

Book Review
By
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Panagiotis Dimitrakis, *The Secret War in Afghanistan: The Soviet Union, China and Anglo-American Intelligence in the Afghan War* (I.B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013), 288

The book titled “**The Secret War in Afghanistan: The Soviet Union, China and Anglo-American Intelligence in the Afghan War**” written by Panagiotis Dimitrakis has made a detailed study of recently declassified intelligence archives in order to assess Anglo-American and Soviet Union secret intelligence operations and diplomacy relating to the invasion of Afghanistan and the decade long war that followed. The book’s main theme is about how lack of credible information on intentions, and incorrect and sometimes flawed intelligence analysis shaped the trajectory of the Afghan conflict from 1979-1988. Within this theme, Dr. Dimitrakis tracks the Afghan conflict and unveils Cold War realities that were masked behind the public rhetoric at that time.

Much has been written on the Afghan conflict of the 1980s but this book differs on two accounts. First is about new insights about Chinese role and policy in Afghanistan during the conflict based on declassified documents on Chinese intentions. Second is about the extent of detailed assessment and evaluation of contemporary intelligence reports cross referenced with the opponents’ reports and views. Moreover the book is also about how critical intelligence gaps and personal biases within the policy making community can shape the evolution of a conflict in general and covert operations in particular.

The first two chapters provide readers with a detailed account of the political events that led to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. These chapters are followed by a strong and informative chapter entitled "International Reactions." This chapter digs into what clearly appears to be author’s strength, analyzing strategic intelligence.

Early in the book readers are reminded of the important role Iran played by binding the United States hands through the hostage crisis; however, and despite the concern regarding USSR's invasion of Afghanistan, there was a greater concern about the Soviet's possible intention of invading Yugoslavia or even Pakistan to obtain access to the warm waters of Indian Ocean.

Chapter three and chapter four are about determining the Soviet's intent on the part of the US and UK. Usefully, chapter four also covers political conflicts within the Kremlin regarding its role in Afghanistan and how to end the conflict there.

With Reagan's presidency beginning in January 1981, the Kremlin was in a difficult position. This is made clear by Reagan signing National Security Decision Directive 32. As Dr. Dimitrakis writes, "it considerably broadened the scope for covert action, as well as for pressing ahead with the arms race—the Soviet would be unable to cope with greater investment in arms, and their economy would collapse." It is also pertinent to mention here what Dr. Dimitrakis describes as CIA's distaste and apprehension regarding the policy of Carter administration to support Afghan rebellion, due to concerns of empowering extremist elements as a consequence.

At this point, the remaining chapters five, six, and seven are gripping and break some new ground. This is particularly the case with Dr.Dimitrakis' research on Chinese efforts to support the Mujahadeen. The Chinese did this by encouraging Uyghur Muslims to deploy to Afghanistan through the Wakhan corridor, the narrow stretch of land that provides a border between the two countries. Also interesting is the examination by the author of the Sino-Soviet political relationship during the period. This subject alone is incredibly complex as China had ended a war with Vietnam in 1979, which the Soviets had continued to support.

In geo-political terms, the Chinese strategic aim was counterbalancing both the US and Soviet Union. This, in part, explained its attempts to ally itself with Pakistan. Similarly, supporting the Mujahadeen was a way to undermine the Soviet Union. Dr. Dimitrakis covers these subjects based on information from primary sources that both specialists and general readers may find useful.

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The book, altogether, makes a worthwhile reading, especially for Cold War scholars and students of Afghan history. The Secret War in Afghanistan is not overly scholarly but includes a nice balance of primary research material with excellent secondary sources.

The Secret War in Afghanistan is a positive contribution and a forward step in our attempt to understand the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and what could be a possible outcome or a blue print to end the longest conflict in modern history.

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