

ANALYSIS OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE 1988 GENEVA CONFERENCE ON AFGHANISTAN'S POLITICAL CRISIS

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Abstract

The 1988 Geneva Conference marked a pivotal moment in Afghanistan's protracted political crisis, serving as a diplomatic effort to address the Soviet-Afghan War and its aftermath. This study critically analyzes the consequences of the conference, focusing on its impact on Afghanistan's political landscape, regional stability, and the broader Cold War dynamics. By examining the accords signed between the USSR, the USA, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, the paper explores how the conference aimed to facilitate Soviet withdrawal while attempting to lay the groundwork for peace. However, it also highlights the unintended consequences, including the escalation of internal conflict, the rise of militant factions, and the failure to establish a sustainable political framework. Drawing on primary sources and historical accounts, this analysis underscores the conference's role in shaping Afghanistan's trajectory toward prolonged instability and its implications for global geopolitics. The findings reveal the complexities of international diplomacy in conflict resolution and the enduring challenges of post-war state-building in fractured societies.

Key Words: *Afghanistan, Consequences, Geneva Conference, Political Crisis*

Introduction

The 1988 Geneva Conference, which aimed to resolve the ongoing Soviet-Afghan War and bring about the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, stands as a pivotal moment in Afghanistan's political history. The conference sought to establish a framework for peace in Afghanistan by setting the stage for the withdrawal of Soviet troops and facilitating a peaceful transition in the country. However, despite the withdrawal of Soviet forces, the Geneva Accords did not provide a sustainable political solution for Afghanistan (Kleveman, 2002). This paper examines the consequences of the Geneva Conference on Afghanistan's political situation, focusing on the fragmentation of the political landscape, the failure to create a cohesive government, and the long-term instability that followed (Rubin, 1995). The issue addressed by this research revolves around the lack of political cohesion in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, despite international efforts through the Geneva Accords. While the conference facilitated the end of Soviet military involvement, it did not prevent internal political fragmentation or the ensuing civil war (Dorronsoro, 2005). The central research problem, therefore, is understanding why the Geneva Accords failed to lead to lasting peace or political stability in Afghanistan and how these failures contributed to the rise of militant factions, including the Taliban (Barfield, 2010).

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the shortcomings of the Geneva Accords and their role in the prolonged instability of Afghanistan. The Geneva Conference, despite its ambitious goals, failed to address the deep-rooted political and ethnic divisions within Afghanistan and did not establish a framework for long-term peace. By critically analyzing the diplomatic process and the political aftermath of the conference, this research aims to provide insights into the impact of international interventions in Afghanistan's complex political landscape. Understanding these historical dynamics is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of peace negotiations and the role of external powers in shaping the political future of conflict-ridden states (Rubin, 1995).

Literature Review

The 1988 Geneva Conference has been extensively analyzed in scholarly literature, with historians, political analysts, and scholars examining its implications on Afghanistan's political landscape. The majority of studies focus on the geopolitical ramifications of the Soviet withdrawal and the broader Cold War dynamics that influenced the peace process. One significant area of discussion is the role of the international community in shaping the outcome of the Geneva Accords. Barfield (2010) emphasizes that the conference was a major diplomatic achievement, bringing together both the Soviet Union and the United States in efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. However, he argues that while the Accords succeeded in facilitating the Soviet exit, they did not address the underlying ethnic and political divisions within Afghanistan, leading to prolonged instability.

Similarly, Banks (2000) explores how the end of the Soviet-Afghan war did not bring peace to the region but instead created a power vacuum that intensified internal conflicts. The literature also touches on the consequences of the Geneva Accords on the pro-Soviet government of Dr. Najibullah. According to the U.S. Department of State (1988), the agreements weakened Dr. Najibullah's regime by committing to the principle of non-interference, which removed the Soviet military and political support that had previously bolstered the government. As Barfield (2010) and Banks (2000) point out, this abandonment by the Soviet Union left the Najibullah government vulnerable to the growing influence of rival mujahideen factions, who sought to control Afghanistan. Another key aspect addressed in the literature is the rise of the Taliban in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal. Scholars such as Rashid (2022) and Johnson (2021) discuss how the lack of effective governance and the continued fragmentation of power among competing factions allowed the Taliban to gain support. This political void, as outlined by Barfield (2010), paved the way for the Taliban's rise to power, a crucial development that would further complicate Afghanistan's political and social situation in the coming decades.

