to be faulty. Some 30 trainees and local people were killed at the camps, but the al-Qa ida leadership, who were sensible enough to foresee what might happen, were elsewhere. They were certainly not intimidated and, because the US had singled them out and the attack on them was so ineffectual, their standing, particularly in the Muslim world, was greatly enhanced. The result was to turn
bin Laden from ‘a marginal figure in the Muslim world into a global celebrity’. According to a Pakistani Muslim cleric, he was

a symbol for the whole Muslim world, against all those outside powers who were trying to crush Muslims. He is the courageous one who raised the voice among them. He’s a hero to us, but it is America who first made him a hero. ²

Over the next three years, the CIA tried ineffectually to target bin Laden. One plan was for a Pakistani commando group to enter Afghanistan and seize him, but this was abandoned when General Musharraf came to power. The cruise missile option was retained on hold, but required several hours’ warning of bin Laden’s location at the time of a strike, which was never forthcoming. To track bin Laden around Afghanistan, the CIA recruited and paid 30 Afghan agents, with whom they maintained secure communications on a daily basis. However, while the agents appeared to know his whereabouts most of the time, they were never able to predict his location sufficiently far in advance to enable a missile strike to be launched. The CIA was frustrated throughout by the Presidential ban on assassinations, first decreed by President Ford. This prevented its authorising the Afghan agents to ambush and kill bin Laden, even though they were apparently prepared to try. A plan to kidnap him was worked out, but this too was rejected, partly because a good many people would have been killed, and partly because it was thought that bin Laden would not allow himself to be taken alive. Nor was any way found of inserting an agent into his circle. ³

With the Northern Alliance still in the field, another option might have been to assist them as a counter to the Taliban and al-Qa ida. Surprisingly, nothing was done to arm and support them to the point where they might have been able to defeat the Taliban, and their continuing presence in the field was due mainly to the leadership of Ahmed Shah Massoud who, tragically, was assassinated by al-Qa ida shortly before 9/11. Also significant was material support, including tanks, AFVs and helicopters, supplied by Russia. Under the Clinton administration, doubts about the reliability and probity of the groups that made up the Alliance were such that the State Department was able to block all proposals to support them. Earlier in 2001, these objections were withdrawn and a plan was worked out for comprehensive support for the Alliance, but no decision on it had been taken before 9/11.⁴ Opportunities to promote opposition among the Pushtoons had also been neglected. A group of Americans with good knowledge of Afghanistan had tried to persuade the Administration, and the CIA in particular, to make contact with Abdul Haq, one of the most effective of the mujahidin commanders during the Soviet invasion.⁵ He had later withdrawn from active involvement in Afghan affairs in disgust at the in-fighting among the mujahidin groups, but as opposition to the Taliban had grown among the southern Pushtoons in the late 1990s, so he had reopened contacts with adherents and disillusioned Taliban leaders, to the extent that, given support, he would very probably have been able to mount an effective challenge to the Taliban regime. The CIA, however, refused to become involved and, in August 2001, he decided to launch operations in Afghanistan on his own. Entering the country in October, he was quickly recognised, ambushed and killed. The reasons for the CIA’s reluctance to support him are
obscure, but probably, as over the Northern Alliance, they stemmed from a continuing posture of deference to the Pakistanis, who were still backing the Taliban.

Pressures were also brought to bear on the Taliban, by the Saudis as well as by the Americans, to hand bin Laden over. Sanctions against the Taliban were ordered by the UN Security Council in 1999 and were extended at the end of 2000. While the relationship between bin Laden and the Taliban was by then none too easy, for several reasons these pressures failed. He was a fellow Muslim who had fought with them against the Soviet Union, to have handed him over would have transgressed the Pushtoon principles of asylum and hospitality, he had contributed money and men to the Taliban cause, and to have bowed to outside pressure would have seemed demeaning. For an isolationist regime such as the Taliban, sanctions were in any case only minimally effective. Not unreasonably, both before and after 9/11, the Taliban asked to be shown proof of bin Laden’s complicity in terrorist activities, but this was not forthcoming. The US State department have given particulars of 30 occasions in which they had contacts with the Taliban over bin Laden. Throughout, the Taliban were evasive, but equally none of the contacts suggest that there was any serious attempt to engage them in a negotiation. After they had been attacked with missiles and subjected to sanctions, it is not surprising that they were uncooperative and that diplomacy went nowhere. Had more finesse been shown, the outcome might have been different: the view of some Afghans at the time was that if patience had been exercised the Taliban might themselves have dealt with bin Laden. This was never put to the test.

