The articles by Eric Aarons and Denis Freney (ALR, March 1980) call for comment, but before examining some of the details a brief sketch of the pattern of events since World War II may be appropriate. These events, according to US views, and lately according to those of China, have been governed by a Soviet drive towards world domination. Every step taken by the imperialist powers has been excused by the alleged need to halt Soviet expansion.

The facts belie this view. Recently top secret 1945 documents of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff have been made public. The first document, dated less than three weeks after Japan's surrender, records the general headings for preparation of a war plan against "potential enemy powers". Joint Intelligence Committee Document 329, November 3, 1945 recommends the Air Force:

To select approximately 20 of the most important targets suitable for strategic atomic bombing in the USSR and Soviet dominated territory.

The next Document — 329/1 — lists the 20 Soviet cities to be bombed, together with particulars about resources, area, population, and the situation of various air bases from which bombers of various ranges could attack. The plan called for the dropping of 196 atomic bombs on these Soviet cities. It was estimated that this atomic attack would destroy: 90 per cent of the Soviet aircraft industry, 73 per cent of the output of guns, 86 per cent of tank production, 88 per cent of trucks and 67 per cent of oil. The population of these 20 Soviet cities in 1945 was 13 million.

Clause 15 of this document says:

At the present time the USSR does not have the capability of inflicting similar damage on United States industry...

This US war plan also provided for the creation and use of an army of 164 divisions, including a hardcore of nazi divisions from the defeated German army, to invade the Soviet Union after the atomic attack. Field Marshall Montgomery's memoirs confirm this.

In 1949 the US war plan was revised. The revised plan, code-named "Operation Dropshot", retained the same targets but provided for the dropping of 300 atomic bombs on these Soviet cities.

It was not moral scruple that halted this plan. By 1945 the peoples of Western Europe and America were war weary. On this point Montgomery replied to Eisenhower:

The British people were completely fed up with war and would never have been persuaded to fight the Russians in 1945.

The people of most western countries would have been horrified by the suggestion that they wage war against an ally who had borne the brunt of the war against the nazi armies. It was the need to change this public opinion, not a "Soviet menace", that led to the anti-Soviet propaganda campaign carried out by the United States since the end of World War II. The "Soviet threat", "Soviet expansion", "Russian imperialism" have been the stock-in-trade of this campaign ever since. By the time this cold war propaganda had begun to affect the public of western countries, the Soviet Union was already producing its own atomic weapons. Those who planned using these weapons against the Soviet Union now faced retaliation in kind. The era of mutual deterrence began.

Beverley Symons, in a well-researched article (ALR, September 1979), showed that at every stage it has been the United States which initiated the war drive and the armaments race:

The first Soviet atomic bomb came four years after the Hiroshima bomb, the Warsaw Pact came six years after the formation of NATO, the US deployed "tactical" nuclear weapons in Europe three years before the Soviet Union did so, the American Polaris ballistic missile submarine existed five years before the Soviet Union had a similar submarine, the US deployed MIRV missiles in 1970, the Soviet Union did so in 1975.

That has been the pattern; a pattern which still continues. During this same period, national
democratic revolutions with varying degrees of socialist content took place in a number of countries: China, Viet Nam, Algeria, Egypt, Cuba, Kenya, Angola, Mozambique, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Afghanistan, Iran, Zimbabwe, and others. All these revolutions were generated by internal causes and were carried through by internal forces; all of them involved armed struggle over more or less prolonged periods of time. None of them had anything to do with Soviet “export of revolution” or “Soviet expansion”.

But it is these countries and the revolutions which took place in them that United States propaganda has in mind when it speaks of “Soviet expansion”, “Soviet imperialism”, and the “Soviet drive towards world domination”.

