Chapter VI

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Non-alignment constitutes the main plank of Afghanistan’s foreign policy. It has been one of the founding members and ardent practitioners of the principles of Non-Aligned Movement. Even prior to the emergence of the term “non-alignment” in early 1950s, Afghanistan vigorously pursued these principles which were known as the policy of positive neutrality. Its commitment to the principles of non-alignment has been subject to historical, geographical, ethical, cultural and political factors which are better put forth as domestic and external factors.

Domestic and external factors greatly influence the foreign policy of a country. At the domestic level, the geographic conditions, economy, cultural aspects, and political system are potent forces that mould the foreign policy of a country towards its neighbours. Similarly, the attitudes and policies of other countries towards a particular country also affect the latter’s response towards them. Thus, there is a close relationship between the domestic and external factors that contribute towards the evolution of foreign policy of a country.
Afghanistan's vigorous pursuit of the policy of positive neutrality and later of non-alignment has not been the result of a sudden development. It carries a long history of over two centuries coupled with Afghanistan's geo-strategic location, its culture and civilization which have been instrumental in shaping the foreign policy of that country.

Afghanistan has historically been a free and independent country. It has never been subject to any foreign rule even for a short spell. This national independence has been instrumental in envisaging the growth of a free outlook both on domestic and external problems. The Afghan rulers pursued an independent foreign policy keeping in view the interests of Afghanistan.

Approximate to this factor has been the culture and civilization of Afghanistan which flourished uninterruptedly. There was no alien interference with the Afghan culture which continued its onward march without being influenced by outside forces. This sense of independence instilled a free thinking. Thus, the nation as a whole had developed in the due course of time an independent outlook which has been reflected in its foreign policy.

Another cultural trait is that Afghan race or the people of Afghanistan are very brave, bold and frank. This
racial trait is a national character which has perhaps been instrumental in warding off the foreign invaders away from Afghan borders for centuries. It had been the carnal desire of the Afghan people to be free and independent. This love for freedom and independence has found manifestation in Afghanistan's yearning for an independent foreign policy.

The blend of all these factors has been manifest in the traditional pursuit of independent foreign policy by Afghanistan. Geo-strategic location of Afghanistan has made it share borders with Soviet Union, India, Pakistan, China and Iran. It has for long been a venue of big power rivalry between Tsarist Russia and British India prior to the Second World War and between Soviet Union and United States in the post-War period.

Founding of Afghanistan as a modern state was at such a juncture when British power was rapidly expanding in India. Tsarist Russia was also expanding its borders in Central Asia and in Europe during that period. Afghanistan was geographically and historically sandwiched between British India and Tsarist Russia. Being an independent kingdom, both great powers were vying with each other to bring Afghanistan under their respective spheres of influence.
The Anglo-Russian rivalry over Afghanistan continued unabated. Both Russia and British India strained every nerve to bring the landlocked kingdom under domination but their sinister designs failed to evoke favourable response. Afghan rulers were aware of the fact that aligning with one great power would incur the wrath of the other. The ruling elite in Kabul was equally alive to the historical and geo-strategic compulsions of Afghanistan. This wise trend was discernible from the cold Afghan response to the advances of both Tsarist Russia and British India.

Such a state of affairs persisted uninterruptedly till the beginning of the twentieth century. Britain and Russia both were dominant global powers during that period. However, the Ottoman Empire's rise was a challenge to their supremacy. Both Russia and Britain were perturbed over the Ottoman Empire's overtures to other countries which threatened the Anglo-Russian supremacy. It was through Versailles Treaty of 1907 that Russia and Britain reached an understanding to minimise their efforts in confronting each other. Its immediate impact was that Afghanistan was acknowledged as an independent country by both Russia and British India. Both great powers also agreed not to exacerbate tension between themselves over Afghanistan. It was a big triumph for Afghanistan's traditional policy of independence and neutrality.
The subsequent developments were more conducive for Kabul. After the First World War, the Tsarist rule was overthrown in Russia in the wake of the October Revolution led by Marxist-Leninist forces in 1917. The post-Revolutionary Russia declared its policy of maintaining cordial and friendly relations with the neighbouring countries. Lenin made special reference to Afghanistan. In 1919, Amanullah became the ruler of Afghanistan. He gave a new direction to the Afghan foreign policy making it more independent without aligning it with either Soviet Union or British India.

During King Amanullah’s regime of ten years from 1919-1929, Afghanistan improved its relations with neighbouring countries. In 1921, a treaty of friendship was signed between Kabul and Moscow which *inter alia* recognized Afghanistan’s policy of independence and neutrality. Amanullah strove for making Afghanistan free from British influence. The Third Anglo-Afghan war fought in 1919 resulted in the conclusion of a treaty between British India and Afghanistan by which the former recognized latter’s independence. Thus during Amanullah’s reign, Afghanistan was able to free itself from the imperial tentacles of Anglo-Russian rivalry.
Afghanistan expanded its relations with other countries, especially with the West during this period. Afghan diplomats visited various world capitals taking the personal message of King Amanullah for forging closer ties with these countries. Special emphasis was laid on cultivating friendly ties with the United States in 1921 and the visiting Afghan mission to Washington expressed the hope that American businessmen would invest in their country for facilitating social and economic development. But there was no immediate US response to Afghanistan's request.