Little, therefore, had been done to deal with bin Laden or his network, or even to keep track of him, when the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center took place. The CIA’s contacts in southern Afghanistan, where it mattered, were ‘not that good and not with the key tribes’. In reality, due partly to a lack of the required language skills, they knew little of the country and had very few contacts at all. Diplomatic activity had been focused in a way that was patently not going to work. In briefing George Bush as incoming President, the CIA had stressed that bin Laden and his retinue were a ‘tremendous’ and ‘immediate’ threat. Yet, despite this assessment, they had neglected opportunities to deal with him, and had never asked President Clinton for authority to take more extreme measures. To the Bush administration, it seemed that their predecessors’ response to bin Laden and international terrorism had been so weak as to be provocative, while the question could also be asked whether they themselves had moved fast enough. As after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, there had been a ‘gross failure not only of intelligence, but also of policy’.  

In the wake of 9/11, President Bush set out two defining parameters for the United States. The first was that it was ‘at war’, the second that it would make no distinction between those who made such attacks and those who harboured them. Given the enormity of what had happened, this was understandable, but the implications, that the United States was prepared not to just go after terrorists, but to fight, invade and enforce regime change in sovereign states, in all probability of an Islamic complexion, were immense. The decision to make these declarations was taken by the President alone, without consultation with his senior advisers. At the same time, two things quickly became apparent. One was that it was established, with near certainty, that al-Qa’ida were behind the attack. Three known al-Qa’ida operatives had been on the aircraft that had been flown into the Pentagon, and bin Laden’s associates had been heard congratulating...
themselves on an undefined, forthcoming big event. The other was that there was a near total lack of military and covert options. The military had no contingency plans whatever for Afghanistan, nothing to give even an outline of possible action. It might take up to two months to put something together. 12

Some quick decisions were, however, taken. The CIA was given the necessary authorisations, including ‘lethal action’, which it had previously lacked. There was also an early focus on Pakistan, whose cooperation was essential if anything effective was to be done in Afghanistan. 13 A list of requirements was drawn up, including an end of all support for al-Qa ida; overflight and landing rights; access to naval and air bases, and to the country’s borders; intelligence and immigration information; the curbing of all expressions of support for terrorism; a cut off of fuel for Afghanistan; and a ban on all movement of Pakistani volunteers to join the Taliban. An additional demand, in the event of proof of al-Qa ida’s complicity in the 9/11 attacks and of its continued harbouring by the Taliban, was for a break of relations with the Taliban and assistance in destroying al-Qa ida. Having been told that these demands were not negotiable, President Musharraf immediately accepted them, although whether he was in a position to comply with all of them was another matter. A welcome sign was that before long, he dismissed the head of the ISI and several of its pro-Taliban senior officers. Realising that he was taking considerable risks, a package of support for him was worked out.

For some weeks, the overall picture remained bleak. The initial military options presented by the Pentagon were limited. 14 One was another cruise missile strike, even though the camps were empty and it would have done no more than ‘pound sand’. The second, again, was to supplement missile strikes with manned bombers. A third envisaged the deployment of Special Operation Forces (SOF ), and possibly other troops, although what precisely they would do was unclear. It soon became evident that conventional warfare, a straight invasion of Afghanistan, would be highly inadvisable, given the obvious danger that an invading force might become bogged down, as had the British and Russians in earlier years. Generalised resistance might develop across the country and there would be the risk of appreciable American casualties. Pakistan and the Central Asian states would be strongly opposed and might well deny landing and overflying rights. World opinion would be alienated and large refugee movements again triggered. As for aerial bombardment, there were very few if any significant targets that presented themselves for attack. Airfields, radar installations and aircraft would have to be targeted in order to give American aircraft immunity, but more widespread bombing would be unlikely to achieve any decisive results. Eventually, therefore, it was decided to focus on support for the Northern Alliance. 15 It was not an attractive option, but there were no others. Its downside would be that it would antagonise the Pushtoon sections of the population and be unwelcome to Musharraf and the Pakistanis, particularly if it were to result in the Alliance taking Kabul. The support would be in the form of money, arms and equipment, together with combined CIA/SOF teams. At the same time, as a back-up measure, plans were also made for putting some 50–55,000 US troops in on the ground.