Two of these countries — China and Egypt — have ceased to be anti-imperialist. The governments of both China and Egypt now have close ties with US imperialism. In their de-facto alliance with the United States, the Chinese leaders are not satisfied with the huge US arms build-up or with the scope of US military activity throughout the world. Condemning people who work against the development of a new cold war, the Chinese say it is good that:

a) US leaders now understand that the supply of grain, credits, technology and equipment would only whet the Soviet appetite for aggression and expansion;

b) it is good that US armed forces officers now admit the US lags behind the Soviet Union in military strength and must make great efforts to catch up with the Russians;

c) the US strategic arrangements have been to fight one and a half wars. Now the US has to get ready to fight several wars in different places simultaneously (Beijing Review, March 10, 1980).

The events in Afghanistan in the final months of last year and the beginning of 1980 are the latest developments in this process going on in the world; they are not inexplicable events arising from nowhere, unconnected with anything else.

Cutting through what seems to be first- and secondhand speculation, the main views of Aarons and Freney appear to stem from three suppositions:

1) That the Afghan revolution which began in 1978 was not a genuine revolution or, alternatively, did not have mass support.

2) Land reform was talked about —, even intended, but no real efforts were made to win peasant understanding and support or to prepare supplies of seed, etc.

3) There were no foreign army divisions on the borders or attacking over the borders, therefore there was no external threat to the revolution requiring Soviet military assistance.

The Afghan revolution, which began in April 1978, is still in process — it is an anti-feudal, democratic revolution which has a number of aims; but the central, the crucial, aim of that revolution is land reform — the division of the landlords’ estates to give land to the peasants.

As Calaforra puts it:

Let us review what Afghan society was like on the eve of the revolutionary uprising of April 27, 1978….Daud’s regime then turned against the progressive groups that had supported it, using the security and police forces trained and infiltrated by the Shah of Iran’s regime and reactionary paramilitary organisations. Its target was the People’s Democratic Party…operating underground because political organisations had been dissolved... The assassination of Amir Akbar Khyber led to popular demonstrations and the arrest of other leaders...this led to bigger demonstrations...fired on by the National Guard, which killed 200 demonstrators on one occasion alone.

On April 27, ten days after the assassination of Khyber, army tanks knocked down the walls of the prison, freeing the prisoners and launching the rebellion (Gabriel Calaforra, Tricontinental, No. 61, 1978).

In Afghanistan before 1978, about 40,000 feudal landlords owned seventy per cent of the total arable land; more than eighty per cent of Afghan people are rural. The division of the land among the peasants, leaving the landlord with as much land as any peasant, is not like a tea party; as marxists need to remember, this process involves the most bitter, the most fierce class struggle known in modern times. In India today, such landlords are burning Harijans (Untouchables) alive. Not because they are seizing land, but simply because they are claiming a mildly better deal.

Feudal landlords, through their control of the land, enjoy enormous power and privilege; they dominate the lives of their peasant tenants or labourers not only in the exploitative economic sense. They also frequently bear the title “Pir” (Saint) who is the religious and political “guide” of the peasants under his control. The Pir deprived of his power and privilege reacts with savage brutality, and because 98 per cent of the peasants he rules over are illiterate, he can trick, beguile and menace many of them into counter-revolutionary activity under his leadership.

It may be the neglect of the characteristics of this central feature of the Afghan revolution which generates the contradictions apparent in the CPA approach. Eric Aarons writes that TV
footage shows these “rebels” to be a motley, disunited and mercenary crew, and argues there is no credible evidence that they could be the main cause of the difficulties. On the other hand, Denis Freney (Tribune, January 23, 1980) quotes Le Monde as saying that as recently as last August, the “rightist revolt” had made 80 per cent of Afghanistan’s territory insecure (although half the population lived in the remaining 20 per cent). These two conflicting versions in fact portray the real situation in a country whose people are making a revolutionary emergence from feudalism. I recall one TV film last year (before the snows) which showed these reactionary forces on the mountain tops happily lobbing mortar bombs (from very modern mortars) into the town of Jalalabad in the valley below. That kind of thing in a country with Afghanistan’s terrain is not easy to cope with.

