

China's Politics and Developments in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an analysis of China's policies concerning Afghanistan's development and modernization programs prior to the Soviet invasion of the country in December 1979. It also examines China's position toward the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (December 1979-February 1989), and its policies supporting the resistance movement in the country.

Introduction

SINCE WORLD WAR II, China has played a major role in the politics of change in South Asia. It not only provided technical and economic support to these countries but also supported revolutionary movements in the region. Political transformation in the Soviet Union in the late 1950s strained Sino-Soviet relations and caused a split to occur within the revolutionary movements in South Asia. China condemned the Soviet leadership for betraying Marxism-Leninism and world revolution. To advance its position within the anti-imperialist movements the Chinese leadership tried to strengthen China's relations with the Third World countries. In the 1970s, China improved its relations with the United States which resulted in the gradual deradicalization of China's politics. The process of deradicalization was further accelerated in the post-Mao period both in the national and international arena.

The focus of this article is to study China's pattern of interactions with Afghanistan, to analyze its strategies in establishing its influence on Afghanistan prior to the Soviet occupation of the country in December 1979, and to examine the basis of China's politics of supporting the anti-Soviet resistance struggle in Afghanistan.

Sino-Afghan Relations, 1949-1973

Although trade and commodity exchanges between China and Afghanistan existed as early as the sixteenth century, there was no formal contact between the two countries until 1944, when the nationalist government of China signed a treaty of amity with Afghanistan. China's interest in Afghanistan intensified after the establishment of the Peoples Republic of

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China in 1949. Although Afghanistan officially recognized China on 12 January 1950, China did not reciprocate until 20 January 1955 because it was deeply concerned with the U.S. economic and military aid to Afghanistan. The establishment of military relations between the United States and Pakistan strained Afghanistan's relations with the two countries. This situation led China to strengthen its relations with Afghanistan and extend diplomatic recognition to the country by sending Ting Kuo-Yu as its ambassador to Afghanistan in March 1955. Afghanistan likewise appointed Abdul Samad as its ambassador to Beijing in January 1956 (Dai, 1966:216).

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries China's political and economic influence in Afghanistan remained on a limited scale because: a) relations between China and the Soviet Union were friendly, which inhibited the former to compete for spheres of influence in Afghanistan with the latter; and b) the Soviet Union already had large-scale economic and military projects in Afghanistan. When relations between Moscow and Beijing deteriorated in the late 1950's China did not regard the Soviet Union as a socialist country and perceived its increasing economic, political, and military projects in Afghanistan as a threat not only to Afghanistan's sovereignty but also to China's national security. This compelled the Chinese leadership to strengthen China's relations with Afghanistan. As a result, China pursued an active policy toward Afghanistan with the intention of reducing Soviet political and ideological influence in the country. To achieve this objective China concluded a trade agreement with Afghanistan in mid-February 1957. A Chinese bicycle factory, Tientsin, began bicycle production in Afghanistan and China began importing raw materials from Afghanistan.

Sino-Afghan relations were further improved by Premier Chou En-lai's visit to Afghanistan in January 1957 and Premier Mohammad Daoud's visit to Beijing in October of that year (Afghanistan, 1975:167). China and Afghanistan signed a treaty of friendship and a nonaggression pact in August 1960, a border treaty in November 1963, and a protocol on border demarcation in 1965, which recognized the common frontier of 40 miles in the Wakhan-Pamir region (Afghanistan, 1975:167).

To further strengthen China's relations with Afghanistan the Chinese leadership also concluded economic and technical agreements with Afghanistan in March 1965 and loaned Afghanistan \$ 15,300,000 to assist the country's development projects (USAID), 1970: 34-35). China's economic aid to Afghanistan was mainly in the form of interest-free loans to be repaid over a 10- to 20-year period through Afghan exports to China. These exports to China included lapis lazuli, dried fruit and nuts, asafoetida, hides, and skins. China's exports to Afghanistan included tea, rayon items and thread, paper and paper products, machines and machine parts (Dupree, 1969:641). Table 1 shows Sino-Afghan trade patterns between 1966 and 1972.