Time was needed to put this strategy into action, since overflight and landing rights were needed in Central Asia, as well as facilities for Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) for any downed aircrows. Given the public’s expectation of early, vigorous, action, the delay was frustrating, and on 7 October it was decided to begin air strikes, while realising their very limited effectiveness. As expected, targets were soon exhausted, Red Cross
warehouses were twice hit in error and civilian casualties began to rise. Questions were soon being asked about the absence of an effective strategy and there were murmurings about a ‘quagmire’.\textsuperscript{16} The general expectation was that the campaign would drag on into the winter and spring of 2002. On 26 September, the first CIA team helicoptered into the Panjshir valley, bringing with it communications equipment and large amounts of dollar bills. But it was not until 19 October that the first CIA/SOF team was able to fly in, followed, by early November, by three more.

On 21 October, US aircraft began to target Taliban front lines, with the aid of laser target designators operated by the SOF teams, but the scale was insufficient to have any marked effect on the ground. However, after the US theatre commander, General Franks, met Alliance leaders in Dushanbe at the end of the month, the scale of bombing was ratcheted up. First to be targeted were the Taliban front lines south of Mazar-i-Sharif. An offensive launched on 4 November, supported by US air strikes, made good progress, and on 9 November the city was in Northern Alliance hands. A similar outcome was achieved to the east, on the Taloqan/Takhar front, after a CIA/SOF team arrived there on 10 November. The fall of Taloqan the following day triggered a general collapse in the area, leaving only Kunduz in Talibani hands. Alliance forces had meanwhile been reinforced on the Shomali Plain, north of Kabul, and an attack began on 12 November. Breakthroughs quickly materialised, the Talibani fled and Kabul was abandoned the same night. After a short siege, Kunduz fell on 26 November. Although the Talibani leadership insisted that resistance would continue in their heartland around Kandahar, the extent of the debacle to the north precluded any recovery. It also led to a general perception among the Pushtoons that to rally to the Talibani would be a futile undertaking. With American SOF support, a force under Hamid Karzai advanced on Kandahar from the north, and a force under Gul Agha Shirzai from the south. The Talibani melted away and the city was taken on 7 December. Some 15,000 Northern Alliance troops had managed to defeat Talibani forces possibly numbering some 50-60,000 in all.

There were several reasons for the Talibani collapse. One was the scale and accuracy of the ordnance used by the US airforce. This included laser-guided bombs, cluster bombs, BLU-82 ‘Daisy Cutter’ bombs and joint direct attack munitions (JDAM), which were accurate to within 10–15 metres using GPS and inertial guidance. At the height of the fighting in the north, the USAF was mounting 90–120 sorties a day, 90 of them in direct support of the Alliance. To locate targets and call in bombers, the US commitment was just 110 CIA officers and 316 SOF personnel. Another element was money, not only for the Alliance leadership and to pay Russia some $10 million for equipment, but also to buy off Talibani leaders. One leader was offered $50,000 but refused: the next night a precision bomb was aimed close to his headquarters and the following day he was offered $40,000. He accepted. A third element was that the Talibani leadership, mostly ignorant of the outside world, had counted on, at the very least, a repetition of the Soviet experience, a guerrilla war against American forces whom they would eventually wear out. Instead, they were caught fighting a conventional war in the open against an enemy armed with a technology the deadliness of which they had not envisaged. Finally, the Pakistanis appear to have withdrawn the ISI field officers who had advised and directed the Talibani from their initial 1995 offensive onwards.

During the fighting, numbers of Arab Afghans were killed and others taken prisoner. But the objective of eliminating al-Qa'ida, as well as the Talibani, was not achieved.
Many had managed to extricate themselves from the battlefield and were concentrated in the mountainous regions straddling the border with Pakistan. A main centre of al-Qa’ida strength was the region of Tora Bora south of Jalalabad, where perhaps some 2,000 were holed up. Having no ‘southern strategy’, the Americans had failed to address this problem, and it was not until late November that US Marines took over an airfield southwest of Kandahar as a forward base for operations in the south. Tora Bora was attacked in early December by CIA and SOF forces, backed by local tribal irregulars and airstrikes against cave complexes. This time, air power was not decisive and the results were meagre. Few al-Qa’ida were killed and, as escape routes were not blocked, the majority, almost certainly including many of the leadership, managed to escape into Pakistan. The Tora Bora operation was followed in March 2002 by Operation Anaconda, an effort to deal with up to 1,000 Taliban and al-Qa’ida fighters in the Shah-i-Kot region 20 miles to the east of Gardez. The battle, which lasted nearly three weeks, aroused considerable controversy. General Franks described it as an ‘unqualified success’, but others described it as a near-disaster. What seems certain is that, once again, the numbers of al-Qa’ida killed were relatively few and the majority seem to have got away before the operation began. The lessons of Tora Bora and Anaconda seem to be that overwhelming firepower is not enough unless accompanied by effective manoeuvre: in both operations, the latter was lacking. In both cases, excessive reliance also seems to have been placed on unreliable Pushtoon ‘irregulars’.