Eric Aarons (Tribune, January 23, 1980) says the entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan will facilitate the main aim of US imperialism...to re-legitimize direct US military involvement around the world, which became politically impossible after the Viet Nam debacle. It was the revolution in Iran which was used for this “re-legitimization”. Should our advice to the Iranians have been: behave yourselves, halt your revolutionary struggle, don’t throw out the Shah and the thousands of US personnel in your country; if you go on like this, you will annoy Carter and the Pentagon and make it easy for them to re-legitimize US military involvement?

A section of the left has set up fixed criteria for granting legitimacy to revolution in a Third World country: guerrilla warfare or a repetition of the bolshevik revolution. Revolutionary events outside these criteria are labelled Red Monopartism. This schematism ignores the fact that national democratic revolutions differ widely in both form and content; it would be hopeless as a tool for analysing how and why the Portuguese army “educated” in Angola was the initiator and motive force of the revolution in Portugal (see Eqbal Ahmad, interview with Dorothy Healey, January 4, 1980).

Another view proceeds from the unspoken assumption that imperialism is not active in attempts to undermine and destroy revolutions in Third World countries. In the “logic of blocs”, the Soviet Union is equated with US imperialism. It is politely suggested both should behave themselves (Romano Ledda, Rinascita, January 4, 1980).

There is a tendency to measure the events in Afghanistan by the yardstick of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. This is a confusion of two different situations, class relations and combinations of social-political forces.

In 1968, a large part of Czechoslovak society was embarked on a course of creative development; a flowering of socialist democracy was evident. The movement of renewal was proceeding in a non-violent way and was being articulated through a re-vitalized Communist Party.

The Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia halted and crushed this progressive internal development and forced Czechoslovak society back into the rigid mould from which it was emerging. The purpose of that Soviet-led invasion was therefore profoundly reactionary both in its internal effect in Czechoslovakia and in its effects on the world socialist movement; because of this, it deserved the world-wide condemnation it received.

At the end of 1979 the situation in Afghanistan was, in virtually all respects, the polar opposite of that existing in Czechoslovakia in 1968. In Afghanistan, the anti-feudal revolution was involved in fierce and violent class struggle in which the armed counter-revolutionary forces headed by a class formation of feudal landlords, merchants and traders were able to make their bloody and destructive forays and then move to across-the-border havens for re-equipment with US, Chinese and Pakistani arms. Thus rearmed and trained they launched fresh attacks at points they chose along 2,000 kilometres of mountainous border to kill and terrorise peasants, blow up bridges and destroy communications.

To argue that because there is no evidence of foreign army divisions in serried ranks crossing the Afghan border there is therefore no evidence of an external threat, is to ignore the clearest evidence of how these things are done nowadays. Apart from a small South African unit the main forces attacking Angola were Angolans who were supported, armed and equipped by South Africa and China. These forces were also able to make their attacks from bases across the border, causing critical destruction and disorganisation which compelled the new government of Angola to seek the support of Soviet-armed Cuban troops; it was this aid that helped bring security to Angola, and guarantee its independence.

The same problem in different forms exists in another part of the world. Eric Aarons says that although the CPA expressed reservations about the Vietnamese intervention in Kampuchea, we have continued to support Viet Nam...and we believe they should withdraw at the earliest possible moment. I’m sure that without any urging from anyone the Vietnamese would be glad to get out of Kampuchea tomorrow, they would also like to get out of Laos just as quickly. But it is the Chinese who make the difficulties, they support and arm the Pol Pot forces who are able to operate from sanctuaries in Thailand. China is training and arming thousands of Laotians on Chinese territory and infiltrating them into Laos. So, apart from the enormous Chinese army poised on Viet Nam’s northern border, these forces are not
While visiting ASEAN countries during March this year, China's Foreign Affairs Minister was quite straightforward about this strategy. He said the pressure on Viet Nam would be kept up from all sides so that Viet Nam would bleed and finally end in economic and political collapse.

There should be no doubt that if we make the rule of non-intervention in the affairs of another country into a rigid principle that no revolution has the right to ask for and to receive outside help to preserve the rights it has won against the threats of restoration, then there are many countries which will lose their independence.

