

Daoud's Modernization Programme and the Pashtunistan Issue (1953-63)

In September 1953 the king's cousin and brother-in-law, and son of the Musahiban uncle assassinated in Berlin in 1933, assumed power as prime minister with the tacit support of the royal family. The ambitious Daoud, who had formerly been minister of defence and was occupying the key military post of commander of the central forces in Kabul at the time of the palace coup, was an autocrat. He had had no patience with the liberal expressions of opinion aired during the prime ministership of Shah Mahmud that appeared, in the eyes of politically conservative Afghans like himself, as no more than attempts to overthrow the establishment. Political prisoners were not freed, and those who were, were released on condition that they ceased their anti-government activities. But Daoud was a fervent nationalist and a modernizer who had been frustrated by the slow pace of economic development under his predecessors.

Daoud's energetic efforts at modernization within the confines of a conservative and autocratic regime led to developments with ominous consequences for the future: the beginnings of the abandonment of the traditional Afghan policy of neutrality. The various strands of the web that led to this unacknowledged but palpable shift in policy are tangled and difficult to unravel even now, with the benefit of hindsight. It is relevant, at this stage, to cast some light on the circumstances prevailing at the time.

First and foremost, Afghanistan was in dire need of external economic and military assistance. The United States, which was in a position to help, was indifferent, or rather insensitive to the peculiarities of the Afghan situation after the British withdrawal from India had left the field open for the Soviets to exploit. Second was Daoud's aggressive espousal of the cause of Pashtunistan that had bedevilled Afghanistan's relations with the British-Indian successor state of Pakistan. These two factors were to bring about a wholly new dependency on the USSR.

The British withdrawal from India in 1947 and the attendant Partition of the sub-continent had made the Afghans vulnerable. The Afghan army at the time consisted of rag-tag groups of badly clothed and ill-equipped peasant conscripts, with an officer corps largely drawn from the Pashtun elite for

want of better employment. The army's main role was to keep internal order and convey the impression that there existed a central government that was able to impose its authority throughout the country.

The Afghan minister of national economy, Abdul Majid Zabuli, had visited Washington in December 1948. According to a US diplomat with long experience in the region, Zabuli's mission was to make a special plea for the supply of weapons to defend Afghan territory in case of Soviet aggression in the wake of the British withdrawal from India, and to maintain internal security against tribal insurrections.¹ Afghan fears regarding the USSR were not without foundation, in view of what had occurred since 1945, and what was happening in eastern and southern Europe; furthermore, the communist parties of Asia, with Soviet support, appeared to be in the ascendant. The Afghans also confirmed their willingness, as in previous requests, to pay for arms and military training with their meagre resources. The US response was negative.

So was the US response to Afghan requests for economic assistance. When Zabuli was in Washington he also tried to obtain a loan to finance a development plan. Zabuli himself was a self-made capitalist, a pioneering entrepreneur who had set up an investment bank, later called the Bank-i-Melli, which had largely contributed to the beginnings of commercial agriculture (cotton in the Kunduz region) and industrial development in pre-war Afghanistan. Zabuli came to the US with a modest, well-conceived plan, with an integrated approach to economic development. The State Department shunted him off to the US Import-Export Bank, which offered instead to finance new contracts for an American engineering firm that had been commissioned by the Afghan government in 1946 to assist in the planning and implementation of a multi-purpose agricultural project in the Helmand Valley. Zabuli had little enthusiasm for putting all the Afghan eggs into one basket, but was forced by Shah Mahmud, his prime minister, to accept the offer for its potential political value. In a conversation with President Truman in Washington, Shah Mahmud is reported to have said: 'The Afghan government tends to think of the loan as of political as well as of economic importance, possibly increasingly so in the light of Soviet interest and offers of assistance to Afghanistan.'²

These Afghan demands for economic and military assistance from the United States were therefore highly political. In their concern to maintain their traditional neutrality and independence, the Afghans were only trying to bring into partnership, as they had done in the 1930s with Germany, Japan and Italy, a geographically remote world power that had the capacity to assist.

