Opposing Explanations for Cold War Proxy Warfare in Afghanistan

Although ethnic diversity and strategic global position had frequently attracted conflict within Afghan borders, the Soviet-Afghanistan War marks the beginning of a long, convoluted history of modern warfare in the Middle East. Understandably, scholars of international relations have sought to parse through the complex events and seemingly endless involved parties in to identify the causes of such violent and persistent war in Afghanistan. Two competing explanations have emerged. One prevalent perspective hypothesizes that the Soviet Union invaded with the intention of securing the region as a permanent foothold for their communist empire and other offensive intentions. Alternatively, the Soviet Union intervened on Afghan politics because the rising tide of Islamic nationalism posed a threat to the stability and cohesion of the Soviet Union, which posits their intervention as a defensive action. This paper will further analyze the merits and inconsistencies of each competing theory of the causes of the Soviet-Afghanistan War becoming a proxy conflict for the Cold War.

Afghanistan, "the graveyard of empires," had attracted attention from expansionist powers for decades before Cold War conflict landed at its doorstep. Despite its harsh environment and dearth of natural resources, European, Russian, Chinese, and Middle Eastern empires clambered to gain influence, or failing that, favor, with the strategically located nation. However, by the beginning of the Cold War, American and other Western powers had resigned Afghanistan to the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. Their shared border attracted special interest from the Soviet Union, who consequently funneled impressive amounts of economic aid into the country to sow the seeds of communist policies. American foreign policy figures in the mid 1950s admitted that the U.S. lacked the motivation to match Soviet funding in Afghanistan and consequently viewed Afghanistan as a necessary win for the Soviet Union, much as the U.S. considered Mexico beyond the limits of a feasible tactical gain for the Soviets (Gibbs, 2006, p.242). Americans were more preoccupied on other fronts, most significantly the war in Vietnam, which drained massive resources and diverted strategic attention throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. Until Afghanistan's political climate began to shift in 1974, America largely ignored Afghanistan, leaving the Soviet Union to drain their time and resources into attempts to stabilize internal political turmoil.

Before examining the dueling explanations for the causes of the Soviet-Afghan war, one must sort through the convoluted political buildup to the 1979 Soviet invasion. In 1973, Mohammed Daoud overthrew his cousin, the king, and began to lead the country under a doctrine of militant Pashtun nationalism, which set off a series of violent coups and incidentally invited in international involvement. The overthrow of the well-established, communist-leaning monarchy attracted international attention, and Selig Harrison asserts, "[a]s factionalism, corruption, and political uncertainty grew, externally backed forces began to jockey for position in preparation for the power struggle expected to follow the elderly Daoud's death," (Cordovez, 1995, p.15). Political instability continued to mount under Daoud's leadership until the Saur Revolution in 1978. Daoud's stringent nationalist policies and harsh suppression of dissent angered both traditionalist and left-leaning factions, leading them to form an unlikely coalition in

a successful coup against Daoud. The Afghan Communist Party (the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, or PDPA) asserted control over the country and, with Soviet guidance and support, implemented a rigorous program of social and economic reforms. Although Soviet advisors realized the devastating effects of the PDPA's overzealous reform tactics, led primarily by Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin, they nevertheless stepped in to help the PDPA suppress the nationwide rebellion that erupted on March 15, 1979 (Hughes, 2008, p.329). This climactic invasion is the moment of tension that attracts extensive scholarly research, including speculations on Soviet motivations to enter the war and America's contribution to the origins of this Cold War proxy conflict.

Offensive Strategy

The popular theory in America throughout the 20th century held that the Soviet Union viewed Afghanistan as a weak link in their empire, and considering the various social movements smoldering in the Middle East, decided to intervene on the nation's internal conflict to secure their own borders. The traditional realist approach that dominated 20th century international relations theory asserts that the Soviet Union was primarily concerned with their own security, which depended on their relative power over enemy nations like the United States. The Cold War was a dynamic global conflict, and realist theory identifies the various diplomatic developments between America, China, Iran, and Pakistan influenced their decision to invade Kabul, with the ultimate goal being to secure a foothold to expand their empire southward.

At the time of the Soviet invasion, American leadership certainly promoted the perspective that Soviets invaded Afghanistan to advance their own security interests. The biggest proponent of this theory was National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who advised President Jimmy Carter that Soviet influence in Afghanistan posed a significant threat to American stability. Brzezinski assured Carter that Moscow's advances on Kabul were "inherently aggressive" and pushed him to issue a statement warning that America would receive Soviet invasion as "a grave threat to world peace" (Hughes, 2008, p. 333). Prevalent theory during the Cold War held that any expansion of Soviet influence spelled out a threat to American national security. From a conventional realist perspective, Americans calculated that Afghanistan could tip the balances of global hegemony by gaining control of this pivotal region, which made American analysts especially sensitive to the possibility of Soviet offensive advances in this area.