To penetrate Afghanistan's economy China increased its economic assistance to Afghan development projects which included the construction of the Parwan Irrigation Project located 40 miles north of Kabul. The project

Table 1

Sino-Afghan Trade Relations, 1966-1972

(in U.S. \$,000)

Year	China's Exports	China's Imports
1966	3,055	1,027
1969	10,362	500
1970	410	NA
1971	638	NA
1972	866	NA
Total	15,331	1,527

Source: Sreedhar. "Sino-Afghan Economic Relations." *China Report* 12:5 & 6 (September-October, 1976): 7-9.

provided water to agricultural farms in the southern part of the Salang Highway and Qarabagh district, Parvan province. The project also included a hydroelectric power station which produces 2,000 kws of electricity on the Charikar Canal and the water storage dam. China built the Bagrami Textile, Printing and Dyeing combined mill located 5 miles from Kabul. The construction of this project began in September 1967 and was completed ahead of its projected schedule of three years. The mill began operation in March 1970. It has an annual production capacity of 12 million meters of cloth of varied designs and collar patterns and 800,000 tons of cotton yarns. The mill has three workshops for printing and dyeing textiles and for dyeing yarns (Sreedhar, 1976:8). Other examples of China's assistance to Afghanistan included the building of the Darunta Experimental Fish-Breeding Center in April 1967. The project was completed within a year's time in February 1968. It was estimated that 450,000 fry were produced in May 1970. During the first fishing season in that year it was estimated that the center's pond produced 50,000 kg of fish to meet demands for fish in Kabul and other cities (Sreedhar, 1976:8). China's economic assistance also included the construction of a poultry center at Bagrami district, Kabul. The center's construction started in March 1968 and was completed in April 1970. The center has an annual production of 200,000 animals and 400,000 eggs. In 1967, China built a silkworm cultivation center (Bratke, 1975:76-78) and participated in the construction of the Farah Rud river project as well as a tea-growing project in the Kunar Valley and the establishment of a lapis lazuli workshop in the Ministry of Mines and Industries (Dupree, 1969:631-641).

China's economic and technical aid to Afghanistan led to China's increasing political and ideological influence in the country. A number of Afghan intellectuals supported Mao Tse-tung's political philosophy and began mobilizing students, blue- and white-collar workers for a grassroots-based social revolution in the country. They succeeded in establishing Sazmani

Demokratik-e-Navin-e-Afghanistan [New Democratic Organization of Afghanistan, or NDOA] in 1965. The organization supported China's domestic and foreign policies and national liberation struggles of the oppressed nations. The organization published a weekly paper, *Shula-e-Jawid* [Eternal Flame] on 4 April 1968. Publication was banned on 10 July 1969 (Dupree, 1969:604-605).

Members of the NDOA organized public rallies and participated in worker and peasant strikes. The organization celebrated the first day of May as International Working-class Day by organizing rallies in Kabul and other cities. The organization is responsible for more than 14 student and workers strikes and rallies in the late 1960s. During student demonstrations on 25 October 1965 in Kabul, security forces clashed with student protesters. Although the government stated that three people were killed, other sources claim that 40 people died and numerous others were injured (Nazaar, 1972:63; Emadi, 1990a: 45). That day is known as *Seumi-Akrab* and its anniversary was celebrated by students annually until Afghanistan was declared a republic on 17 July 1973. Although there is no evidence implicating China's involvement in the student uprising on 25 October 1965, Louis Dupree writes that,

the Chinese maintain a large embassy in Kabul and occasionally Chinese students attend Kabul University to study Persian and Pushtu in exchange for Afghanistan students studying Chinese in Peking. At the time of the demonstrations, six Chinese students attended Kabul University, and I saw several conferring with student leaders during the *Seumi Akrab* demonstrations (Dupree, 1969:595).

In May and June 1968, pro-Beijing communists participated in various worker strikes. Leaders of the group were Dr. Rahim Mahmoodi, Dr. Hadi Mahmoodi, and Professors Akram Yari and Mohammad Usman, who was known as *Landai* (dwarf). Government security forces arrested some of the group leaders for their role in organizing a strike at the large state-owned *Jangalak* Automative Repair factory in Kabul. The Maoists concentrated their work among students in schools and colleges at Kabul University. In August 1971, students at Kabul University formed the Students' Union. The Union declared that it fights for students' democratic rights and supports the liberation struggle against exploitation and colonialism. The Union elected a Supreme Council which was heavily dominated by members of the Maoist organization *Sazmani Demokratik-e-Navin*, known as *Shula-e-Jawid* (Bashkakov, 1985:289). *Shula-e-Jawid* split into several factions such as *Rahaye*, *SAMA*, *Akhgar*, *Paykar*, *Khorasan*, etc. The reason for the split was mainly due to ideological and political differences on the question of strategy and tactics of armed struggle in Afghanistan. After Mao's death and new changes in China in 1976, the splintered groups of *Sazmani Demokratik-e-Navin* remained critical of China's political and ideological position. *SAMA* and *Rahaye* remained pro-Beijing in their political orientation while *Akhgar* and others condemned China's leadership for betraying Mao's revolutionary legacy.

