

## AFGHANISTAN REVISITED: A SPOT OF SUPERPOWER RIVALRY IN THE ERA OF THE COLD WAR

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### Abstract

*Discourses on the conflicts, rivalries and confrontations between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War era have paid marginal attention to their activities in Afghanistan. The activities of these two superpowers in this central Asian country cannot be swept under the carpet, at least for the sake of history. What have been bandied about in popular literature are their transactions in such countries as Vietnam, Korea, Israel, Cuba, Italy, Congo and the Horn of Africa to the neglect of Afghanistan. With the use of available documented sources, fragmented and incoherent as they were, this paper examines the roles of the superpowers in Afghanistan in furthering their Cold War ideological, political and economic interests, as well as the global consequences of these roles. The method of analysis was descriptive. The study concludes that Afghanistan was a hotbed of superpower rivalry and a prelude to the jihadist terrorism around the world which, in turn, increased the security architecture and consciousness of some world nations.*

**Key words:** Afghanistan, Superpowers, Cold War, Conflicts, Rivalries, Terrorism.

### Introduction

The Cold War era refers to the period in international relations between the end of the Second World War in 1945 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was characterized by aggressive acts and threats of aggression by the two belligerent superpowers, the United States of America (United States or U. S.) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, otherwise called the Soviet Union or USSR. During this



period, the 'East' consisted of the Soviet Union and its allies in the Central and Eastern Europe while the 'West' was made up of the industrialized nations of North America, Western Europe, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Both the 'East' and the 'West' were also respectively called the 'Second World' and 'First World' in contradistinction to what, in the 1950s, Alfred Sauvy called *tiers monde* that is, the 'Third World.'<sup>1</sup> The Cold War era was also marked by ideological, economic and political differences between the two protagonists. While the United States made frantic efforts to spread its liberal democratic ideology in countries around the world, the Soviet Union struggled to propagate its communist ideology beyond its satellite states of Eastern Europe.

Afghanistan, a nation in central Asia but which through its regional alliances identifies with the Middle East, is the focus of this essay. It became mired as a hotbed of rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union in the era of the Cold war. A concatenation of events would lead to the killing of several Soviets by the Afghan Fundamentalist Islamic fanatics and rebels called the Mujahideen, a group supported by the United States. The Mujahideen would emerge successful in the struggle against a pro-Soviet regime that took over in Afghanistan in 1978 when King Daoud Khan was killed in a coup organized by Soviet-trained Afghan officers.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, Afghanistan was to acquire notoriety in international jihadist terrorism, which is currently ravaging the world, as the Mujahideen eventually gave birth to the Taliban that began a repressive regime in that country in September 1996.

### **Background to the Cold War**

The end of the Second World War saw the emergence of two superpowers, the United States and Soviet Union. Europe was no longer the centre stage of world politics as it went into eclipse, while the United States and Soviet Union became the main actors in the international system. The two powers had become military superpowers



by the end of the war, having possessed piles of nuclear weapons of mass destruction. Simultaneously, the two began to jostle for supremacy in world affairs.

It was also evident from the war that the two superpowers were fundamentally incompatible in the areas of ideology and national interest. Their ideological differences manifested in contrasting perspectives of the state and of the international system. The democratic liberalism of the United States was based on a social system that recognised and afforded the value and worth of the individual, a political system that allowed all persons to participate in the electoral process, and lastly, a capitalist economic system that provided opportunities for individuals to pursue economic advantages unfettered by government involvement. This is replicated at the international level in the form of support for other democratic liberal governments and capitalist institutions.<sup>3</sup>

On its part, the Soviet Union with its communist ideology embraced Marxism, a social theory formulated by Karl Marx, which posits that one class (the bourgeoisie) owns and controls the means of production and uses its wealth, institutions and authority to maintain its control over the workers, largely the poor masses. The Marxist ideology holds that the problem of class rule would be solved by a social revolution whereby the workers (the proletariat) seize control from the bourgeoisie by means of the state. This class conflict between owners and workers will lead to the eventual demise of capitalism, to be replaced by socialism—an economic and social system that relies on intensive government intervention or public ownership of the means of production and exchange in order to ensure equitable distribution of wealth among the population.<sup>4</sup> Although capitalism would extend its tentacles through imperialism in order to gain more markets, raw materials and capital, Soviet leadership maintained that the Soviet Union must not rest on its oars but must in every way strengthen its state, the state organs, its intelligence service and the army, so that it

would not be smashed by the capitalist power.<sup>5</sup> At the global level, Soviet leaders encouraged movements whose objectives were to promote a new social order that undermine capitalism.