After signing of the Afghan-Soviet treaty of friendship in 1921, the political and economic relations between Afghanistan and Soviet Union increased. After a decade, both the countries signed another treaty of Friendship, Neutrality and Non-Aggression in 1931. The Soviet Union recognized Afghanistan's neutral status. This treaty secured Afghanistan from any eventuality of invasion from Soviet side. Kabul could address itself for envisaging socio-economic development within the country.

In 1933, Zahir Shah took over as the King of Afghanistan. There was no change in Afghanistan's policy of traditional neutrality and friendship. Rather it had become more independent in its foreign policy pronouncements.
British power in India was more embroiled in early 1930s with internal developments of India. The chances of any direct British threat to Afghanistan had become rare.

Then came the period of Second World War (1939-45) in which Soviet Union joined with Britain and the United States against the Axis Powers. Afghanistan maintained a strict neutral posture during the course of the Second World War. Prior to the outbreak of War, Kabul was anxious to have German investment in the country. But in the eventuality of Germany joining the Axis powers against the Allied powers, Afghanistan adopted a low profile towards Germany.

Afghanistan's strict neutrality during the Second World War won it good dividends as it continued maintaining friendly relations with neighbouring countries and Allied Powers. During 1941-42, Afghanistan again approached the United States for establishing diplomatic relations. Prior to this period, US Ambassador to Teheran was also accredited as Ambassador to Kabul. It was in July 1942 that both Washington and Kabul established direct diplomatic ties at Ambassador level.

Conclusion of the Second World War in 1945 was followed by the emergence of cold war between the Soviet Union and the United States — both war-time allies had turned main adversaries now. The resultant effect was that both
Moscow and Washington emerged as the main rivals to bring the rest of the world under their respective spheres of influence.

The United States floated military alliances like NATO, CENTO and SEATO which bound some of the newly independent countries of the Third World to the United States by mutual and multilateral treaties. Besides, the United States assumed the global role of containing communism of which Soviet Union and its allies of East Europe were main protagonists.

In the wake of the emergence of this cold war hotly chased by the super powers, Indian leaders espoused the idea of keeping away from the military alliances sponsored by the Super Powers. They had envisaged this idea of keeping away of the military alliances in September 1946 when India was still under British colonial yoke. India's attainment of independence in August 1947 was marked by the vigorous pursuit of the policy of keeping away from the military alliances. This policy during its initial stage was called the policy of positive neutrality or policy of equidistance from Super Powers. But these ambiguous terms did not denote the real content and meaning of this policy. Thus, the policy of keeping away from power blocs and pursuing independent foreign policy came to be known as the policy of non-alignment during the Cold War period.
Afghanistan which had in the past pursued vigorously the policy of non-alignment, became an active exponent and practitioner of this policy along with other non-aligned countries of Asia and Africa who had recently won their independence and were determined to preserve it.

As the cold war rivalries sharpened between the Super Powers so did the desire of non-aligned countries to strengthen the non-aligned movement. When India hosted the First Asian Relations Conference in March 1947, Afghanistan not only participated in this conference but extended its full co-operation to other countries. Kabul emphasized the need for strengthening the relations among non-aligned countries so that Super Powers did not get an opportunity to bring the newly independent countries under their respective spheres of influence.

The First Non-Aligned Summit was held in Belgrade in September 1961, which established the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as a force to reckon with in international affairs. The intervening period saw Afghanistan actively espouse the cause of the NAM and co-operate with other countries like India, Egypt and Yugoslavia, to make this movement a success. At the same time, Afghanistan maintained cordial and friendly relations with both the Super Powers.
However, following the British withdrawal from
the Indian sub-continent in August 1947 which resulted
in the partition of the sub-continent into India and
Pakistan, Afghanistan shared common border with Pakistan.
The issue of Durand Line which later took the form of
Pushtun issue became a major irritant between Pakistan and
Afghanistan. The latter claimed that the area on the
Pakistan side of the Durand Line and inhabited by the
Pushtun tribes belonged to Afghanistan. Pakistan refuted
the Afghan argument and declined to hand over the area.
From 1950s onwards, Pakistan not only joined the US-Sponsored
military alliances but received heavy economic and
military assistance from the United States.

Afghanistan felt a threat to its territorial
integrity from Pakistan which had now turned a US ally.
Authorities in Kabul approached the Soviet Union for arms
assistance to face an eventuality of any attack from
Pakistan. The Soviet economic and military assistance to
Kabul was in no way instrumental in changing latter's
pursuit of the policy of non-alignment. It was in
Afghanistan's national interest to safeguard its borders.

