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Soviet-Afghan war

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Why is in news? 34 years ago, the Soviet Union left Afghanistan: Why did it withdraw, and what was the impact?

On **February 15, 1989**, the Soviet Union (USSR) withdrew the last of its troops from Afghanistan, ending its nine-year occupation of the country.

The conflict is estimated to have led to the deaths of around a million civilians, Mujahideen fighters, and Soviet and Afghan soldiers, and left Afghanistan in ruins.

The war had far-reaching and long-term consequences, including the disintegration of the USSR, the Afghan civil war, the rise of radical Islamism, and the formation of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Thirty-four years after the end of the conflict, the world continues to witness its after-effects.

Why did the Soviet Union invade Afghanistan?

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 in an attempt to **support a friendly communist government** (Saur Revolution) that had seized power in Kabul earlier that year.

The Soviet Union saw the situation in Afghanistan as an **opportunity to extend its influence in the region** and to protect its southern borders from Islamic fundamentalism.

The Soviet Union was **concerned about the possibility of the United States gaining a foothold in Afghanistan** and potentially using it as a base for attacks against the Soviet Union.

What led to its withdrawal?

The Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan **faced fierce opposition from Afghan rebel groups**, who were **supported by the US** and trained by Pakistan hoping that the jihadis would wage war on India and liberate Kashmir.

The **conflict turned into a protracted and costly war** that lasted almost a decade, with the Soviet Union suffering significant casualties and eventually withdrawing its troops in 1989.

After the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the Afghan government, which had been propped up by the Soviet Union, soon collapsed, and the country plunged into a civil war.

What happened after the Soviets left Afghanistan?

Various factions vied for power, and the **Taliban emerged as a dominant force**.

The Taliban, a hardline Islamist group, took control of the country in 1996 and imposed a strict interpretation of Islamic law.

This rule was marked by brutality and oppression, including the widespread use of public executions, amputations, and other forms of punishment.

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Safe havens for terror: The group provided a safe haven for Al Qaeda, which was responsible for the 9/11 attacks in the US.

Why did the US leave Afghanistan?

In **August 2021**, the **US completed its withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan**, marking the end of a 20-year-long military presence in the country. It decided to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan for several reasons-

Massive cost: The conflict had lasted for two decades, and the United States had spent over \$2 trillion on the war effort.

Huge casualties: The number of lives lost by the United States in the war in Afghanistan is a matter of debate, but it is estimated that more than 2,400 US military personnel were killed in the conflict.

Mission accomplished: The US had achieved many of its initial objectives in Afghanistan, such as dismantling Al Qaeda's infrastructure and removing the Taliban from power.

Foreign policy shift: The withdrawal of US forces was part of a broader shift in US foreign policy towards a focus on great power competition, particularly with China and Russia.

America first policy: The US had also sought to end what it saw as "endless wars" in the Middle East and refocus its attention on domestic priorities.

Taliban rule:

Since taking control of Afghanistan in **August 2021**, the Taliban has taken a number of steps to consolidate its power and impose its ideology on the Afghan people.

The Taliban is an Islamist extremist group that seeks to **impose its strict interpretation of Islamic law** on the country.

The Taliban has been accused of committing **widespread human rights abuses**, including extrajudicial killings, summary executions, and forced disappearances.

The group has also **targeted women and girls**, imposing strict dress codes and limiting their access to education and employment.

The Taliban has **cracked down on freedom of expression and the press**, shutting down independent media outlets and arresting journalists and activists who oppose their rule.

The Taliban's takeover has caused an **economic and humanitarian crisis** in Afghanistan, with many people struggling to access basic necessities like food and medical care.

Many countries have suspended aid and diplomatic relations with Afghanistan, and the UN has expressed concern about the group's human rights record.

How is India helping the Afghan people cause?

India has been actively involved in providing humanitarian aid to the people of Afghanistan, especially in the wake of the Taliban's return to power. Some of the ways in which India is helping the Afghan people are:

Providing food and medical aid: India has sent several consignments of food and medical aid to Afghanistan, including wheat, medicines, and other essential supplies. The aid is being delivered through various channels, including the Afghan Red Crescent Society and the UN.

Supporting refugees: India has a long history of providing support to Afghan refugees, and the government has pledged to continue this tradition in the wake of the Taliban's return to power. India has said it will grant visas to Afghan nationals who are seeking refuge, and the government has also set up a new portal to streamline the visa application process.

Diplomatic efforts: India has been working to build international support for the Afghan people, and the government has been in touch with various countries and international organizations to coordinate relief efforts. India has also called for an inclusive political settlement in Afghanistan that respects the rights of all Afghan citizens, including women and minorities.

India's contribution in reconstruction efforts:

India has committed over 3 billion US\$ for development efforts in Afghanistan.

It has financed and built significant projects such as: **Delaram Zaranj Highway, Parliament Building, India Afghanistan Friendship Dam/Selma Dam, Hari River, Heart Province and Transmission lines to Kabul.**

While it has avoided its own military presence, India views foreign military presence in Afghanistan as indispensable in promoting political stability and development in the country. The USA has also urged India to get involved more.

India believes in invest and endure strategy for Afghanistan.

India-Afghan Relations after Taliban Takeover:

India follows 'zero-tolerance policy' towards terrorism.

India propagate an Afghan-led, Afghan-controlled and Afghan-owned Inclusive Peace Process.

India seeks a bigger role of United Nations in the Afghan peace process.

India criticizes the role of Pakistan in promoting terror groups and for installing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

What is the importance of Afghanistan to India?

Regional Balance of Power: Afghanistan is tied to India's vision of being a regional leader and a great power, coupled with its competition with China over resources and its need to counter Pakistani influence.

Strategic Location: Afghanistan's location at the crossroads of South and Central Asia makes it a critical hub for India's regional and international interests.

Security Concerns: Afghanistan has been a major source of instability and terrorism in the region, and India has a vested interest in ensuring peace and stability in the country.

Energy and Resources: Afghanistan has abundant natural resources such as oil, natural gas, and minerals, and India sees potential for mutually beneficial cooperation in these sectors.

Cultural Ties: India and Afghanistan share a rich cultural heritage, and India sees the promotion of cultural and people-to-people ties as an important aspect of its relationship with Afghanistan.

Regional Cooperation: India sees its relationship with Afghanistan as an important part of its regional cooperation in South Asia, and is committed to supporting Afghanistan's efforts towards peace, stability, and development.

Connectivity: The most important role of Afghanistan is always considered as India's gateway to Central Asia.

Way forward:

Strengthening regional cooperation: Enhancing cooperation and coordination among regional players is crucial for stability and progress in Afghanistan.

Supporting Afghan-led Peace Process: India should support an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process to achieve lasting peace and stability in the region.

Enhancing Economic Engagement: India should focus on enhancing economic cooperation, trade, and investment with Afghanistan to promote sustainable development.

Providing Humanitarian Assistance: India should continue to provide humanitarian assistance to address the urgent needs of the Afghan people, especially in areas such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure development.

Strengthening Security Cooperation: Collaborating with Afghan security forces and other regional partners to address security threats and counterterrorism is essential for ensuring stability in the region.

Conclusion:

India's Afghan policy must be based on a clear-cut understanding of India's strategic goals in the region, and the regional and global strategic environment. Though it is a bit late, yet India has taken the right decision by engaging the amenable section of the Afghan Taliban.