On the issue of geopolitical national interest, Soviet Union used its new found nuclear power to maintain and solidify influence in the buffer states of Eastern Europe – Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania. It was reasoned that maintaining friendly neighbours on its western borders was crucial to Soviet national interest in the Cold War era. As for the United States, its foreign policy since the beginning of the Cold War had two long-term objectives. The first was to limit the expansion of Soviet and communist influence throughout the world. In 1947, an American diplomat and historian, George Kennan published the famous “X” article in the *Foreign Affairs* magazine in which he initiated and persuasively advocated for a policy of “Containment” with regard to the Soviet Union. He argued that because the Soviet Union would always feel insecure militarily it would always conduct aggressive foreign policy, and so ‘containing’ its Cold War enemy (Soviet Union) should become the best foreign policy direction of post-war America. Side by side with this policy was the second objective which was to prevent the conflict between the two superpowers from escalating into war or from getting dangerously close to war, the *raison d’être* for favouring containment.<sup>6</sup>

The new containment doctrine emerged in part as a response to the events in Europe, particularly in Turkey and Greece. The Soviet leader, Josef Stalin, tried to win some control over the vital sea lanes from Turkey to the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, in Greece, the British had withdrawn their assistance, offered to the country to enable it recover from the devastations of the Second World War, having announced their inability to continue. The result was that communist insurgents began to threaten the pro-Western government of Greece. These challenges acted as a spur on President Truman of the United States who now decided to enunciate a firm policy by drawing heavily from



the ideas of George Kennan. Kennan had warned that in Soviet Union, the United States faced ‘a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with the U. S. there can be no permanent *modus vivendi*.’ The result was that on 12 March 1947, Truman appeared before Congress and used Kennan’s warnings as a basis for what became known as the Truman Doctrine. Said he, ‘I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.’<sup>7</sup> Truman further requested for US\$400 million to bolster the armed forces in Greece and Turkey and to provide economic assistance to Greece was quickly approved by Congress.

No doubt, the Truman Doctrine assisted the Greek government to smash the communist forces and ultimately eased Soviet pressure on Turkey. The Doctrine also accommodated the international status quo at the time as Stalin had established communist governments in Eastern Europe and there was no immediate possibility of overturning them. Again, as a strategy for the future, it was necessary to contain communism within its present borders because it was a real expansionist movement.<sup>8</sup>

Other decisive episodes were to contribute in drawing the line between the East and West. Former British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had on 5 March 1946 in Fulton, Missouri, delivered what became known as the ‘Iron Curtain’ speech, which reads thus:

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain had descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the States of Central and Eastern Europe – Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest, and Sofia. All these famous cities and the populations around them lie in the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence, but to a very high and increasing measure of control from Moscow.<sup>9</sup>



Then, there was the proposal by the American Secretary of State, George C. Marshal, that the United States should make a major contribution to the economic recovery of post-war Europe. It was expected that the European states themselves should cooperate in the administration of the aid programme. The Soviet foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov rejected the Marshal Aid because, according to him, it represented American interference in the internal affairs of other states. On the orders of Joseph Stalin, Molotov not only refused the Marshal Aid for Russia, but also forced other Eastern European states to do the same.

On 5 June 1947, the Marshal Plan, originally called the European Recovery Programme, was announced by George Marshal. Sixteen European states—Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, France, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland, Sweden, Turkey and United Kingdom—became the beneficiaries of the American grant. Although the sixteen nations initially requested a total of US\$29 billion to cover each country's deficit over the period from 1948 to 1952, only US\$12.5 billion was actually delivered. By mid-1951, the Marshal Aid was phased out and was replaced by the Mutual Security Assistance, which extended substantial military aid to Western Europe. Although the Marshal Plan has been dubbed the “most selfless act in history”, it was introduced not only to safeguard America's strategic, political and military interests in Western Europe, but also to take account of the need of the United States to maintain its colossal export of surplus goods in the face of a predicted domestic recession arising from the exigencies of the Second World War.