The Afghan leadership approached the United States
also for economic assistance. Washington attached signifi-
cance to Afghanistan in its global strategy of containing
Soviet Union because of Afghanistan's geo-strategic location. But the United States adopted a low profile in case of Afghanistan. Washington was convinced that ruling elite in Kabul was committed to the policy of non-alignment and it would not fall an easy prey to US baiting for joining anti-Soviet military alliances. Besides, USA had already enticed Pakistan and Iran, the immediate neighbours of Afghanistan, to its military alliances against the Soviet Union. But actually it was the Afghan reluctance that thwarted US strategy in dovetailing Afghanistan to its military alliances.

Afghanistan's diplomacy at the Non-Aligned Summits from Belgrade (1961), Cairo (1964), Lusaka (1970), Algiers (1973) and Colombo (1976) was par excellent. Its participation in these Summits has not been of a mere spectator. Afghanistan played a decisive role in focussing the attention of non-aligned countries on major global issues. Even at the meeting of the Non-Aligned Foreign Ministers and Co-ordinating Bureaus, Afghanistan always lent a fruitful and helping hand in making such meetings successful. Being the founding member of the NAM, it always showed anxiety for the vigorous pursuit of the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement.
Afghanistan did not play the role of a mere catalyst in the NAM. It made concrete suggestions on global issues like disarmament, detente, world peace and New International Economic Order (NIEO). Afghan delegates to the Non-Aligned Summits were not mere passive listeners but they participated in almost all the deliberations and made valuable suggestions. Afghanistan along with other active non-aligned countries like India, Egypt, Sri Lanka, Zambia, Yugoslavia, Tanzania, etc. tried to help adopt unanimous declarations devoid of any ambiguities.

When the Sixth Non-aligned Summit was held at Havana (Cuba) in September 1979, Afghanistan had undergone a major political change. In April 1978, a communist government had taken over by staging a coup. Though the new regime reiterated its commitment to the policy of non-alignment, but in practice its pronouncements were more pro-Moscow.

The Afghan mission to the Havana non-aligned Summit failed to play effective and genuinely non-aligned role as it had done in the past. The new Afghan regime identified itself much closer to Moscow. At the Havana Summit, the new regime adopted a new stance of distinguishing the attitude of the non-aligned movement towards the Super Powers. It endeavoured to envisage the identity of
views between the Soviet bloc and the NAM. It was a major departure in Afghanistan’s traditional policy of non-alignment.

The apparent change in Afghan attitude towards non-alignment and fostering of close relationship between the Afghan communist regime and the Soviet Union were the concomitant developments which went hand in hand. Just within few months after the April 1978 coup, Kabul had signed over 29 agreements with Moscow. As the communist regime was met with stiff resistance from within the country, it sought massive Soviet armed assistance to consolidate its hold over the country. The flow of Soviet arms, armed forces and other Soviet personnel into Afghanistan kept on increasing steadily.

The conclusion of Afghan–Soviet Treaty on 5 December 1978 was another watershed in the bilateral relations between the two countries. This treaty had put the relationship between Kabul and Moscow on different levels as compared to the past treaties of 1921, 1926 and 1931. The December 1978 treaty contained provisions which directly put Afghanistan in Soviet orbit. Though Kabul had not formally joined the Warsaw Pact nor it had signed any military pact with Soviet Union. But the provisions of the 1978 Afghan–Soviet Treaty certainly marked a departure from
traditional Afghan policy of non-alignment. It had become evident that Afghanistan was prepared to renounce its traditional policy of non-alignment and join the Soviet Camp.

The communist regime repeatedly declared that past Afghan regimes did not pursue genuinely non-aligned policy whereas the new government pursued the policy of genuine non-alignment. The foreign policy pronouncements made by the post-April 1978 ruling elite in Afghanistan had more pro-Soviet Union stance. The element of independence and non-alignment was missing from their contents.

There was a systematic step by step erosion of Afghanistan's traditional policy of non-alignment. The final blow came in the form of direct Soviet armed intervention in December 1979. The continued presence of over one lakh Soviet troops in Afghanistan since December 1979 has served a final blow to the non-aligned stature of Afghanistan. Though the new regimes that have been in power since April 1978 coup -- Taraki regime, Amin regime and now the government headed by Babrak Karmal, have all sworn by Afghanistan's commitment to the policy of non-alignment. But in practice, the new ruling elite has been taking pro-Moscow stance on global issues.
Under the given circumstances, when Afghanistan's status as a staunch adherent of the policy of non-alignment has been tarnished, it devolves on the other non-aligned countries to help restore the non-aligned status of Afghanistan. The available recourse is that the NAM countries should ensure the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan. Once the foreign troops are withdrawn and normalcy restored, non-aligned countries should urge the Super Powers, especially the Soviet Union, not to interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. Adequate economic assistance should be made available to Kabul to reduce its dependence on the Soviet Union.

Afghanistan's case is a lesson for other non-aligned countries as to how a Super Power by its sheer military might can erode the non-aligned status of a small country. Afghanistan's past role as one of the founding members of the NAM and its active and staunch adherent of the movement is a record in itself. Serious and well-concerted efforts by the non-aligned countries can be instrumental in ensuring the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. Restoration of the non-aligned status of Afghanistan will once again make it an active participant and adherent to the principles of non-alignment. It will definitely serve the interests of the non-aligned movement as well as that of Afghanistan.