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# DAYS OF OPPORTUNITY: The United States and Afghanistan Before the Soviet Invasion | By Robert B. Rakove

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Whereas leading accounts of the Cold War tend to posit that Afghanistan began to hold significance for the United States only after Russian interference in the country culminated in the December 1979 invasion, Robert Rakove in this painstakingly researched volume contends that that US-Afghan engagement began long before 1979. Specifically, he avers that the “the story of the US-Afghan relationship before 1979 is one of consequential involvement, not of abandonment” (2). While it’s easy to dismiss the American role in what Rakove calls “pre-cataclysmic Afghanistan,” close study of American diplomacy and aid across four decades reveals a different story. “Small, remote, often poorly understood, Afghanistan nevertheless assumed real significance to successive administrations in Washington” while Afghan leaders also “attached considerable importance to their country’s relationship with the North American superpower” (2). In this sense, this volume joins a growing body of scholarship that rethinks the extent of America’s role in Afghanistan prior to the sanguinary events of the late 1970s.

The first two chapters review the early years of US-Afghan relations. Chapter 1 describes a period of distant relations between the great wars, focusing upon 1921 through 1938. Afghanistan was in a precarious position after WWI. Despite attaining its independence from British suzerainty in 1919, it still faced numerous threats from the north and south. Necessarily, Afghan diplomacy was “omnidirectional balancing between imperial neighbours while fostering deeper political and economic connections with other, noncontiguous powers” (14). While President Harding conferred recognition of the Afghan kingdom during a 1921 Afghan delegation, the state department rebuffed Afghan entreaties to establish a resident mission in Kabul. Over time, Afghan persistence and the prospects of business opportunities in Afghanistan gradually undermined Washington’s efforts to remain distant.

Chapter 2 exposit US-Afghanistan relations in the backdrop of World War II, focusing upon the years between 1938 and 1945, and the extensive efforts of Minister Cornelius Engert to assist neutral Afghanistan. Afghanistan's drive for direct relations with Washington in the mid-1930s occurred as Afghanistan perceived growing threats to its security. Germany was the only country that was both capable and willing to play a significant role in Afghanistan. Afghan leadership viewed Nazi Germany as a potential ally against Soviet aggression. Germany's influence grew dramatically during the 1930s in Afghanistan. While the outbreak of war effectively halted commerce with Germany, Afghan support for the Axis powers did not end until Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Despite this, Afghanistan still sought support from the US. Afghan efforts ultimately resulted in a formal US legation to the country in 1942. Operations of the legation were hindered by the wartime conditions.

Chapter 3 describes the period 1945 to 1952 which was one of relative American preeminence within Afghanistan in the immediate post-war period. American connections to Afghanistan deepened "not through the implementation of grand strategy, but haphazardly, as Afghans and Americans pursued post-war opportunities" (64). The keystone project of this period was the irrigation project in the Helmand Valley. Unfortunately, given the Cold War between the US and the USSR, the Helmand project drew Afghanistan into the Cold War.

Chapters 4 and 5 evaluate the Eisenhower Administration's choices in Afghanistan. Chapter 4, covering the years between 1953 and 1956, focuses upon the American response to the growing Soviet aid program within Afghanistan while Washington was hastily establishing its own alliance system. Eisenhower considered undermining Afghanistan's nationalist prime minister, Mohammed Daud Khan, but ultimately opted to counter Moscow's influence with its own aid projects. During this period the US and the UK formulated the Northern Tier concept of defense in which Afghanistan did not figure extensively. While Afghanistan could not be included in the alliance network, nor could it be abandoned to Soviet designs. Chapter 5 covers the years 1956 to 1959 and details the vicissitudes of the US assistance programmes to Afghanistan amidst increasing Soviet penetration.

Chapter 6 covers the so-called Crisis Era of 1959-1963, detailing the burgeoning Afghan-Pakistan tensions against the context of the Cold War and the recurring crises therein. A key episode of this period was the closure of that Afghan-Pakistan border; however the Kennedy administration's deft local and regional diplomacy contributed to the ouster of Daoud and the reopening of the border.

Chapter 7, which covers the period between 1963 and 1968, and chapter 8, which covers 1968 to 1973, exposit American policy during Afghanistan's constitutional experiment galvanized by King Zahir Shah following Daoud's ouster, which transpired amidst a period of diminished Cold War tensions within Afghanistan after Washington welcomed changes in Afghan governance. However, growing domestic and Congressional opposition to foreign aid limited Washington's engagement with the new government. The Vietnam War both distracted President Johnson and introduced new tensions as Johnson sought to punish Afghanistan for its episodic and milquetoast criticism of the war. Chapter 8 focuses upon Nixon-era policy up to Daoud's ouster of King Zahir Shah and the constitutional regime in July 1973.

Chapters 9, covering 1973 through 1976, and chapter 10, covering 1977 through 1979, explore the period following Daoud's coup up to the Soviet invasion. Chapter 9 studies the interactions between Afghan events and the détente system through the end of the Ford administration. During this period, American and Iranian diplomacy helped to achieve a modicum of détente between Afghanistan and Pakistan by

the end of 1976. Chapter 10 describes the final years of the US-Afghanistan relationship as Afghanistan emerged as a violent battleground with global implications. The April 1978 violent overthrow of Daoud occurred during a period of general erosion of the détente system. With the emergence of an explicitly Marxist regime in Kabul, the idea of a Soviet Union seeking to make advances around Indian Ocean strengthened the hands of hawks in the Carter administration. “Acting from anxiety and perceiving opportunity—yet bereft of any grand design—Washington sought to extract a cost from its Soviet adversary” (12).

The volume closes with a series of concluding thoughts about the nature of American engagement in Afghanistan. Over several decades of Cold War competition with Afghanistan, America attributed various schemes to their Soviet adversaries. Yet despite it all, Afghanistan managed to sustain “improbable, remarkable balancing act” (355) up until the Soviet invasion in 1979. The author concludes that “US policy inadvertently and greatly complicated Afghanistan’s difficult path through Cold War years. Three principal failures occurred: of counsel, of consistency, and of diplomacy” (350).

This volume is an important contribution to our scholarly understanding of US engagement of Afghanistan prior to the Soviet invasion of the same.

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