The United States later advocated a policy of *detente*, a term first introduced by President J. F. Kennedy in 1963, when he made a unilateral declaration of the end of the ‘Cold War’ and opted for a relaxation of tensions between the United States and Soviet Union. *Detente* became a dominant focus of United States foreign policy from 1973 under the Nixon-Kissinger-Ford administration and “another



form of ‘containing’ the Soviet Union, not by military strength but by the skilful use of checks and balances, pressures, and inducements, attempting to build a ‘structure of peace’ on the resulting balance of power.”<sup>10</sup> President Jimmy Carter, early in his administration, also continued to encourage the policy of *detente*, but later cut off American grain and technology exports to the Soviet Union after the December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union.

The Second World War also resulted in the realization that the differences between the two protagonists would be played out through proxies rather than through direct confrontation. Consequently, millions of lives were lost in the superpowers’ proxy wars around the world, most notably in Southeast Asia. In general, it has been estimated that the United States lost about one hundred thousand lives in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Although it is difficult to ascertain the number of Soviet soldiers that died in these wars, the financial expenditure for the Soviet Union was far greater than that of the United States. From the 1950s and 1960s, newly independent states began to proliferate in Asia and Africa as they were now freed from the stranglehold of colonial rule. The result was that the superpowers began to vie for influence with these new states in order to project not only their power but also their ideology to areas beyond their traditional spheres of influence. With the Cold War, therefore, conflict became globalised to all continents.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Cold War was characterised by high-level tension and competition, there was no direct military conflict between the superpowers. The advent of nuclear weapons gave rise to international bipolar stalemate. The acquisition of nuclear weapons by both the United States and the Soviet Union meant that such equal division of power or nuclear deterrence, or what Winston Churchill called ‘Balance of Terror’ and later became known as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD),<sup>12</sup> led to some measure of stability in the international system. But the nuclear forces of the superpowers continued to grow and



technologies were developed, so that nuclear weapons became the main focus of arms control during the Cold War.<sup>13</sup> However, the confrontations between the superpowers led to the emergence of military alliances. As a prelude, the United States had made efforts to strengthen the military capabilities of Western Europe after the Second World War, noting that a reconstructed Germany was crucial to the designs of the West. To this end, President Truman reached an agreement with England and France to merge the three western zones of occupation (West Berlin) into a new West German republic. This would include the American, British and French sectors of Berlin, even though much of that city lay within East Berlin, the Soviet zone of occupation.

Stalin's response to this move was quick: on 24 June 1948, he imposed a tight blockade around the western sectors of Berlin. He argued that if Germany was to be divided, then the country's Western government must abandon its outpost in the heart of the Soviet-controlled eastern zone. Truman refused to yield to this, and shortly after the blockade, food could not be delivered into Berlin and the city's dwellers began to starve. As an alternative to war through a military response to the blockade, Truman ordered massive airlift to supply the city with food and other essential goods. The Berlin Airlift continued for more than ten months, and, in the end, West Berlin became a symbol of Western resistance to Soviet communist expansionism.<sup>14</sup> In May 1949, following negotiations with the United States under the sponsorship of the United Nations, the Soviets lifted the blockade and the airlift came to an end. But during the period of the airlift, the United States had delivered up to 2,500 tons of food to the city while the Allies spent US\$200 million to ensure that their planes flew in every kind of weather.<sup>15</sup> In October of 1949, Germany became officially divided into two nations – the German Federal Republic (West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

The Berlin crisis was to accelerate the consolidation of moves for an alliance among the United States and the Western European countries.



On 4 April 1949, twelve nations comprising the United States, Canada, Australia and much of Western Europe signed an agreement establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The organisation declared that an armed aggression against one member would be seen as an attack against all. NATO maintained a standing military force in Europe as a defence against Soviet communist intervention. Thus, NATO became the immediate response to the perceived Soviet threat especially after the Soviets backed a successful coup in Czechoslovakia in addition to the West Berlin blockade.<sup>16</sup>

The formation of NATO spurred the Soviet Union into creating its own military alliance, the Warsaw Pact on 14 May 1955 (this Pact lasted till 1 July 1991). Members of the Warsaw Pact were drawn from the communist countries of Eastern Europe, namely the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and East Germany. The Soviet Union was further alarmed by the fact that upon admitting West Germany into NATO, the Allied nations authorised its government to rearm. The Warsaw Pact comprised a total military strength of six million communist troops. In 1985, its treaty was renewed to provide for the maintenance of Soviet military units within the territories of participating nations.<sup>17</sup> This move was described as a ‘systematic plan to strengthen the Soviet hold over its satellites.’<sup>18</sup>