The results of the Afghanistan intervention were, therefore, mixed. Once the initial difficulties had been surmounted, the innovative combination of American air power and Northern Alliance troops resulted in a succession of quick and decisive victories that put paid to the Taliban regime and scattered its troops, possibly as many as 8–12,000 of them being killed. But this initial success, brilliant as it was, was not followed up, and what at first seemed to be a clear success story became a partial failure. Most of the al-Qa’ida leadership escaped, together with a good many of the rank and file, and are still at large. If more substantial forces had been sent in more quickly, it should have been possible to trap larger numbers of al-Qa’ida, as well as create a situation in which more leverage could have been brought to bear on the political outcome. As it is, they and the remnants of the Taliban continue to mount guerrilla attacks from relatively safe strongholds in the tribal areas on the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, protected by the Pushtoon traditions of asylum and hospitality. Now allied with Hekmatyar, they are still causing trouble for the 15,000 coalition troops who remain deployed in Afghanistan. These have, so far, been unable to gather the intelligence and form the connections with the border tribes that might lead to bin Laden’s discovery and elimination. The essential war aims have therefore been unattained, and may in any case have been unattainable, calling into question the whole intervention strategy. The years of nurturing the Arab Afghans and of inactivity prior to 9/11 ensured that most of the al-Qa’ida militants had earlier had the opportunity to disperse worldwide, possibly to as many as 68 countries, leaving the importance of the Afghanistan base much diminished. Terrorist attacks cost relatively little and the manpower required is small. Bin Laden and his coterie might provide the inspiration and, possibly, some funds and guidance, but the continuing threat lies with cells of militants and sympathisers long since spread throughout the Islamic world and further afield.
Contributing to the downside are the perceptions that the coalition brought renewed
war to an already shattered Islamic country and disregarded Geneva conventions and the
rule of law in dealing with prisoners. The testimony of three British citizens released
from two years’ incarceration at Guantanamo Bay suggests that after they had
surrendered in Northern Afghanistan, thousands of Taliban and al-Qa’ida prisoners were
suffocated by being packed into containers – a form of massacre previously used by both
the Taliban and the Northern Alliance during the fighting around Mazar-i-Sharif.18 This
ties in with a separate report that some 5,000 Taliban and al-Qa’ida were missing
following the fighting in the North.19 Having been moved to Kandahar and then to
Guantanamo Bay, the human rights of the relatively few survivors were (with the
apparent connivance of the British Government in the case of the three Britons) seriously
violated, and they were subjected to brutal and inhumane treatment in defiance of the
provisions of international law. This can only have influenced adversely the moral
equation which has attached to the asymmetric war that al-Qa’ida is now waging against
the international community.
Part VII
Conclusion
Conclusion

Afghanistan presents a number of paradoxes. Unlike the majority of its neighbours, it has never been colonised, but it has suffered repeatedly at the hands of imperialist powers. Its governments have been weak, susceptible to foreign pressure and dependent on foreign support, but its society has been autarchic and resilient. Its population is highly disparate, but has been able to combine to beat off both internal and external challenges. In the wars that have been described in the foregoing chapters, these are common threads, which intertwine with a number of others: a harsh and difficult climate and terrain; a people whose way of life is hard, but simple and self-sufficient; a society that is exceptionally close-knit at grassroots levels; a martial, if undisciplined, ethos; and the unifying factor of the Islamic faith. The consequence has been that a desperately poor and primitive country has been able repeatedly, through resort to asymmetric warfare, to make any prolonged invasion or occupation too costly to be sustained.