China continued providing a modest program of economic assistance to Afghanistan with the intention of expanding its political and social influence in the country. Chinese advisors and technicians were employed in various industrial and manufacturing enterprises in Afghanistan. By 1970, the number of Chinese advisors in Afghanistan was estimated to be 200 (Hyman, 1984:30). On 25 July 1972, China built, free of charge, a 250-bed hospital in Kabul. The Chinese leadership announced that the hospital was a token of China's goodwill and friendship to the people of Afghanistan (Bartke, 1975:78). In 1970, the total amount of China's economic and technical assistance to Afghanistan was estimated to be \$ 29,370,000. Table 2 shows China's economic assistance to Afghanistan between 1949 and 1970.

Table 2

China's Aid to Afghanistan, 1949-1970

(in \$ U.S.)

Fiscal Year	Amount of Aid
Prior 1967	15,300,000
1967-1968	2,980,000
1968-1969	5,530,000
1969-1970	5,560,000
Total	29,370,000

Sources: Afghanistan, Ministry of Planning, Department of Statistics, *Survey of Progress 1968-1969* (Kabul, 1969), p. s-2;

USAID/Afghanistan, *Briefing Book*, January 1970 (Kabul, 1970), pp. 34-35.

China and the Republican Regime in Afghanistan, 1973-1978

China perceived the military coup of 17 July 1973, which brought President Mohammad Daoud to power, as Soviet-inspired and geared toward Soviet expansion toward the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. China regarded Daoud's republican regime as an enhancement of Soviet influence in Afghanistan because President Daoud was considered to be the main architect of Afghan-Soviet special relations in 1953-1963. Although China formally recognized the republican regime in July 1973, it was not happy with Afghanistan's close ties to the Soviet Union and its hostility toward China's close ally, Pakistan. China's main concern was partly due to the proximity of Afghanistan's border to its nuclear installation at Lop Nor, Sinkiang and Soviet support of Afghanistan's policy on the right to self-determination for the Pushtun people of North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), Pakistan (the Pushtuns were divided between Afghanistan and Pakistan by the Durand Line drawn by the British government in 1893). China supported Pakistan's policy vis-a-vis Afghanistan on the question of Pushtunistan.

President Daoud adopted a repressive policy toward his opponents, particularly the pro-Beijing organizations. To consolidate his base of power Daoud jailed and executed key leaders of the opposition parties. Gulbuddin Hikmatyar and Burhanuddin Rabbani, leaders of the Islamic movement, sought refuge in Pakistan and the leaders of the pro-Beijing groups went underground. Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan deteriorated over the question of the right to self-determination for the Pushtun people of Pakistan. The government of President Daoud provided military and economic support to the Pushtun and Baluch dissidents in their struggle for autonomy. The government of Pakistan reciprocated by supporting Daoud's opponents, the Islamic fundamentalists residing in Pakistan (Emadi, 1990b: 1515-1516). In July 1975, Pakistan provided arms to the Islamic fundamentalists and encouraged them to launch a military assault on several regions in the eastern part of Afghanistan. The Kabul government claimed that the rebels were armed with Chinese-made weaponry (Bashkakov, 1985:300).

After consolidating his base of power, President Daoud tried to improve Afghanistan's relations with its neighboring countries including China. To do so, Daoud sent his brother Mohammad Naim to Beijing in December 1975 (Afghanistan, 1975:167). As a result, relations between the two countries improved to the extent that China again committed to providing \$ 55 million in economic aid to Afghanistan (Afghanistan, 1978:259). During the five years of the republican regime of President Daoud, Chinese imports from Afghanistan were estimated to be \$ 22,744,000 and its exports to Afghanistan \$ 20,476,000. Table 3 shows China's trade with Afghanistan in the period between 1973 and 1977.

Table 3

China's Trade with Afghanistan, 1973-1977

(in U.S. \$,000)

Year	Imports	Exports
1973	6,370	3,529
1974	2,993	2,919
1975	2,830	2,877
1976	4,965	4,295
1977	5,586	6,856
Total	22,744	20,476

Source: United Nations. *Yearbook of International Trade Statistics 1972-1980*. New York.