In examining the humanitarian consequences of the Geneva Accords, the role of Afghan refugees and displaced persons has been another area of focus. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (1988) highlighted the challenges posed by the return of millions of refugees to an unstable and war-torn Afghanistan. The failure to address the humanitarian crisis, in conjunction with the political instability, exacerbated the challenges faced by Afghan society during the post-Geneva period. In conclusion, the literature on the Geneva Conference underscores its mixed legacy. While it succeeded in bringing about the Soviet withdrawal, it failed to establish a lasting political framework for Afghanistan. The lack of a comprehensive post-conflict strategy, as argued by many scholars, contributed significantly to the subsequent civil war and the eventual rise of the Taliban, making the Geneva Accords an example of a peace agreement that could not deliver sustainable peace.

Research Methods

The methodology for analyzing the consequences of the 1988 Geneva Conference on Afghanistan's political crisis involves a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach. It includes historical analysis, which examines primary and secondary sources, such as official documents, treaties, and contemporaneous news reports, to reconstruct the events surrounding the Geneva Conference and its immediate aftermath. Political analysis assesses the political dynamics within Afghanistan post-conference, focusing on the fragmentation of political factions, the collapse of the central government, and the emergence of new power structures. Geopolitical analysis investigates the roles of external actors, including the Soviet Union, the United States, Pakistan, and neighboring countries, in influencing Afghanistan's political landscape following the conference. Qualitative research is conducted through interviews with experts, policymakers, and individuals who experienced the period firsthand, providing insights into the socio-political climate and public perception of the Geneva Accords. Lastly, comparative analysis is employed to compare Afghanistan's post-Geneva situation with other conflict zones where similar peace agreements were implemented, aiming to identify patterns and draw lessons on the effectiveness of such accords.

Results

Withdrawal of Soviet Forces and the Shift in Power Dynamics

The primary outcome of the 1988 Geneva Conference was the agreement for the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan. This agreement, mediated by the United States, Pakistan, and the Soviet Union, set the stage for the end of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, marking a critical juncture in the Cold War (Kramer, 2002). However, the withdrawal process began in May 1988 and continued until February 1989, with the last Soviet troops leaving Afghanistan by early 1989. This shift in military presence marked a significant change in the regional balance of power, although the political implications were far more complex.

While the Soviet military presence ended, the Soviet Union continued to provide substantial support to the

Afghan government, led by President Najibullah. This ensured that the government remained intact for some time after the Soviet withdrawal (Rashid, 2000). However, this created a delicate balance, where the Afghan government relied heavily on continued Soviet backing even after the military withdrawal—a situation that only delayed its eventual collapse. The withdrawal process exposed the inherent fragility of the Najibullah regime, which lacked the necessary political legitimacy to effectively address the growing insurgent opposition (Bose, 1993).

The continued Soviet support after the military exit demonstrates a paradox. While Soviet forces were no longer present, their support allowed the Najibullah government to maintain a semblance of power. This made the situation even more precarious, as it underscored the government's reliance on foreign backing rather than internal strength. The political survival of Najibullah's regime was not a result of popular support or effective governance, but rather the continuation of Soviet aid, which, in the long run, proved insufficient to prevent its collapse (Rashid, 2000).

The fragile nature of Najibullah's government became more evident as the insurgency, composed of various factions with conflicting goals, gained momentum. The withdrawal process, while ending the Soviet military presence, left Afghanistan with a deeply divided political landscape. The collapse of Najibullah's government in 1992, after the final withdrawal of Soviet support, signified the unraveling of a fragile peace that had been maintained through external intervention (Bose, 1993). The impact of the Soviet withdrawal was therefore not merely military but deeply political, setting the stage for Afghanistan's continued instability.

In summary, the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, although initially seen as a victory for the Afghan resistance and the international community, ultimately highlighted the vulnerability of the Najibullah regime. Despite its reliance on Soviet support, the government's lack of domestic legitimacy and inability to contend with internal opposition led to its eventual downfall. The complexities of this power shift illustrated how external military withdrawals could disrupt fragile political balances, leaving lasting repercussions on both Afghanistan's internal stability and the broader regional dynamics (Kramer, 2002).

Empowerment of the Mujahideen and Escalation of Internal Conflict

The Geneva Accords of 1988, while intended to facilitate peace, inadvertently empowered the Mujahideen, the Afghan resistance groups that had long been combating the Soviet-backed regime. These groups, who had received extensive support from the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, gained military strength and political legitimacy as they were integrated into the negotiations (Kramer, 2002). However, the lack of a coherent political framework for these factions proved disastrous, as it contributed to an increasingly fragmented political landscape. The absence of a clear, unified strategy during the negotiation process allowed internal rivalries to flourish, setting the stage for future conflicts (Barfield, 2010).