Although a strictly realist analysis dominated deliberations at the time of the conflict, subsequent Western theories argues that the Soviet Union's intervention was offensive but influenced by both security and ideological considerations. A.Z. Hilali argues that "the Soviets decided in 1979 to intervene in Afghanistan as part of their global strategy to reduce the influence of the United States, China and Pakistan, and to achieve long-term multidimensional foreign policy objectives which were necessary to maintain global domination and to expand the communist ideology" (Hilali, 2003, p.113). According to this logical framework, the Soviets recognized the instability of Afghan domestic politics as an opportunity to exert their ideological influence and, by extension, their military interests. Recognizing that American and Chinese relations had begun to improve following the introduction of détente policies, the Soviet Union

felt compelled to increases their political leverage by securing Afghanistan. Because domestic disputes among Afghans centered around ideological debates, such as tradition versus modernization and a host of religious and ethnic conflicts, the Soviet Union predicated their entrance into the conflict on their ability to win the war both ideologically and military, which would advance both their hard power and soft power interests.

Other scholars have also noted how the political climate within and around Afghanistan propelled the Soviet Union to take offensive action. Minton Goldman concludes that the Soviet Union's strategy may have partially been defensive, but that the Soviet' expansionist goals likely increased their desire to intervene. Goldman summarizes possible offensive intentions, arguing that Moscow "wanted control of Afghanistan also to achieve a strategic advantage in the ongoing rivalry with China and the United States," (Goldman, 1984, p. 403). The Soviet Union had been observing the conflict between China and the United States unfolding on the other side of the continent in Vietnam, which had reached a painful stalemate by 1979. Sino-Soviet relations had soured, and the Soviets believed China plotted their revenge on Moscow by fomenting revolution in Afghanistan. Believing their suspicions of Chinese interference were confirmed, Soviets felt compelled to squash internal Afghan opposition and prove their strength to China (p.395). Goldman further argues that Carter's approach to détente and thawing Sino-American relations also pressured the Soviet Union to secure the Persian Gulf and make strides toward a larger, safer empire. Goldman postulates that Moscow believed President Carter had "neither the will nor the capability to block Soviet entry into Afghanistan," which further empowered Soviet leaders to impose their offensive strategies while their primary opponent seemed unlikely to choose confrontation (p. 396).Thus, international power imbalances compelled the Soviet Union to intervene to maintain their hegemony in Asia and the Middle East.

This paper has presented two slightly divergent versions of the offensive explanation for the Soviet Union's decision to engage in Afghan conflict. Conventional realism underscores the Soviet Union's expansionist vision and natural inclination for wielding their hard power to expand their sphere of influence. This third level of analysis emphasizes the security dilemma unfolding between the United States and the Soviet Union, in which Soviet advances toward the Persian Gulf inherently posed a security threat to the United States, prompting proxy warfare in Afghanistan. Goldman and other post-revisionist realists point to both these international dynamics between the two bipoles, as well as the regional tensions that threatened to destabilize the Soviet border. This theory introduces the possibility that the Soviets made both defensive and offensive considerations, but ultimately concludes that the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan because they calculated they could advance their global influence without significant pushback from the United States.

Defensive Maneuvers

However, newly resurfaced documents from the Soviet Union's archives have given rise to alternative theories for their motivations to enter into conflict in Afghanistan. Records from Soviet strategizing sessions indicate that they saw their intervention as defensive, a last-ditch effort to secure Afghanistan, a gateway state to the Soviet empire. David Gibbs argues the

"documents show that the Soviets were content to live with a neutralized Afghanistan and had little interest in turning the country communist. What undermined this arrangement was not Soviet subversion, but the Shah's effort to turn Afghanistan toward the West in 1974" (Gibbs, 2006, p.259). According to this analysis, Soviets initially attempted to persuade Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin to find compromise between his stringent socialism and the complaints of traditionalists, hoping to avoid violent confrontation between the PDPA and the various religious factions unifying against the communist party. The question of U.S. support for the Mujahidin, whether it began prior to or in response to the 1979 Soviet invasion, is crucial for determining whether the Soviet decision was offensive or defensive, and Gibbs proclaims that subsequent interviews with American leaders reveal Americans had funded rebellious groups in Afghanistan prior to 1979 (p.255). Soviets only intervened at the desperate request of the PDPA, when it became clear that their opposition, the Mujahedin, was receiving international financial support from the United States.