In October 1954 Mohamed Naim, the foreign minister (and Daoud's brother), went to Washington to appeal once again for military assistance.

The reply of Eisenhower's secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, was received three months later: 'After careful consideration, extending military aid to Afghanistan would create problems not offset by the strength it would generate. Instead of asking for arms, Afghanistan should settle the Pashtunistan dispute with Pakistan.'³ In Dulles's Manichaean world view, Afghan neutrality meant 'non-alignment', a status that had no value to him at a time when he was busily forming military alliances like SEATO and the Baghdad Pact (later CENTO) to 'contain' the Soviet Union. Pakistan had joined SEATO in September 1954. It was to adhere to the Baghdad Pact a year later. Pakistan as a potential ally was not to be antagonized; Afghanistan was dispensable. To underline his point, and in a serious breach of diplomatic etiquette, Dulles sent a copy of his reply to the Pakistani government.

The outraged Daoud turned immediately to the Soviet Union, whose offers of military aid had long been rejected as a matter of policy. In December 1955, after their famous tour of India, Bulganin and Khrushchev visited Afghanistan - an unprecedented gesture towards a small and seemingly insignificant country. They not only offered to train and equip the Afghan army and air force, but also to grant economic assistance on a large scale - the first such Soviet programme in the so-called Third World. While in Kabul, the Soviet leaders also publicly announced Soviet support for the Afghan position on the Pashtunistan issue.

It was perhaps the headstrong Daoud's obsessive pursuit of the Pashtunistan issue that gave the Soviets the first opportunity for their economic penetration and subversion of Afghanistan. One concrete result of the ensuing confrontations with Pakistan was that they dramatized the landlocked country's extreme vulnerability: transit facilities for vital Afghan imports and exports through Pakistan and the port of Karachi were blocked or delayed. Soviet assistance to circumvent these threats to Afghan survival was prompt and psychologically effective. Abdur Rahman's 'elephant' had begun its 'slow and steady' advance. Its first victim was Afghan neutrality; its second, Afghan independence.

The Pashtunistan problem had originated with the demarcation by the British in 1893 of the Durand Line. The purpose of this demarcation had been both strategic and defensive: to delimit the respective spheres of influence of the amir of Kabul and of the British over the unruly Pashtun tribes on either side of the Line, and to discourage armed incursions into British India by wild raiding parties from the Afghan side. The substantial Pashtun population on the British side were nominally subjects of the amir. Nor could the British be said to have been actually administering at that time the whole of that vast territory west of the Indus. The 'pacification' campaigns against the fierce Pashtun tribesmen, in an era of jubilant Victorian jingoism, incidentally inspired a great deal of romantic literature, including Winston

Churchill's rather fanciful accounts of his youthful exploits in the Malakand campaign.⁴

In 1901 the British created the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), separating the Pashtun country west of the Indus from the province of Punjab. They divided the new province into the so-called 'Settled Districts', that is, the 'pacified' areas directly administered by the British, and five autonomous Tribal Agencies ruled by local khans or chiefs, with resident British political agents reporting, not to the governor of the NWFP, but directly to the viceroy's government in Calcutta.⁵

The Durand Line was not an 'international frontier' in the accepted sense and its status was not without ambiguity. The Anglo-Afghan Treaty of 1921 referred to the mutual interest of the contracting parties in the tribes residing close to their respective boundaries. But the special status of the autonomous Tribal Agencies placed them outside the pale of the mainstream political, economic and social developments in the rest of British India. In fact the Simon Commission Report of 1930 went so far as to say that 'British India stops at the boundary of the administered area'.⁶

Before Partition in 1947 the British sponsored a referendum in the Settled Districts of the NWFP, giving them the choice of joining either India or Pakistan. The overwhelmingly Muslim population of the Settled Districts voted to join Pakistan. In the five autonomous Tribal Agencies linked to the government in New Delhi by special arrangements, the British sponsored a jirga that also opted for Pakistan. The Afghan government objected to this procedure on the grounds that the Agencies belonged to the same category as the 562 self-governing princely states of British India that had been presented with a third option - becoming independent - an option that was not made available to the Tribal Agencies which, like the princely states, had never been directly administered by the British. Although the new state of Pakistan continued to respect the autonomous status of the Tribal Agencies, and even worked hard to placate the tribes with subsidies and a reduced military presence, the Afghans, supported at first by newly independent India, claimed that by denying the third option to the frontier Pashtun tribes, the Durand Line had been treated as an international border.