Afghanistan’s tragedy is that its geographical location has given it a geopolitical importance. In itself, it has little in the way of resources that are of value to outsiders. If it had, it would no doubt have been subjected to much more determined efforts to reduce it to colonial status. In the nineteenth century, it was the epicentre of the competing interests of Britain and Russia in Central Asia. In the latter half of the twentieth century, there were, in the Cold War context, the competing interests of the Soviet Union and the United States. Once these were resolved, there were Pakistan’s strategic and commercial designs, resulting in attempts to impose Islamist or fundamentalist regimes on an unwilling country. In the twenty-first century, there has been the infiltration, with the complicity of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the United States and the Taliban regime, of a terrorist network which is seen as the principal current threat to the international order. Afghanistan has also an internal tragedy, largely self-inflicted. In the crisis brought about by the Communist coup and the Soviet invasion, resistance movements developed of varying complexions and degrees of organisation. Once the Soviets had departed, such unifying motivation as there had been disintegrated in the face of struggles for power and gross misrule. Fuelled by the country’s ethnic and cultural diversity, as well as by the more recent proliferation of ‘warlordism’, there have been immense difficulties in maintaining a sense of national unity. Afghanistan once had a very different tradition, one of hospitality and toleration. Not only, after so many wars, has this disappeared in relationships with foreigners, there is now, after so many years of civil strife, greatly intensified hostility within the Afghans’ own society.

The principal key to an appreciation of the implications of Afghanistan’s role in recent and contemporary history lies in an understanding of the concept of jihad. Jihad means ‘striving’ or ‘struggle’, and can be used either in the sense of an internal struggle to perfect faith, or as an external struggle – a ‘holy war’ – to promote or defend justice and
Islam. There has been much controversy over the circumstances in which a *jihad* can properly be invoked but, in practice, the term has been used to legitimise both defensive and offensive warfare, as well as, controversially, warfare not merely against infidels but also against Muslims regarded as apostates. In Afghanistan, the concept gained fresh impetus with each foreign invasion, and not least during the conflict with the Soviet Union. As Brigadier Yousaf put it, in the context of the resistance to the Soviets:

Mujahideen means Soldiers of God – those who fight for Allah in his war against unbelievers. It is an honour, a duty that is welcomed by the true Muslim. Unless you fight in a Jehad you cannot be a Mujahid. The Holy Koran states that a man killed in a Jehad becomes a Shaheed, a martyr … The Mujahideen’s willingness to die in battle stems from the promise by Allah that Shaheeds go immediately to Paradise. No matter how many sins they have committed in this life, to die as a Soldier of God ensures complete forgiveness. A special place in Paradise is assured. Shaheeds are buried as they fall, in the clothes that they died in, bodies bloodied and unwashed, and without coffins. They go to Allah exactly as they died for their faith. There is no greater glory for the Muslim warrior.

It is not only the man who dies in a Jehad that is venerated. There is reward also for those who fight and live. Such a person is called a Ghazi, and Islam promises him rich rewards in Paradise. According to the prophet (peace be upon him) the Mujahid who spends one night on guard duty has performed equally with the ordinary man who prays for a thousand nights.¹

The phenomenon of the *ghazi* was noted throughout the first two Anglo-Afghan Wars, where he was regarded as a peculiarly fanatical warrior, not to be stopped unless killed. Fifty or so *ghazis* were murdered by Shah Shuja outside Ghazni during the First Anglo-Afghan War. At the Battle of Ahmed Khel, during the Second Anglo-Afghan War, the British army was all but overwhelmed by a wild onslaught of 3–4,000 poorly armed *ghazis*, while on the heights above Kabul, it was mainly resistance by *ghazis* that caused such problems for Roberts’ troops and contributed to the decision to retreat to Sherpur. There again, the onslaught was headed by warriors bent on victory or death. During the Soviet occupation, the often reckless courage of the mujahidin was noted, and equally fierce opposition was encountered during an operation in eastern Afghanistan in November 2001, when a force of 100 British SAS were sent to deal with an al-Qa'ida stronghold. Despite a heavy air bombardment, the SAS encountered fanatical resistance. ‘These guys were lunatics’, commented an SAS participant:

surrender was the last thing on their minds. They would also run at the front line firing. It was something out of the First World War … These were not people, proper soldiers, who could be treated with dignity. If they had a breath left in them they would be trying to shoot you so we had no choice but to kill.
After four hours’ fighting, 73 al-Qa’ida had been killed, against only minor injuries suffered by the SAS.\(^2\)

Such accounts of the suicidal propensities of Islamic militants have, of course, been compounded by those of terrorists engaged in suicide bombings in Palestine, East Africa, New York and elsewhere. The irony is that suicide is explicitly forbidden in the Koran, as is the taking of innocent lives in the hadith, the sayings of the Prophet. The practice of suicidal killing stems from a perversion of the Islamic belief referred to by Yousaf, that a person who dies in a jihad, a shahid, goes straight to heaven. This perversion seems now to be established as a fundamental belief of Islamic extremists, even if promoted cynically by their leaders and motivators.