Subsequent series of events were to force a readjustment of the United States Cold War policy. In the first place, several Americans became frightened when in September 1949 Soviet Union detonated its first nuclear atomic bomb. Also, at the close of 1949, the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-Shek in China collapsed with startling speed. Kai-Shek and his political allies fled to the offshore island of Formosa (Taiwan) leaving the entire Chinese mainland under the control of a communist government. The United States that had occupied Japan after the Second World War with the aim of reconstructing the country now devoted increased energy and attention



to its revitalisation as a buffer against Asian nationalism. But the American occupation was to end in 1952. Under this atmosphere of crises, President Truman called for a thorough review of American foreign policy. This led to the issuing, in April 1950, of a National Security Council report known as NSC-68. This report ultimately outlined a shift in the United States foreign policy position. Although the containment doctrine had been viewed as a commitment shared among the United States and its allies, the NSC-68 maintained that the United States could no longer rely on other nations to spearhead resistance to communism. The United States must now institute active leadership of the non-communist world and must also move to stop communist expansion throughout the world. The report also called for a major expansion of American military power with a quadrupled defence budget.<sup>19</sup> Afghanistan became one of the sites for the demonstration of the increased United States military power during the Cold war.

### Political map of Afghanistan



Source: <https://www.nationsonline.org> (accessed 10 June 2024).



### **Afghanistan: a spot for superpower rivalry**

Bordered by Iran, Pakistan and some of the former Soviet Socialist Republics such as Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan with mainly Muslim populations, Afghanistan, the landlocked and mountainous country in central Asia, was a backward nation lacking natural resources and industrial infrastructures. By the end of the 1970s, Soviet Union's authority and communist influence in the region became endangered as a powerful fundamentalist Muslim movement attempted to take over Iran and was determined to propagate its doctrine to other Muslim areas. On its part, the United States viewed Afghanistan as a buffer nation between the Soviet Union and the important oil-rich nations of the Persian Gulf, namely Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The result was that Afghanistan became the bone of contention between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, in 1973, Mohammed Daoud Khan overthrew the king of Afghanistan, his cousin; and, the United States, desirous to bring Afghanistan under its sway of influence, offered the new government some economic aid. To demonstrate appreciation to United States and contempt for the Soviet Union, Daoud Khan deported Soviet advisers sent to Afghanistan and banned the communist party established in the country. In 1977, Khan broke relations completely with Moscow. A year later, in 1978, he 'was deposed and murdered in a bloody coup *d'état* led by Soviet-trained Afghan officers.' Thus, a pro-Soviet regime took over, thereby offering a golden opportunity to the United States to harass and humiliate its Cold War enemy. The Afghan fundamentalist Muslim rebels who fought the communist government quickly became known as the Mujahideen, meaning 'those who wage jihad', and began a systematic killing of Afghan supporters of the pro-Soviet regime, Soviet advisers and their families.<sup>21</sup> This prompted the following appeal from the government of Afghanistan to the Soviet Union: 'The situation is bad and getting worse. We need practical help in both men and weapons.'<sup>22</sup> What followed was the landing in Afghan capital, Kabul,



massive Soviet helicopter gunships and several hundreds of paratroopers disguised as aircraft technicians.

The pro-Soviet Afghan President, Nur Mohammed Taraki, needed additional help and so travelled to Moscow in September 1979 to meet President Brezhnev. On his return, Taraki was murdered through suffocation by his political enemies. The demise of Taraki gave rise to the emergence of Hafizullah Amin, a military strongman whom Moscow suspected of making deals with the Americans. On 12 December 1979, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (known as the Politburo)—the executive committee and chief policymaking body of the Communist Party—met and decided to intervene militarily in Afghanistan. On 25 December 1979, on Christmas day, Afghanistan was invaded as hundreds of Soviet tanks and thousands of motorized infantry crossed the border into the country. The invasion, no doubt, was designed to prop up the Afghan communists who took over power in 1978 in the bloody coup that killed Daud Khan.