When Pakistan applied for United Nations membership in September 1947, Afghanistan, a fellow Muslim state, cast the only negative vote. The Afghans also revoked unilaterally the Anglo-Afghan treaties containing references to 'boundaries', and had this action endorsed by a loya jirga. So began a period of acute tension between the two neighbours. Although formal diplomatic relations were established in 1948, hostile Afghan actions and declarations on the Pashtunistan issue led Pakistan to retaliate on several occasions by subjecting the transit through its territory of vital Afghan imports and exports to bureaucratic delays and other obstacles.

The resulting economic hardships caused the Afghans to turn to the Soviets for help. The Soviet response was prompt: a four-year barter agreement was signed in July 1950, with the Soviets providing petroleum products, cement, cotton cloth and other essentials in return for wool, raw cotton and other Afghan products. The Soviets also agreed to the free transit of Afghan exports through their territory, and offered to invest in oil exploration. In 1952 the Afghans authorized the opening of a Soviet trade mission in Kabul, a facility that had always been denied before.

In early 1954, some months after Daoud had taken office, the Soviets loaned the equivalent of US\$3.5 million for the construction of grain silos in Kabul and Pul-i-Kumri, and a flour mill and bakery in Kabul. This was the first Soviet loan to a neutral country in the Third World. Josef Stalin, who had employed more direct methods of extending Soviet power and influence, had not believed in providing material assistance to such countries. Loans for other infrastructure projects soon followed: \$1.2 million for the construction of an oil pipeline across the Amu Darya, and three oil storage facilities; \$2 million for road-building equipment, \$2.1 million for an asphalt factory and equipment to pave the streets of Kabul. That same year, Czechoslovakia provided a credit of \$5 million to build three cement plants and other projects - its first aid programme outside the Soviet Bloc.⁷ During their December 1955 visit Bulganin and Khrushchev announced an outright gift of a 100-bed hospital for Kabul, and 15 passenger buses to ply the newly paved streets of the capital. These are examples of the small but highly visible projects that appeared as spontaneous and generous responses to meet real Afghan needs, but had in fact great psychological and propaganda value for the Soviets.

US economic assistance, when it began in 1956 in response to the Soviet economic offensive, provided essential but nearly invisible items and services: wheat, stored in the Soviet-built silos, and substantial investments in educational programmes, such as grants to Afghan students to study at American universities, and projects to expand and upgrade the local educational infrastructure and services. As Dupree commented: 'and so nine-tenths of the American aid sits, iceberg-like, below the surface, invisible to the journalistic eye'⁸ - one might add, just like the American grain in the Soviet silos.

Another US project was an ambitiously modern airport in Kandahar that turned out to be a white elephant. The US also built a highway between Kabul and Kandahar. The Soviets built the Kandahar-Herat highway, and, most dramatically, an all-weather road linking Kabul with the USSR border that involved a spectacular feat of engineering - the construction of a tunnel that pierced the Hindu Kush for the first time in history. The Salang Tunnel, the road network and the airports would prove to be of immeasurable value to the Soviets in easing the logistics of their 1979 invasion.

The Afghan–Pakistani confrontations over Pashtunistan intensified in March 1955 when Pakistan announced the One Unit Plan to create the single province of West Pakistan, symmetrical to the existing single province of East Pakistan. The idea was to end the disparities between the east wing, which had a larger population, and the west wing, which, with four provinces, had a disproportionately greater representation in the national legislature, an equal number of seats having been attributed to each of the five former provinces.