From Afghanistan, there has thus emerged a hydra-headed monster, the spectre of international terrorism. It has thrived on the concept of jihad, which was extended following the Soviet withdrawal as justification for the internecine conflict between the resistance movements, and then by the Taliban for their offensives against their Afghan opponents, although they too were Muslims. It has also developed as a result of past errors, being nurtured in the first place as a means to help drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan, and then being allowed, as a result of supine policies, to possess a safe haven there in which to develop and from which to spread. It cannot now be put back into its box. Its adherents are spread across the world, and possess their own, largely independent, networks and resources. The war it is fighting is asymmetric: not having the big battalions, it strikes at civil society in ways that are hard to foresee and still harder to combat. Much of its inspiration is derived from the Salafiyya movement, the extreme end of which it occupies. Inspired by such thinkers as the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, Salafis call for a return to what they conceive to be the pure Islam that existed at the time of the Prophet. As well as al-Qa’ida, the movement has included the Muslim Brotherhood, the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Jihad and other like-minded organisations. They regard contemporary Islamic governments as Munafiqin, hypocrites, who, while purporting to be Muslims, have ceased to observe God’s law, the shari’a, and have become corrupted through their association with the secular West. A jihad is therefore called for, to deliver the umma, the Muslim community, from the rule of these governments. Specific aims are very probably, by provoking regime change, to gain control of the sources of Middle East oil and the Pakistan nuclear capacity. A particular target is the Saudi regime, which has ‘opened up the Arabian Peninsula to the crusaders’. The violence of al-Qa’ida’s verbal and physical attacks on the West may well be a reflection of the extent to which the Salafiyya movement has hitherto failed to make headway against these governments. While America and the West may be hated for their secularism and the perceived ills of their societies, and while Salafis also tap into the widespread resentment in the Islamic world at what it sees as its humiliation at the hands of the West since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, particularly in its support for Israel, the real conflict is within Islam itself. What is essentially happening is a violent clash between modernising and secularising elements within Islam on the one hand, and those who seek a return to the ‘true faith’ on the other. What the outcome will be cannot yet be determined, but what can be said is that the current policies of retaliation against peoples and states make the outcome much less likely to be favourable, in that public opinion across the Islamic world has become much more antagonised, and hence much more tolerant of, and receptive to, extremism.
In conducting its campaign, al-Qaeda enjoys several of the advantages that were features of the asymmetric conflicts in Afghanistan. In the first place, it does not engage its opponents on the latter’s terms. There has, for example, been little conventional fighting in Iraq; instead, guerrilla warfare has developed, undoubtedly with al-Qaeda involvement. It also aims to provoke a damaging over-reaction, and in this it has succeeded brilliantly. In the Afghan wars, there was little or no deliberate attempt to engineer a moral or public relations advantage – this came about almost automatically as a result of the Afghans’ bitter resistance to invasion, giving rise, for example, to Gladstone’s sentiments and to the widespread aversion to the Soviet conduct of their war. Al-Qaeda, on the contrary, aims deliberately to induce its opponents to take measures that can only mobilise political and moral opposition to Western governments and their associates in the Muslim world.

Two other necessary conditions for successful asymmetric warfare are also being satisfied in the present situation. The first is that al-Qaeda enjoys a significant degree of invulnerability. This does not arise, as in the Afghan wars, primarily from its having safe havens in remote and difficult terrain, or across international frontiers, although it does to a degree enjoy these advantages. Rather, its invulnerability arises from its global dispersion and its ability to recruit activists from among populations that may, for the most part, be wholly innocent of any such propensity. The other advantage is al-Qaeda’s willingness to accept casualties – indeed, positively to invite them – as a means of waging its campaign.

The critical question is how to counter this form of asymmetric warfare – to deal with an opponent who is impervious to reason, to whom compromise is anathema, who is totally uninterested in negotiation and who has an unshakable belief in the rightness of his cause and the utter depravity of one’s own? In the words of Abdullah Azzam, ‘Jihad and the rifle alone, no negotiations, no conferences and no dialogues’.