The reaction of the United States was decisive. On 28 December, just three days later, President Jimmy Carter told Leonid Brezhnev who controlled the Soviet Communist party, that the Soviet invasion was a ‘clear threat’ to peace and ‘could mark a fundamental and long-lasting turning point to our relations.’<sup>23</sup> What followed was what later became known as the Carter Doctrine, which stated that ‘an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.’<sup>24</sup> Carter imposed a number of economic sanctions on the Soviets, cancelled United States participation in the 1980 summer Olympic Games in Moscow and withdrew the consideration of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT 11) from Senate, so that it was never ratified by Congress. President Carter described the Russian invasion as a ‘stepping stone to their possible control over much of the world’s oil supplies.’<sup>25</sup>



The national security advisor to President Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski, a rabid anti-communist, proposed that the United States should intervene indirectly in Afghanistan via the neighbouring state of Pakistan, another close ally of the United States. This was in keeping with the principle of avoiding direct confrontation with the Soviet Union, which might lead to superpower war; and so, Brzezinski noted that ‘it is essential that Afghanistan’s resistance continues. This means more money as well as arms shipments to the rebels, and some technical advice.’<sup>26</sup> Shortly after, substantial United States arms, cash and advisors made their way into Pakistan from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, all allies of the United States. Not long after, Britain, France, Israel and even the People’s Republic of China were contributing money, all designed to thwart Soviet interests in Afghanistan.

In the meantime, the Mujahideen was organized into a strong array of major armed camps. The United States support for the Mujahideen flowed through Pakistan’s intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), whose officers were trained by American advisors in the United States and Pakistan. The officials of the ISI, in turn, passed on the knowledge to the Mujahideen, among which were ‘how to use small arms and heavy weapons, sniper rifles, camouflage, explosives and car bombs. Just as important, they taught the Mujahideen the conspiratorial habits and skills of successful guerrilla warriors.’<sup>27</sup> In 1986, through a paramilitary covert action, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began to transfer one of its most sophisticated weapons: the shoulder-launched anti-aircraft Stinger missiles to the Mujahideen, ‘which helped turn the tide of the war and sent the Red Army into retreat.’<sup>28</sup>

It is important to note that the United States sponsorship of the Mujahideen was massive such that the Congress appropriated around US\$30 million for the rebel group during the initial stage of funding. By 1987, the United States annual budget for the organisation had reached US\$630 million. On their part, Egypt and Saudi Arabia



were keenly interested in establishing solid presence in Pakistan and Afghanistan. They, therefore, began to recruit small contingents of men to fight alongside the Mujahideen and also to channel money through various religious and social agencies. It is to be pointed out that since 1979, committed Islamic clerics throughout the Middle East region kept their followers duly informed about the importance of supporting the anti-communist jihad and the efforts of their Muslim brethren to kick out the Soviet infidels out of Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup>

Equally crucial was the fact that this collective effort to garner support for the Mujahideen cemented United States relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The two countries were also eager to equip their armed forces with American weapons and training, counter the Soviet-backed Syrians and to stop some of their intellectuals who were drifting towards communism. It was not long before Egyptian and Saudi officials began to receive training from the Americans. The knowledge acquired was passed on to newly recruited men who later joined the Mujahideen in fighting the Soviets out of Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup>

### **The role of Osama bin Laden**

Osama bin Laden, a young millionaire from Yemen, was the most successful in raising funds and recruiting men for the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Having studied under two influential Islamists: Muhammad Qutb and Abdullah Azzam, a radical Islamic scholar, in the city of Jeddah, bin Laden became hooked to the anti-communist jihad. He was later to become the jihad's biggest private financier in support of the struggle. Bin Laden visited Afghanistan in 1984. Later, he transferred his family to Pakistan. In company of his teacher, Azzam, he established the Services Bureau near Peshawar on the Afghan-Pakistan border, which he used to recruit fighters, raise money and operate a training base. By 1987, bin Laden had begun venturing into Afghanistan with bands of guerrilla fighters.<sup>31</sup>