For Daoud the One Unit Plan was a provocation, an attempt to treat the Durand Line as the official frontier and to absorb the Tribal Agencies into Pakistan. Although the Agencies were not included in the plan, their own self-governing khans feared that it was a move towards their eventual integration into Pakistan. In Afghanistan mobs staged violent demonstrations at the Pakistan embassy in Kabul, and attacked the consulates in Kandahar and Jalalabad. The country prepared for war. The government called a *loya jirga* that unanimously endorsed its demand for a plebiscite in the Pashtun areas of Pakistan. The Pakistanis countered by asking whether the Pashtun population on the Afghan side of the Durand Line would have the right to secede by voting for an independent Pashtunistan straddling the Line. Pakistan had scored a very valid point, underlining the essential weakness of the Afghan position.

The most prominent proponents of Pashtunistan in British India before Partition had been Dr Khan Sahib and his elder brother, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. The latter was known as the Frontier Gandhi because of his ascetic habits, his alliance with the Mahatma's Hindu-dominated Congress Party in the anti-British civil disobedience campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s, and his leadership of a radical movement for Pashtun social reform called the 'Red Shirts' (the *khudai khidmatgar*). The Khan brothers had politically organized the NWFP so well that their party, the Frontier Congress, controlled the provincial legislature. Before the British held their referendum, the NWFP cabinet had voted to join India. It is possible that Indian Congress leaders had promised Pashtun autonomy within an independent India. As the British journalist George Arney pointed out, Pashtunistan meant different things to different people:

To Ghaffar Khan, it may well have carried spiritual overtones. He had devoted his life, not just to independence, but to the moral regeneration of a people racked by blood feuds, bribery, family disputes and degrading social customs. To his fellow Pashtuns of the North West Frontier, Pashtunistan could mean anything from autonomy within Pakistan to complete independence. To the wild tribesmen straddling the Durand Line, it probably meant the splendid prospect of everlasting anarchy, without interference from north or south. To the rulers of Kabul, who

adopted the call for Pashtunistan with alacrity, it clearly implied the integration of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province into the Afghan state.⁹

If ethnic affinity was the basis of the case for a Pashtunistan, then logic demanded that such an autonomous or independent entity would also have to include the Pashtuns of Afghanistan. Afghan demands for a plebiscite could certainly not have encompassed Afghan Pashtuns who were the very basis of the Afghan state. Any expectations that Daoud may have had, that Pakistani Pashtuns would choose to be attached to Afghanistan in a plebiscite, were purely illusory. The NWFP had been under British rule for over 50 years, and the Pashtuns, especially the elite, had reaped the benefits of modernization. For instance, two public schools on the British model, Edwardes College and Ismailia College in Peshawar, had for several generations catered to the educational needs of the sons of tribal leaders, landowners and other Pashtuns of standing. The British had also favoured the recruitment of Pashtuns into the armed forces because of their proven fighting qualities, and they were thus well represented in the Pakistani officer corps. One of them, General Ayub Khan, was to take power in 1958, and, as president of Pakistan and a ferocious opponent of Pashtunistan, was to prove Daoud's nemesis.¹⁰

Although passions had cooled by September 1955, Daoud's closure of the border for a five-month period drove the desperate Afghans to seek Soviet help once again. At Daoud's request the 1950 transit and barter agreements were renewed. The visit of Bulganin and Khrushchev took place in December that year. This resulted in a US\$100 million long-term development loan on very soft terms. By March 1956 numerous projects had been identified by joint Afghan-Soviet teams: two hydro-electric plants, three automotive repair and maintenance facilities, a road from Qizil Qala on the Iranian border west of Herat to Kabul, including the Salang Tunnel through the formidable Hindu Kush, a major air base in Bagram, three irrigation dams and canal systems, a fertilizer factory, and so on. The planning and implementation of these projects brought in large numbers of Soviet advisers and technicians. The Soviet economic penetration of Afghanistan had begun. Between 1956 and 1978 Afghanistan received a total of \$1265 million in Soviet economic assistance, mostly in the form of loans, and an additional \$110 million from the rest of the Eastern Bloc.