Three propositions suggest themselves. The first is to be serious about diplomacy and conflict resolution, the second is that war is a counterproductive instrument, the third is to remove the inequities on which terrorism feeds.

Conflict resolution

The Third Anglo-Afghan War was a case apart, arising as it did from a conventional, ‘first strike’ attempt to liberate a country from dependence on an imperial power. All the other conflicts covered in this book, however, had much wider causes and ramifications, and were ones from which effective diplomacy might have rescued the participants. Prior to the First Anglo-Afghan War, one of the alternatives open to the British government was to seek in St Petersburg a diplomatic solution to a potential confrontation. Diplomatic representations there did, in fact, work, but Auckland and his associates were so ‘wooden-headed’ and focused on their own diplomatic efforts and military plans that the Russians’ repudiation of their diplomats’ activities passed them by. Burnes’ negotiations were, themselves, badly handled, as were those with Ranjit Singh, which aroused exaggerated expectations of the extent to which British policy could be carried out with Sikh support. Prior to the Second Anglo-Afghan War, it could again be said that diplomacy in St Petersburg might well have defused the crisis caused by the arrival of the
Russian delegation in Kabul, had Lytton – a professional diplomat – not thrown diplomacy to the winds. The war might also have been prevented if, following the various contacts with Sher Ali, the recommendations of successive Viceroy’s in favour of undertakings to him had been accepted. The failure of the Soviet leadership to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan had more complicated roots. Here, it was not just a failure of diplomacy, although Moscow knew very well what the situation demanded, and tasked Safronchuk and Puzanov, as well as visitors such as Ponomarev, to try to shift Taraki and Amin in the direction of compromise and non-violence. By the spring of 1979, however, it was probably too late, in that earlier Soviet policies towards Afghanistan had already had irretrievable consequences. As for the Taliban, it is also possible that there was in any case nothing to be achieved in dealings with them over bin Laden, but the methods adopted, futile bombings and a heavy-handed imposition of largely vacuous sanctions, were those best designed to make any settlement unachievable. The dominant consideration appeared to be a distaste for any constructive dealings with a thoroughly unpalatable regime, rather than a genuine effort to achieve an acceptable, non-violent outcome.

These four examples point to several conclusions. One is that there are considerable dangers in demonising the people – in these cases, Dost Mohammed, Sher Ali, Amin, and the Taliban – with whom it is necessary to deal, particularly when the alternative is to go to war. The record suggests that there was often simply not the skill and patience required to deal with men of a different race, traditions and background. Rather, they were looked down on as uncivilised, and treated with dislike and disdain, with the result that the only answer seemed to lie in compulsion. Similar attitudes seem to have contributed to the failure to achieve a lasting settlement in Afghanistan in the run-up to the Geneva Accords. The inclusion of the resistance groups was a necessary part of that settlement, but the feeling was that the participation in the diplomatic process of such disagreeable and disruptive elements would simply have made the task of achieving an outcome too difficult. The consequence of their exclusion was no genuine peace settlement at all. In the case of the Taliban and bin Laden, there was no serious attempt to achieve a diplomatic solution: rather, the means applied were bombardment, threats and sanctions, all of them inconclusive, if not counter-productive.

Therefore, it pays to be serious about diplomacy. Clearly, there can be no accommodation with fanatics. But in any situation, there are almost bound to be power structures with a role to play, with some of whom it may be distasteful to deal but who can help create constructive outcomes. There are also broad sections of the international community, including the vast majority of Muslims, who are totally opposed to religious terror, but are alienated by an apparent reluctance to seek their goodwill and cooperation, as well as by seemingly insensitive and high-handed efforts to settle issues by force. It is self-defeating to leave them and their governments out of the equation, whether in public or private diplomacy. In this context, a negotiated settlement of the Palestine–Israel conflict is a first priority. More generally, diplomacy is needed in order to coordinate national responses into a global system of resistance to terrorism. This requires persuasion, not threats or attempts at regime change.
War

Again, with the exception of Amanullah’s war, both the two Anglo-Afghan conflicts and the Soviet intervention resulted in failures of varying magnitude on the part of the powers that instigated them. In each case, the attitude of mind that stultified diplomacy led also to a belief that a military solution would present no great difficulty. The asymmetric nature of each conflict led to over-confidence, reinforced by a lack of appreciation of Afghan strengths. Also underestimated were the inadequacies of the military forces at the disposal of these powers, which led them to employ strategies and tactics that were inappropriate and ineffective in the environment in which they were fighting. In the case of the Second Anglo-Afghan War, a diplomatic outcome was engineered, but one that should have been attainable without recourse to a war that bore a heavy cost in both lives and treasure. The First Anglo-Afghan War, which should have served as a dire warning to Lytton and his government, similarly resulted in a reversion to the status quo ante, at a roughly equivalent human and material cost. Most disastrous of all was the Soviet invasion, which equally resulted from a failure to foresee the nature and consequences of the asymmetric warfare that the Afghans were able to conduct.