Azzam convinced bin Laden of the need to create an organisation that would lead international jihad against non-Muslims. Besides Azzam,



bin Laden was also influenced by al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian leader of al-Jihad, who had worked in a hospital for refugees in Pakistan in 1980. Al-Zawahiri's experience in Pakistan convinced him that Pakistan and Afghanistan provided better opportunities than Egypt for organising international jihad. Consequently, after the end of the war against the Soviets, bin Laden combined the worldviews of both Azzam and al-Zawahiri and committed himself to global jihad against non-Muslims and Muslim apostates beyond the borders of Afghanistan. In 1988, therefore, bin Laden began to raise a private army that would be committed to jihad and be supported from his personal wealth. This private army was named al-Qaeda – 'the base.' Most of its leaders were Egyptians, including al-Zawahiri.<sup>32</sup> In the end, the Mujahideen prevailed in the Afghan – Soviet war that dragged on for many years, ultimately forcing out a superpower, the Soviet Union, out of Afghanistan. In September 1996, after the fall of Kabul, the Mujahideen established a repressive regime in Afghanistan known as the Taliban, which unfortunately has continued to frustrate NATO efforts to rebuild the infrastructure of that country after the long war with the Soviets.<sup>33</sup>

### **The balance sheet**

Several thousands of Arabs found their way into Afghanistan in the course of fighting off the Soviets out the country. Although their military influence was minor compared to their Afghan comrades, the Arabs were, however, engrossed in the campaign of anti-communist jihad and were provided by the United States with the necessary means to execute it. The Americans had little control over the movement of weapons, funds and training, as these were entirely handled by the Pakistani intelligence services. The United States showed little or no concern about who used the weapons and was satisfied as long as they were used against the Soviets and their Afghan allies. The result was that some of these weapons were either purloined or sold on the black market in Afghanistan, and there is every possibility that the Arab Afghans participated in the purchase.<sup>34</sup>



By 1988, the Soviet public had become disgruntled with an interminable war that only produced mounting casualties. It has been estimated that about fifteen thousand Soviet soldiers died in the war. The result was that the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, began to look for a final solution to the conflagration; and within a year, in 1989, the last Soviet soldier had left Afghanistan. This was achieved through the Geneva Accord signed on 14 April 1988 between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the United States and Soviet Union serving as guarantors. The Accord officially took effect from 15 May 1988 and ended on 15 February 1989, thus ending the nine-year Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The Mujahideen were neither a party to the negotiations nor to the Geneva Accord, and consequently did not accept the terms of the agreement.<sup>35</sup>

Because the Afghan communist regime could not hold on to power for long after the Soviet withdrawal, the deep-seated animosities among the various Afghan warlords and Arab fighters erupted into a civil war, as they all jostled for post-communist control of the country. Bin Laden's chief mentor, Abdullah Azzam, killed by a roadside bomb in November 1989, was among the first victims of the civil war. The Najibullah regime that was backed by the Soviet Union could not win any territory, popular support or international recognition. In 1992, the regime collapsed having been overrun by the Mujahideen.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, Osama bin Laden had become both giddy and emboldened with the victory over the Soviets and, of course, greatly respected as the master mind of the Arab-Afghan force. He now began to ponder what to do with his small but well-trained and well-armed private army of 'holy' warriors, al-Qaeda. Three main factors combined to turn bin Laden from an anti-communist insurgent into an international terrorist. Firstly, the continuing presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait after the Gulf war, and in Somalia under a UN mandate did not go down well with him. He was agitated by the inroads the United States was making into the Islamic world, with active support from the leading Muslim nations of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, not to mention





Israel. Secondly, bin Laden's transition into an international jihadist resulted from his constant mingling in Khartoum with the leaders of Islamist and jihadist movements throughout the Muslim world. These included the representatives of Al-Jihad (Egypt), the Islamic Group (Egypt), Hamas (Palestine), the Abu Nidal (Palestine), Carlos the Jackal (Palestine), and Hezbollah (Lebanon). Several of these meetings and conversations convinced bin Laden that suicide bombing was the most effective technique of striking a superior enemy. Thirdly, a new round of study of Islamic history and the Quran emerged. In particular, bin Laden had discovered the teachings of Ahmad ibn Taymiyya, 'a fourteenth-century scholar who taught that Islam had always sought the establishment of state power so that Muslims could live under leaders ruling in full accordance with every teaching of the Prophet.'<sup>37</sup> Taymiyya's fatwas provided every Quranic support for 'a campaign of purifying violence against all enemies of true Islam' and proclaimed jihad a critical component of the Islamic faith. Bin Laden even read that the fatwas permitted the killing of innocent bystanders if that could facilitate the destruction of the infidels.<sup>38</sup>