In 1955, at the height of the tensions over Pashtunistan, the Afghans had purchased \$3 million worth of arms and military equipment from Czechoslovakia. After the Bulganin-Khrushchev visit, Soviet military assistance also began in earnest, with a loan of \$32.4 million for the purchase of tanks, aircraft and arms, and for the construction of four military airfields. There is no doubt that Daoud's intent was to build up and equip armed forces that would be strong and effective enough to deter any external threats and maintain internal order during his determined efforts to modernize his

economically and socially backward country, in the manner of an Ataturk or a Reza Shah. But the US refusal to be of assistance made him almost exclusively dependent on the Soviet Bloc. He may not have perceived the long-term implications of such dependence.

Between 1956 and the eve of the communist coup in 1978, Afghanistan also received the equivalent of \$1240 million in military aid from the USSR, mostly in the form of credits. By 1978 some 3725 Afghan military personnel had been trained in the Soviet Union. In the words of an official document emanating from the US embassy in 1971: 'There is no effective organization within the military to counter or even catalog the long-term possibly subversive effects of the training of the many military officers who go to the USSR for stints as long as six years.'¹¹ In contrast, Afghan officers had taken a total of 487 courses in the United States, with smaller numbers trained in Egypt and India.

While Daoud worked with restless impatience to implement his programme of modernization of the Afghan economy, his efforts at social reform were cautious, circumspect and carried out with a minimum of publicity. This was especially true of his efforts to achieve the social emancipation of Afghan women. Amanullah's attempts to tamper with the tradition of *purdah* (the isolation of women) and the wearing of the veil had brought down on him the wrath of the mullahs.

But Daoud had gathered round him as advisers, jurists who had studied at the shari'a school of Kabul University, a faculty affiliated to the oldest extant seat of Islamic theological learning, the Al-Azhar University in Cairo. Some of them had gone on to complete their theological studies at Al-Azhar, and others had rounded off their training with secular legal studies at universities in the West. Daoud had his legal advisers carefully scrutinize each reform he contemplated, to ensure that it did not violate the religious law, the shari'a, as contained in the Koran and the canonical sayings (*hadith*) of the Prophet.

Once his advisers had concluded that *purdah* and the veil had no absolute justification in Islamic law, Daoud did not promulgate a decree but acted unofficially. During the ceremonies to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Afghan independence in August 1959, Daoud, other members of the royal family, and high-ranking civilian and military officers appeared on the podium to review a military parade. Their wives and daughters were also on the reviewing stand, but the women were unveiled. The effect on the Kabul populace was electrifying.

Before this very public event, Daoud had quietly tested the waters. A few years before, women singers and announcers had been employed for the first time by Radio Afghanistan: they could not, for obvious reasons, have been wearing the veil. But since they had to work in the company of men who

were not their fathers, brothers or sons, there was a flurry of protests. In 1957 a delegation of Afghan women attended an international women's conference in Colombo, Ceylon. The next year a woman was included in the Afghan delegation to the United Nations in New York. Some months before the public unveiling, a number of women were recruited to serve as (unveiled) receptionists and stewardesses on the national airline, Ariana. There were no protests this time. Around the same time, young girls who had completed their studies at a high school in Kabul were asked to volunteer to work in a local pottery factory: 40 of them turned up armed with letters of consent from their families. Daoud's approach was not Amanullah's, but there was a new environment. Daoud had a trained army behind him, and a feared secret police.

When a delegation of religious leaders called on the prime minister to condemn the public unveiling, Daoud retorted that he would be the first to return his wife and daughter to *purdah* and the veil if the clerics could provide justification in Islamic law. When the mullahs then took to preaching against the regime in their mosques, the ringleaders were arrested. They were charged with treason for advocating the overthrow of the government, and with heresy: in traditional Islamic theory a *de facto* government rules by 'divine sanction' that can only be withdrawn or refused by his Muslim subjects if the ruler openly violates the laws of Islam. In practice, however, an autocratic ruler with strong powers of coercion at his command continues to have his way in spite of such theories.