CPA leaders appear to equivocate if it is Vietnamese or Cuban troops operating with Soviet arms, but respond with condemnation when it is Soviet troops who have to use their own arms as in the case of Afghanistan. Eric Aarons poses the problem as though the CPA were being asked to give unqualified support to any Soviet action; there are some people who demand this but it is not the issue. The real danger is that of becoming locked into a position which compels automatic opposition to every "difficult" action of the Soviet Union. This is just as paralysing and ineffectual as the opposite position held by those who without thinking support anything the Soviet Union does.

Denis Freney expresses the view that the main reason Soviet troops went into Afghanistan was to kill Amin, that the commission of this act after earlier Soviet support for Amin showed cynicism. In fact all the evidence, including that which Denis adduces, establishes that the Soviet leadership refrained from interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. They recognised and worked with the government led by Daoud, they maintained the same relations with the revolutionary government headed by Taraki, and, evidently not with much pleasure, they maintained the same principle of non-interference with the government headed by Amin.

Babak Karmal informed a press conference of 200 journalists in Kabul on January 10 that he returned to Afghanistan secretly from exile early in November 1979. He met with the Revolutionary Council and the Central Committee of the PDP (which already had an overwhelming majority opposed to Amin's policies). The meeting of the Revolutionary Council and the CC of the PDP which decided to ask for Soviet military assistance, took place early in December with Amin present. It was decided that Amin convey the request to the Soviet government. The relevant Soviet meeting took place on December 15. Soviet troops immediately began moving in. December 27 was only the day of the big airlift.

There is no evidence or ground for assumption that the Soviet authorities killed or arranged the killing of Amin. The leader of the present government, Karmal, has stated that Amin was tried and sentenced by a tribunal set up by the Revolutionary Council and the CC of the PDP. It may not have been quite so tidy. The circumstances of the death of Soviet Lieutenant-General Paputin (who had some responsibility for guarding Amin) point to a chaotic situation in which Amin was killed by the members of his own party whom he had persecuted.

Whatever really happened at that point and as Denis says, we may never know, there is no doubt that Amin was the central figure in the factional struggles in the People's Democratic Party which were so debilitating and helped the forces of counter-revolution. As Denis recounts it:

...In mid September last year Amin asked Taraki to dismiss Interior Minister Watanger and Border Affairs Minister Mazduryar. Amin took a military escort with him to the Presidential Palace...Palace guards opened fire...Amin went away, came back with troops, stormed the Palace and killed President Taraki...Amin then sacked three Ministers, arrested 4,000 Taraki supporters and executed a number of military men.

Denis says the evidence points to Amin being a too fanatical, too devoted, and too brutal a revolutionary. Putting aside the linkage of devotion with fanaticism and brutality, what are we to make of his next suggestion: that the Soviet leaders...were not prepared to risk seeing Amin transform Afghanistan into a central Asian Yugoslavia? How on earth do we equate too fanatical and too brutal with Yugoslavia?

In another explanation along similar lines for the Soviet action Denis quotes favorably the opinion of Dr. Beverley Male that this Soviet action was to “save” Afghanistan from “an independent-minded government with no reason to love Moscow...Moscow could not risk the abrogation of its treaty with Afghanistan and the expulsion of Russian advisers”.

Bearing in mind the internal relationship of class forces in Afghanistan at the time, one can only say that if this was indeed Amin’s intention, that would lend credence to the most sensational and dramatic accounts of what Amin was about (accounts which I had been inclined to discount). Any attempt to put such a scheme into operation would be bound to meet with opposition from a majority of the People’s Democratic Party, the Revolutionary Council and at least half the army. The outcome of the inevitable internecine conflict, opening the way for unfettered operations by the armed bands of the feudal landlords and city merchants would have been a long way from any kind of Asian Yugoslavia.

For most references see Afghanistan: Fact — Opinion — Analysis. CPA publication. Price $2.00.