For bin Laden, therefore, it was necessary to force the United States out of the Middle East so that Islam could truly regenerate itself and, to also bring together the disparate ragtag and bobtail of the international jihad that were struggling among themselves in Afghanistan. This was to be achieved through a campaign of terror against the United States. The blueprint had been developed in the Mujahideen's war against the Soviet Union that ended in 1991; and this must be applied to the sole remaining superpower. Thus, on 11 September 2001, bin Laden's al-Qaeda hijacked three airliners and flew them into the Pentagon and the two main towers of the World Trade Centre. The fourth plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania as its passengers tried to overpower the hijackers. Three thousand people lost their lives in the attacks; only about 10 percent of these were not Americans. The United States economy was greatly damaged as billions of dollars were lost. The attacks were to precipitate the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq to give



effect to the doctrine of ‘War on Terror’ enunciated by President George W. Bush.<sup>39</sup>

Al-Qaeda terrorist factions received massive aid from jihadists associated with the Taliban—the insurgent organization that provided safe haven to bin Laden and his men in Afghanistan from 1998 to 2001—before and during the terrorist operations against the United States. The result was that Western nations intensified their intelligence operations throughout the Middle East and in Southwest Asia with the hope of acquiring prior knowledge of future attacks. They shared a strong determination to cripple al-Qaeda and the Taliban and other terrorists by means of aggressive paramilitary operations. This move yielded good fruit and in May 2011, a United States Navy SEAL team with the support of intelligence from spy agencies, raided a private compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, and killed Osama bin Laden, a decade after he masterminded the attacks on the United States.<sup>40</sup>

The Afghan Mujahideen that fought against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan with strong support from the West via the CIA and which afterwards formed the Taliban, originally emerged from the *madrasas* of Afghanistan and Pakistan. These fighters were not demobilized or reintegrated after the Soviets’ withdrawal from Afghanistan even though it was known that they used the Soviet forces and civilians as guinea pigs for terrorist tactics. This no doubt sabotaged the 1988 Geneva Accord, which the Mujahideen neither participated in negotiating nor accepted its terms. These forces later refocused their energy against the United States from 11 September 2001 as al-Qaeda.<sup>41</sup> Despite the killing of al-Qaeda’s chief sponsor and strategist, the world was again shocked when shortly after, another terrorist organization, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), a deadly army of insurgents emerged in the Middle East and North Africa, specifically in Syria, Iraq and Libya. The group’s other names are Islamic State(IS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant(ISIL) or *Daesh* in Arabic. ISIS conducted several attacks not only in the Middle East and Libya, but also in Brussels, Nice, London, Berlin and Paris. In line with its anti-



Western agenda, its adherents engaged in mass killings in San Bernardino, California, and Orlando, Florida, thus forcing the United States to view ISIS as a major threat because of its ‘growing virulence and ability ... to spawn “lone wolf” attacks against the democracies.’<sup>42</sup>

The 2014 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) of 162 countries showed an increase of 61 percent in the number of deaths from terrorism since 2012.80 percent of these came from five countries – Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq and Nigeria. Over one third of the deaths occurred in Iraq. Thus, it is not surprising that the predominantly military response to the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States by al-Qaeda under the leadership by Osama bin Laden was focused on Afghanistan and Iraq. Based on recent estimates, the United States had committed between US\$4 trillion to US\$6trillion for the ‘war on terror’ in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001. Despite all these, Afghanistan/Pakistan and Iraq/Syria have remained the focal points of global terrorism.<sup>43</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

Three major episodes triggered the end of the Cold War. First was the crumbling in November 1989 of the Berlin Wall which had been erected in 1961 by the Soviet-backed government of East Germany, to stem the tide of East Germans fleeing from the political and economic problems of the state into West Germany. Second was the re-unification of the German Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic in October 1990, thereby bringing an end to the division between the two separate German states, which had been a central problem of the Cold War. The process of re-unification was precipitated by the collapse of the German Democratic Republic’s communist regime in 1989 that arose from the intense struggle for political and social change in the areas of democratization and liberalization throughout Eastern Europe. Third was the formal dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on 31 December 1991. The end of the Cold War ushered in a ‘New World Order’ with a fresh potential for international



cooperation. This was first exemplified in the Gulf War of 1991 that ejected Iraq out of Kuwait.