Not only does Gibbs argue that the Soviets acted in response to covert American maneuvers, but he also underscores that Soviet leadership did not intend to use Afghanistan as a launchpad for their empire's southward power grab. Instead, Gibbs highlights that Afghanistan played a significant role in the stability of predominantly Muslim regions of the Soviet Union. When Prime Minister Amin demonstrated his willingness to work with Iran, Soviets feared Afghanistan would succumb to the rising tide of Islamic nationalism, which precipitated the overthrow of the Shah in Iran in 1979 and the establishment of an Islamic Republic (Goldman, 1984, p.385). If Afghanistan broke off from Soviet influence and economic support, then the southern border would be exposed to non-allied nations, leaving them vulnerable to antagonistic maneuvers. In "New Bottles for New Wine," Tony Smith demonstrates how potent Islamic nationalism could be as a unifying force for rebel groups against imperialist powers, and offers numerous examples illustrating that the world powers during the Cold War were unlikely to ignore mounting nationalist sentiments that often preceded rebellion (Smith, 2000, p.591). Smith's theory takes a state-level of analysis, arguing that the cultures and political leaning of Afghanistan and neighboring actors influenced the Cold War's trajectory and wielded more influence over the United States' and Soviet Union's decisions to enter into the conflict. Soviets feared that Afghanistan's departure from their sphere of influence, whether they aligned themselves with Iran or America, would destabilize the entire Eastern Bloc, leaving Moscow vulnerable to Western antagonism.

Comparing Perspectives

Offensive and defensive perspectives operate according to different framework of analyses, with the former relying primarily on a third level and the latter depending on a second level of analysis. The third level of analysis requires a wider depiction of Cold War dynamics, including America's involvement in Vietnam, Soviet preoccupation with Pakistan, and China's oscillation between the two great powers. This analysis is valuable because both American and Soviet strategists took a comprehensive analysis of their opponents strengths and weaknesses before deciding to enter Afghanistan, and in an era when both countries constantly feared that the

advances of their opponent could pose an existential threat, a framework focused on security threats and global balance can provide insight into the decisions of both nations. An offensive take on the Soviet-Afghanistan war corresponds with the expansionist tendencies of both the U.S. and the USSR, recognizing that Moscow definitely calculated the strategic benefits associated with controlling this pivotal region in the Persian Gulf.

However, a wide lens on the issue can obscure the regional influences that informed the Soviet Union's decision. Deliberations between Afghanistan and Iran and aid flowing into Afghan ideological rebels also influenced Soviet strategy. A defensive explanation pays more attention to these state-level factors that shaped Soviet strategy. As Gibbs highlights, the Middle East was fraught with ideological battles, and the Afghan civil conflict was the fuse threatening to destabilize the entire region, including the six Soviet states that were predominantly Islamic (Gibbs, 2006, p.259). While the Americans aligned themselves with the Mujahideen, who did not agree with American democratic or religious values, the Soviet Union had an ideological stake in the battle. Fighting to preserve the public image of socialism as a viable solution for economic disparities directly correlated with the Soviet Union's international legitimacy as a global power. A defensive explanation incorporates both the Soviet's interest in stabilizing their neighboring region and their desire to preserve their legitimacy as cultural and political leaders.

In light of the unsurfaced documents from the Soviet Union and interviews with American officials, the offensive theory has lost significant legitimacy as an explanation for proxy warfare in Afghanistan. The United States began attempting to draw the Soviet Union into the mire of Afghan conflict since July of 1979, according to an interview with National Security Advisor Brzezinski conducted in the late 1990s (Gibbs, 2006, p.255). The revelation that American aid to the Mujahideen preceded the Soviet Union's invasion, in conjunction with the documentation of Soviet attempts to negotiate with Amin and the PDPA before deploying troops, is damning evidence against the offensive theory. Increasing access to documentation from the Cold War reveal that the offensive theory was borne out of a dearth of verifiable information from the communist perspective and a bias among Western scholars to paint America as morally superior.

This paper has presented two opposing perspectives on the onset of Cold War proxy warfare in Afghanistan, mostly focusing on the Soviet Union's decision to intervene on behalf of the communist party to squash internal opposition from a coalition of religious groups, called the Mujahideen. The offensive theory, which was the dominant opinion among international relations scholars throughout the Cold War, maintains that Soviet leadership hoped that backing the PDPA would allow them to exert more influence in Afghanistan and eventually as a gateway to incorporating the Persian Gulf into its sphere of influence. Alternatively, the defensive opinion points to American interference on behalf of the Mujahideen and the existential threat facing the Soviet Union if Afghanistan aligned themselves with Islamic nationalism and rejected Soviet influence as the primary motivation for the 1979 Soviet intervention. Although each theory provides a valuable framework for understand Cold War dynamics –the former focuses on international power structures and the latter underscores the political climate and calculations for

state actors– uncovered documents and interviews with influential leaders have proven the defensive theory to be a more accurate picture of Soviet motives.

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