China and the Democratic Regime in Afghanistan, 1978

On 27 April 1978, army officers loyal to the pro-Soviet Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) staged a military coup and declared Afghanistan a democratic republic. The PDPA's central committee convened

a meeting and elected Noor Mohammad Taraki, General Secretary of the PDPA, president of the country. Although China recognized the democratic regime in Afghanistan on 7 May 1978, it was not comfortable with the growing Soviet influence in the country, especially when Kabul and Moscow concluded a treaty of friendship on 5 December 1978. China stressed the military aspect of the treaty between Kabul and Moscow. Article 4 of the treaty stated that "... in the interest of the strengthening of defense capacity of the high contracting parties they shall continue to develop cooperation in the military field on the basis of appropriate agreements concluded between them." Article 8 stated that "high contracting parties shall facilitate the development of cooperation among Asian states and the establishment of relations of peace, good neighborliness, and mutual confidence among them and the creation of an effective system in security in Asia on the basis of joint efforts by all states of the continent." (Ashitkov, 1986:54-55). The Chinese leadership maintained that the Soviet domination of Afghanistan poses a major security threat to China and the littoral states in the Middle East. China opposed Soviet policies in Afghanistan, terminated its economic aid projects to Afghanistan and lent its support to anti-government resistance forces fighting the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan.

China and the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979

On 27 December 1979, Soviet troops stormed the Presidential Palace, killed President Hafizullah Amin and his men, and installed Babrak Karmal, head of the Parcham faction of the PDPA, as president of the country. The Chinese leadership regarded the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan as part of the Soviet hegemonic policy of trying to encircle China and to open a land route to the Indian Ocean. According to the Chinese leadership

the old tsars drooled over it [Afghanistan] long ago. The new Soviet tsars have assumed the mantle from the old tsars. To get hold of the passage leading out of the Indian Ocean and to control the strategic sea route of the West and Japan, the Soviet Union is energetically trying to control Afghanistan to open a land route south to the Indian Ocean. (Wren, 1982).

To counter the Soviet's imminent threat on its territories, China mobilized a contingent of its armed forces along its 75-kilometer long border with Afghanistan in the Pamir region. China condemned the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and rejected the Soviet claim that they had been invited by the Afghan government to deter foreign aggression on the territories of the democratic regime in Afghanistan. China refused to accord full diplomatic recognition to the Soviet-backed government of President Karmal and headed its embassy in Kabul with a *charge d'affairs*. China called for an immediate and unconditional Soviet troop withdrawal and called upon countries around the world to support the struggle of the Afghan people for freedom. China warned

Moscow that a Soviet troop withdrawal was one of several conditions which could lead to an improvement in Sino-Soviet relations. Other conditions included a drastic reduction of Soviet troops on the Chinese border, withdrawal of Soviet troops from Mongolia to pre-1965 levels, and cessation of Soviet support for the Vietnamese involvement in Cambodia. China used the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan to strengthen its relations with the U.S. This strategic relationship was further strengthened during a visit by U.S. Secretary of State Harold Brown to Beijing in January 1980. During his visit, Brown announced U.S. willingness to sell high-tech weapons and military equipment to China. The U.S. position on supplying military equipment to China was reiterated by Secretary of State Alexander Haig's visit to Beijing in June 1981 (*International Herald Tribune* 17 June 1981, p. 1).

China regarded the national liberation war in Afghanistan as a just war and maintained that the guerrilla warfare in Afghanistan, which was based on the model of China's peoples war strategy, eventually would wear down the Soviet occupation forces in Afghanistan. Although various social forces espousing different political and ideological orientations were engaged in the armed struggle against the Soviet forces, the splintered groups of the pro-Beijing organization, Shula-e-Jawid, were in the forefront of the urban-based guerrilla warfare. The Soviet-backed government considered this group to be more subversive than other opposition groups in the resistance movement and came down hard on them. However, government security forces arrested numerous people associated with various splintered groups of Shula-e-Jawid and executed them on alleged charges of spying for Pakistan, the United States, and China. In 1980, several radical organizations convened a joint committee for action against the Soviet occupation. The committee was dissolved when one of its members, Sayed Bashir, surrendered to the ruling party. After receiving assurance for his safety Bashir had arrested members of the committee. In May 1981, the Kabul regime executed Bashir along with Engineer Latif Mahmoodi and others. Before they were sent to the gallows they were shouting "long live communism." (Anwar, 1988:259).