However, it is a truism that most of the civil conflicts since the Second World War, from Afghanistan to Vietnam, had been instigated by superpower rivalry via arms and aid support. Although the ideological explanations no longer apply, the conflicts have persisted. Some of the conflicts emerged from the demise of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, a part of Ukraine, and on 24 February 2022, invaded the country entirely. The Russian invasion of Ukraine may not be unconnected with the historical, economic and cultural affinity of the two countries. Moreover, the Ukrainian romance with NATO may have angered the Russian leader, Vladimir Putin as it portends a threat to the international power politics between the NATO countries and Russia. If brought under its fold, Ukraine will become a buffer state of Russia against the West. As the war rages, the global supply of gas and wheat has become negatively affected: since the early twentieth century, Ukraine has been regarded as the breadbasket of Europe.

In other regions of the world, conflicts have continued to increase, both in intensity and number, and war has become more normal than peace. The civil war in Angola which began in 1975 became a recurring decimal until 2002. Myanmar had been at war with itself since 1948, recording pockets of conflict up to 25 August 2017 and, therefore, would appear to be the world's longest civil war. Civil conflicts in Cambodia, El Salvador and Mozambique initially showed signs of being intractable until eventually resolved. These conflagrations were caused by the lack of clear political programmes, proliferation of belligerent factions, disintegration of lines of command, and unwarranted attacks on civilians.<sup>44</sup>

Although the Cold War ended in favour of the United States, its legacy has continued to influence world affairs, as the world is currently widely considered unipolar with the United States being the sole



remaining superpower. Meanwhile, the superpower rivalry of the Cold War era degenerated into an unpalatable consequence—the present day international jihadist terrorism that is currently ravaging the world whether as al-Qaeda or ISIS or their splinter groups, as well as several other jihadist movements. These include Boko Haram (of Nigeria), AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) based in Mauritania; MUJAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa), and SBB (Signed-in-Blood-Battalion) based in Mali. It was AQIM that gave birth to MUJAO and SBB; and in August 2013 a member of the SBB named Bel Moukhtar, joined forces with MUJAO to form the Al Murabitoum.<sup>45</sup> In Nigeria, the high point of terrorist activities was in 2014 when Boko Haram kidnapped three hundred school girls from the North-eastern part of the country. It is regrettable that the United States, despite warning signals, did not realise the dynamics that its own policies were playing during the crucial years of the struggle against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. It is, therefore, necessary to engage in thorough analyses of intelligence, understanding and appreciation of the nature of multi-level complexities of transnational conflicts before venturing into them. It must not be forgotten that while the end of the Cold War ushered in an era of economic growth and saw an increase in the number of liberal democracies in Eastern Europe, in other parts of the world, such as Afghanistan, independence became accompanied by state failure. No doubt, Afghanistan was a hotbed of superpower rivalry as the Cold War lasted, leading to a spiral of jihadist terrorism around the globe which, in turn, bloated the security architecture and consciousness of some world nations.

A more serious threat from the Cold War era has been the unabated military development and spending especially in the area of deployment of nuclear-armed ballistic missiles and defensive systems. In the absence of a formal treaty ending the Cold War, the United States and the republics from the defunct Soviet Union have continued, in varying degrees, to maintain, improve or modify their existing nuclear weapons and delivery systems; and other nations not acknowledged as nuclear-



weapons states have also developed and tested nuclear-explosive devices. The nuclear age thus faces the possibility of nuclear and radiological terrorism by both national and sub-national organizations, as well as individuals.<sup>46</sup> Global efforts should be intensified toward averting these threats to human survival. Technical surveillance methods, public protection, shutting down of sources of financial supply, strengthening of front-line allies, as well as direct military action could be deployed in countering security threats from fanatical ideologies.

However, military counterterrorism actions are usually associated with violation of human rights. There is need to address the underlying factors that enable terrorists to recruit and retain members. Fanatical ideologies or violent extremists should be engaged in dialogues to find common ways of forging peaceful relations in society. Community engagements in preventive actions are necessary because the communities constitute the sources of recruitment and the source for prevention. Most terrorist groups define themselves in terms of religion and willing to be recruited and die for the Islamic goal. Because religion drives recruitment, local religious leaders should be used to raise awareness and offer positive alternatives to the distorted interpretation of Islam by fanatical ideologues.<sup>47</sup>

### End notes

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