The American intervention in Afghanistan at least showed that some lessons had been learnt. Although a full-scale invasion was considered as an option, that chosen was clearly preferable. The concept of enabling an indigenous army to overcome a stronger opponent through the deployment of air-launched precision weaponry was revolutionary, and might indicate the shape of wars to come. But its limitations were also visible. It worked less well against determined and well dug-in opponents, who possessed a safe haven to which they could retreat. Moreover, the decision to take the war to Afghanistan had itself a considerable downside in terms of public perceptions worldwide. There is currently much less toleration of what is increasingly seen as aggression against sovereign states, whatever the justification – as one writer has put it, ‘we don’t “do” conquest any more’. Hence, the damage caused by the decision to regard individual or group terrorism as an act of war, to be countered primarily by unilateral military means, rather than as a criminal conspiracy, to be countered by an international consensus, and by police, legal, intelligence and undercover operations. In the view of many, individual or group terrorism cannot legitimately be countered by what amounts to state or state-sponsored terrorism. The attacks on Afghanistan and, more so, Iraq have given al-Qa ida and its allies a considerable ‘hearts and minds’ advantage, so important in asymmetric conflict. To provoke such attacks was, indeed, al-Qa ida’s aim.

Removing the iniquities

Afghanistan, always a wretchedly poor country, has been torn apart by two and a half decades of warfare and civil strife. As its society has dis integrated, its people killed or exiled, its towns and countryside devastated and sown with mines, so more extreme elements have emerged into positions of power. The country is now dominated by warlords, whose corruption and human rights abuses are notorious and who have little
interest in nation-building or development. Their entrenched position is due partly to their having been seen by the American-led coalition as useful assets, who could be prevailed upon to render military assistance in return for cash payments. While moderates, with modest support from the international community, have made some progress over political and economic reconstruction, a functioning administration and an effective, democratic government are still barely in sight. In the east and south-east of the country, the Taliban have been returning in some force. In sum:

the West’s support and strategy for rebuilding Afghanistan have so far been a failure. The war against terrorism is still to be won in the Afghan mountains and deserts and among the Afghan people as well. Their nation, the largest and most tragic victim of terrorism, is not being rebuilt. Until that happens, there is little incentive for al-Qaeda or extremists elsewhere to lose heart.5

The lesson applies in the more general context. Conditions of repression and deprivation, such as those still rife in Afghanistan, encourage extremism, as young people in particular, an ever larger proportion of total populations, see little hope of meaningful employment and a decent society in which to live and bring up families. Global communications are now such that the glaring disparities between rich and poor societies and nations are all too visible to those who are deprived. Nor has the situation remained constant: on the contrary, global inequalities have grown and, over the past 40 years or so, the share of income accruing to the richest countries has risen appreciably in relation to that of the poorest. Also, in many Third World countries, particularly in the Middle East, such wealth as has been secured as a result of economic relationships with the richest countries has been retained by elites and has not ‘trickled down’ to the most deprived sections of society. The overwhelming need is to tackle, not only in Afghanistan but also in other dysfunctional states, the political, social and economic conditions that encourage the growth of extremism. These create a fertile ground for those who promote terrorism, who will only be defeated when progress is being visibly made towards a less inequitable international order. In the last resort, the threats posed by international terrorists, diffuse and widespread as they now are, will not be overcome by direct action, and still less by resort to full-scale conflict, which causes only death and destruction without dealing with the prime causes of the trouble. The religious activists themselves have little interest in economic progress or reform, but they achieve a resonance when people see that gross economic inequalities and injustices exist. At bottom, as in all asymmetric warfare, it remains a question of hearts and minds.
Notes

Introduction


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17 Masson, op. cit., Vol. III, Ch. XIX, *passim*.

3

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10 Parliamentary Papers, Vol. 40 (1839), India Papers Vols I–VII.
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4

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