The imprisoned mullahs had learned their lesson and were soon released. But as Dupree comments:

Not all religious leaders accepted the voluntary abolition of the veil and other reforms, however, because each intrusion into their customary power erodes their secular influence. They oppose secular education, for in the past they have controlled the educational institutions; they call land-reform anti-Islamic, for they own large tracts of land in the name of *waqf* (religious endowments); they oppose a constitutionally separated church and state, for such a move diminishes their temporal power.¹²

Daoud demonstrated the new power of the central authority on two other occasions: firstly, when a tribal feud in the Khost area of Paktia province erupted into an armed conflict, during which an army officer was killed by mistake; and secondly, during riots in Kandahar. How the riots came about is particularly instructive. Year after year a charade was enacted when the governor of the province notified the local landlords about their obligations concerning the payment of taxes. After such meetings, the landlords or their representatives marched to the compound of a neighbouring mosque where they claimed sanctuary (*bast*), which by tradition protected them from government authority, until the governor gave up for the sake of peace. In

December 1959, after the meeting in the governor's compound, the landlords found their habitual line of march to the mosque blocked by armed policemen. There could therefore be no recourse to bast this time. But the landlords, and religious leaders who had large land-holdings in the form of religious endowments, fomented anti-government riots that were quickly suppressed, with some bloodshed, by the police and the army. The new element in the Afghan context was the rapidity and effectiveness of the interventions of the Kabul government in Khost and Kandahar with the help of the newly mechanized army.

Daoud's realistic attempts to bring about the social transformation of his country were largely countered by his illusions with regard to the Pashtunistan issue. In September 1960 a local quarrel between rival tribal chiefs in the Pakistani frontier district of Bajaur erupted into a war, with the two governments taking sides. Pakistan used US-supplied military aircraft and weapons against armed incursions of tribal elements from the Afghan side, and US protests were haughtily ignored by the Pakistani president, Ayub Khan. In the course of the mutual recriminations that followed, Pakistan closed its consulates in Kandahar and Jalalabad, and demanded that the Afghans close theirs in Quetta and Peshawar. In September 1961 Daoud took the extreme measure of breaking off diplomatic relations with Pakistan and sealing off the border. It was the irrational move of a self-deluded autocrat, explicable only by Daoud's irredentist obsession with 'Pashtunistan'.

Customs duties accounted for some 40 per cent of Afghan government revenues; these were lost during the 1961-63 closure of the border, and ministry budgets had to be slashed by 20 per cent. US aid projects, the implementation of which had received a big boost after President Eisenhower's visit to Kabul in December 1959, were threatened: several million dollars' worth of equipment and materials for the Kabul-Kandahar road gathered dust or eroded in Pakistani warehouses; the construction of new faculty buildings for Kabul University was curtailed; and a US gift of 8000 tonnes of wheat lay rotting in Peshawar warehouses. Private Afghan exporters and importers suffered the most. The bulk of Afghan exports that brought in precious foreign exchange were fresh and dried fruit and nuts. The national carrier, Ariana Afghan Airlines, of which a 49 per cent stake was held by a major US airline, chartered more aircraft and began an airlift to India, Afghanistan's most profitable customer for these products. But the truckers and smugglers on both sides of the porous Durand Line had a field day, despite the official closure of the land border.

While the Afghan government and legitimate business were the major losers - and there were some winners - the Soviets were the ultimate winners, a Pyrrhic victory as it turned out in the end. A few days after the border was closed by Daoud's dictat, the Afghan foreign minister flew to Moscow

and negotiated an agreement for a major increase of transit facilities through the USSR, and for an airlift of the threatened fruit crop, mainly grapes, for sale there or elsewhere in the Soviet Bloc. By 1963 it appeared that the servicing of the Afghan debt to the USSR would exceed the total value of Afghan exports to that country. On 9 March 1963 Radio Afghanistan informed the country that the king had accepted Daoud's resignation.