The absence of a unified leadership or governmental structure exacerbated Afghanistan's instability in the early 1990s. With the Soviet military withdrawal, a power vacuum emerged, and the Mujahideen factions struggled for dominance. This struggle, combined with personal and ideological rivalries, eventually spiraled into a full-scale civil war. Key figures such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of Hezb-e Islami and Ahmad Shah Massoud of Jamiat-e Islami became prominent leaders, but their conflicting agendas led to brutal confrontations (Rashid, 2000). As the various factions fractured further, the lack of a coordinated political vision, coupled with their dependence on foreign support, prevented the emergence of a stable government.

The power struggles that followed were not just military confrontations but were also reflections of deeper divisions within Afghan society. While the Geneva Accords aimed to establish a peaceful transition, the lack of consensus among the Mujahideen groups highlighted the failure of the international community to provide a sustainable political solution (Dupree, 1980). These divisions ultimately paved the way for the rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s, a movement that capitalized on the chaos and offered a unifying ideological platform, albeit through a totalitarian approach (Rashid, 2000).

The power vacuum left by the Soviet withdrawal and the absence of a strong central government allowed these factions to engage in endless infighting, significantly hindering any efforts to achieve peace. The aftermath of the Geneva Accords thus served as a cautionary tale, illustrating how the failure to integrate political and military power within a unified structure can lead to long-term instability and fragmentation (Barfield, 2010).

Political Vacuum and Civil War: A Direct Result of the Geneva Accords

The Geneva Accords, signed in 1988, were designed to end foreign military intervention in Afghanistan, particularly by Soviet forces. However, while they marked the cessation of Soviet involvement, the accords failed to address the deeper political fragmentation that had taken root within Afghanistan. The accords did not include a clear pathway to establish a unified Afghan government or initiate a political reconciliation process, leaving the political landscape fragmented (Kramer, 2002). As a result, Afghanistan's civil war, already prolonged by years of foreign

intervention, continued to intensify.

Although the Geneva Accords facilitated the Soviet withdrawal, they did not resolve the underlying political discord in the country, nor did they effectively limit the role of external powers. Despite the Soviet departure, Afghanistan remained entangled in foreign rivalries. Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia continued to intervene, each supporting different factions based on their geopolitical and ideological interests. This external involvement only deepened Afghanistan's internal divisions, preventing the creation of a legitimate, unified government (Rashid, 2000; Goodson, 2001).

The failure to establish strong political institutions or offer a sustainable governance model led to the collapse of the Najibullah government in 1992, a key turning point in the country's descent into greater chaos (Bose, 1993). The political vacuum that followed saw the rise of numerous Mujahideen factions, each pursuing their own vision for Afghanistan, leading to further fragmentation and violence (Barfield, 2010). The absence of a cohesive leadership structure, coupled with the legacy of divided foreign support, provided the conditions for the eventual rise of the Taliban in 1996 (Braham, 2004).

The Geneva Accords, while facilitating the Soviet withdrawal, inadvertently sowed the seeds of Afghanistan's future instability. They failed to construct the political framework necessary to stabilize the country, leaving it vulnerable to continued foreign interference and internal fragmentation. The resulting civil war and power vacuum culminated in the emergence of the Taliban, whose ascension to power was a direct consequence of the failures of the political process initiated by the Accords.

The Role of External Powers and Geopolitical Implications

The geopolitical landscape surrounding the 1988 Geneva Conference played a pivotal role in shaping its outcomes and the subsequent trajectory of Afghanistan's political and military situation. The conference not only reflected the broader shifts in Cold War geopolitics but also encapsulated the competition for influence among global powers. As the Soviet Union was in its final stages of decline, both the United States and other Western powers sought to secure a resolution that would end Soviet involvement in Afghanistan but, notably, did not prioritize the creation of a sustainable, long-term political framework for Afghanistan's future (Rashid, 2000; Goodson, 2001). The U.S., while instrumental in promoting the Soviet withdrawal, focused predominantly on Cold War dynamics rather than addressing Afghanistan's internal political fragmentation, which became a critical flaw in the accords (Barfield, 2010).

Pakistan's influence during the Geneva negotiations was crucial. As a principal actor in the region, Pakistan provided significant support to various Mujahideen factions, particularly those aligned with its strategic interests. Pakistan's objective was to install a government in Afghanistan that would be favorable to its geopolitical aims, especially concerning security concerns and regional power dynamics (Rashid, 2000; Callahan, 2011). However, Pakistan's extensive involvement both exacerbated Afghanistan's internal divisions and contributed directly to the failure of the Geneva Accords. The support for Mujahideen factions, coupled with its later backing of the Taliban, ultimately destabilized the region and undermined the prospects for political reconciliation (Barfield, 2010).