During the initial stage of the armed struggle against the Soviet occupation forces in Afghanistan, China provided antigovernment guerrillas with Soviet-made light weapons, such as rifles, light machine guns, and mines (Vertzberger, 1982:12-13). China supported both the Pakistan-based Islamic parties and pro-China organizations, SAMA, and Rahaye. Abdul Majid Kalakani, head of the SAMA organization prior to his execution by the Kabul regime in June 1980, had tried to establish contacts with China. After Kalakani's execution, SAMA's leadership continued their efforts to establish contacts with the Chinese leadership (Niday-e-Enkilab, 7:1 (1365):32). There is no evidence to show that the organization actually succeeded in doing so. Another pro-Beijing organization, Rahaye, is believed to have succeeded in establishing contacts with China. Yunus Akbari, former professor of Kabul University, Department of Sciences, and a leading member of the organization, was arrested by security in Kabul and confessed the following:

Me, Dr. Faiz and his wife Leila, Najeeb, Abeed, and Naseem flew from Karachi to Beijing via Singapore. However much I questioned Dr. Faiz about the purpose of this trip, he told me nothing. In Beijing we were met by a high-ranking official in charge of foreigners and two interpreters. Later, the head of that department and his deputy met with our delegation. At that meeting, Dr. Faiz presented a report to the Chinese and asked \$ 10 million in aid. The Chinese expressed doubt about that sum and gave him only \$ 200,000 (Afghanistan, 1985:18).

From 1980-1985, China provided the Pakistan-based Islamic parties with approximately \$ 400 million worth of weapons, which included HN-5 surface to air missiles and their launchers, rockets, mines, anti-aircraft machine guns, and anti-rocket grenade launchers (FBIS, 1985: p. C1). In 1985, the Soviet-backed government in Kabul claimed that China had trained more than 30,000 "counter-revolutionaries" in 120 camps in Pakistan and in camps in Azgar, Gogirfeng, and Maryang in Sinkiang province, China (Afghanistan, 1985:16-20). China also committed itself in providing humanitarian aid to the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. In 1988, China donated 1,250 tons of rice and approximately one million yards of cloth to the Afghan refugees in Pakistan (U.S. Department of State, 1988:21).

China supported the UN General Assembly resolution which called for an immediate termination of armed intervention in Afghanistan and supported the UN's efforts in finding a solution to the crisis in Afghanistan. In April 1981, United Nations Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar appointed his personal representative Diego Gordovez to travel to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran to discuss with leaders of these countries ways and means of ending the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Although Iran refused to participate in the meeting on the grounds that leaders of the Afghan Islamic resistance were not included in the talk, the UN-sponsored negotiation between Kabul and Islamabad continued. Seven rounds of indirect talks between Kabul and Islamabad were completed in March 1987. The talks resolved three basic issues: a) the United States and the Soviet Union guarantees to end outside interference upon the Soviet withdrawal; b) a means of monitoring the withdrawal; and c) a means of repatriating refugees. The UN-sponsored Geneva accord was signed by Afghanistan and Pakistan and endorsed by the United States and the Soviet Union on 14 April 1988 (*Mainichi Daily News*, 15 April 1989: c-3). As a result, the Soviet Union declared it would withdraw its troops beginning 15 May 1988. The withdrawal was completed within seven months on 15 February 1989. China welcomed the UN-sponsored Geneva talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan and was pleased with the Soviet decision to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. Although the Chinese leadership began to normalize China's relations with the Soviet Union after its troop withdrawal, it continues to support the Pakistan-based Islamic parties in their struggle to overthrow the Soviet-backed government in Kabul and establish a theocratic state in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

In the mid 1950s and 1960s China's Afghan politics were shaped by China's foreign policy orientation of aiding and abetting revolutionary and anti-imperialist struggles, on the one hand, and Sino-Soviet contention for spheres of influence in the Third World, on the other. To establish its influence on Afghanistan, China engaged in various development projects in the country and provided technical and economic assistance to support Afghanistan's drive to modernity. To win the minds of the Afghan people, China, unlike the other developed countries, provided interest-free loans to Afghanistan. In doing so, the Chinese leadership intended to help the people of Afghanistan to modernize their country and also to convince countries with traits similar to Afghanistan that China has no intention of dominating and exploiting these countries and that China's economic aid, unlike that of the West, has no strings attached to it. China had succeeded in cultivating political sympathy and support among intellectual strata within and without state apparatuses in Afghanistan. These intellectuals actively worked to apply China's strategy of development to the conditions of Afghanistan.

China's politics in Afghanistan underwent changes after Chairman Mao Tse-tung's death in 1976. The post-Mao leadership in China began to deradicalize China's internal and external policies and tried to strengthen China's relations with the West. As a result, China's active involvement in Afghanistan's development declined. Sino-Afghan relations further receded after the establishment of a pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan in 1978 and the Soviet occupation of the country from December 1979 to February 1989. China reduced its support to the revolutionary forces fighting the Soviet backed government in Kabul but increased its support to the Pakistan-based Islamic parties. However, after the Soviet troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989, China publicly declared that it supported a political settlement of the crisis in Afghanistan. China also remains supportive of Pakistan's Afghan politics on the establishment of an interim government, comprised of the Islamic parties, in Afghanistan.

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