A warning voice from the past


In December 1979, the Kremlin sent Soviet troops to Afghanistan in order to establish the authority of the socialist regime of President Babrak Karmal throughout the nation. Up to now, the Soviets have not succeeded. Despite all claims to the contrary, their failure has not been the result of Western and other military involvement, but of the efforts of the Afghans themselves.

Many in the non-communist world have taken heart from this and concluded that Afghanistan has become the Soviets' Vietnam. However, others have pointed out that the Vietnamese communists received much greater military assistance than the Afghan non-communists are receiving and that the Soviet Union is not subject to the same domestic pressures that ultimately forced the United States to withdraw from Indochina. Finally, the Afghans fighting the Soviets are also fighting among themselves, with little prospect of being able to unite in the face of the common enemy.

The weakness of the Afghans could be seen as a hopeful one. However, upon reading Elphinstone's classic narrative of Afghanistan based on his travels there in the early 19th century, it appears that it is not particularly important.

Although the entire country was nominally under the authority of a king, the king usually ruled little more than the city he lived in. Authority in the countryside was held by the various tribes, or ooloooses. Yet even in the tribes, authority was fragmented. While each had a hereditary chief, important decisions were often made by an assembly of the men of the tribe. If anyone disagreed with the decisions of his tribe, he could flee with his family and demand the protection of a neighboring tribe.

The structure of authority in Afghanistan, then, has traditionally been weak. This, combined with what Elphinstone saw as the Afghans' love of fighting, meant that the usual state of affairs in Afghanistan was continuous inter-tribal conflict. Elphinstone did note that there was one cause for which the Afghans would unite — to oppose any sort of foreign intervention. The king, who was only tolerated at the best of times, would also come under attack if it was he who invited the foreigners into Afghanistan. Internal opposition to the foreigners would be nearly universal and would be the primary concern of the Afghans. However, the inter-tribal disputes would not be forgotten either, especially if the foreigners were put on the defensive (as the Soviets have been).

The picture that emerges from Elphinstone's account is that Afghanistan was (and still is) a near-perfect anarchy. Authority at all levels is weaker than those whom it nominally controls. The sphere of independence for individuals and tribes is great; any attempt to impose control over them by a centralised authority through force or negotiation has met with failure.

By not learning this lesson from Elphinstone, potential conquerors have made the mistake of assuming that if they were able to obtain the consent of the Afghan central government to the extension of their influence in Afghanistan, the country would be theirs to control. However, the populace would never accept such an arrangement since the Afghans simply were not under the control of their central government.

While this book was written so long ago, much of it is still accurate today; the Afghans have maintained their independent traditions. While they may now fight among themselves, they have always done so. This has not prevented them from maintaining their independence against foreign invaders in the past, nor should it do so in the present. The Soviets may be the best-armed invaders that Afghanistan has seen, but so far this has not provided them with any notable degree of success in their attempt to conquer this indomitable nation.

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