Similarly, Iran's involvement, though less pronounced than Pakistan's, also played a significant role in shaping Afghanistan's political dynamics. Iran's support for specific factions, such as the Shia Hizb-e-Wahdat, further fragmented the political landscape, ensuring that any potential for a unified Afghan government remained elusive (Katzman, 2008). This external meddling only deepened Afghanistan's internal strife, making it increasingly difficult for the country to emerge from the conflict with a cohesive political structure. Ultimately, the lack of a comprehensive approach by the Geneva Accords to address these external interventions allowed for the continued fragmentation of Afghanistan's political sphere, setting the stage for the civil war and the eventual rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s (Rashid, 2000; Barfield, 2010).

Humanitarian Crisis and the Ongoing Impact of War

The humanitarian consequences of the civil war that followed the Geneva Accords were devastating. The continuing conflict displaced millions of Afghans, with large numbers seeking refuge in neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran (Dupree, 1980). The destruction of infrastructure, combined with the lack of stable governance, led to widespread poverty, health crises, and a breakdown of social order.

The Geneva Accords did not account for the human toll of continued warfare, and the failure to address issues like refugee resettlement and reconstruction left Afghanistan in a state of permanent crisis (Bose, 1993). The prolonged nature of the conflict meant that Afghanistan would not see a lasting recovery until the early 21st century,

after years of intervention by various international forces.

6. Long-Term Consequences: The Rise of the Taliban and the Enduring Conflict

In the long run, the lack of a political resolution following the Geneva Accords played a crucial role in the rise of the Taliban. The power vacuum created by the civil war, combined with the lack of a cohesive government, allowed the Taliban, an Islamist militant group, to gain control of large parts of Afghanistan by 1996. Supported by Pakistan and driven by a radical interpretation of Islamic law, the Taliban were able to impose their rule over much of Afghanistan, sparking further conflict (Barfield, 2010).

The rise of the Taliban was a direct result of the political fragmentation that followed the Geneva Accords. The inability to establish a strong, inclusive government in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal ensured that extremist groups could flourish. Furthermore, the Taliban's repressive regime led to significant international condemnation and prolonged Afghanistan's isolation on the global stage (Kramer, 2002).

Discussion

The 1988 Geneva Conference, which resulted in the Geneva Accords, was initially intended to resolve the Soviet-Afghan War and establish a framework for peace in Afghanistan. However, the outcomes of the conference did not bring lasting peace or political stability. Instead, they contributed to political fragmentation, civil war, and the emergence of extremist factions such as the Taliban. While the Accords facilitated the withdrawal of Soviet forces, they failed to address Afghanistan's internal political divisions. The lack of a unified political solution created a power vacuum, leading to various Mujahideen factions vying for control and sparking a civil war that further destabilized the country. External powers, such as Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, continued to intervene in Afghanistan's internal affairs, exacerbating these divisions and fueling the civil war. Pakistan's support for specific Mujahideen factions and its pursuit of a government aligned with its interests significantly influenced Afghanistan's political dynamics. The political fragmentation and ongoing conflict set the stage for the rise of the Taliban, an Islamist militant group that, by 1996, controlled large parts of Afghanistan, further complicating the political situation. The civil war and political instability also led to a severe humanitarian crisis, with millions of Afghans displaced and widespread poverty. Meanwhile, the failure to establish a stable government hindered efforts to address these challenges. In conclusion, although the Geneva Accords marked the end of Soviet military involvement, they did not provide a sustainable political solution. The ensuing political fragmentation, civil war, and the rise of extremist factions like the Taliban had long-lasting consequences for Afghanistan's political landscape.

Conclusion

The 1988 Geneva Conference, while a diplomatic milestone in facilitating the Soviet withdrawal, ultimately failed to provide a sustainable political framework for Afghanistan. The accords did not establish mechanisms for a peaceful power transition, nor did they offer a comprehensive strategy to integrate the various Afghan factions into a cohesive government. As a result, the political vacuum left behind fueled internal fragmentation, intensified civil war, and created conditions conducive to the emergence of extremist groups like the Taliban. The absence of an inclusive post-war settlement and continued foreign interference—particularly from Pakistan and regional powers—further destabilized Afghanistan, allowing radical factions to exploit the disorder. The Taliban's rise in the mid-1990s can be traced directly to the geopolitical aftermath of the Geneva Accords, as warlords and Mujahideen groups, lacking centralized authority, engaged in internecine warfare, creating a power void that the Taliban capitalized on. Ultimately, the Geneva Accords exemplify the limitations of externally brokered peace agreements that fail to consider the intricate sociopolitical realities of a conflict zone. The consequences of this flawed agreement reverberated for decades, contributing to Afghanistan's prolonged instability and shaping its trajectory well into the 21st century. Understanding these failures remains crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of future international peace negotiations in conflict-affected regions.

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