DISCUSSION

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Jack Blake's discussion piece (ALR, No. 74) raises vital issues which include, but go beyond, Afghanistan.

Referring specifically to Eqbal Ahmad (Interview in Afghanistan: Afghanistan: fact-opinion analysis, CPA publication), Jack says:

A section of the left has set up fixed criteria for granting legitimacy to revolution in a Third World country.

I do not agree with everything Ahmad says, but I think Jack's criticism misses the main point. Ahmad approves the program of the People's Democratic Party in Afghanistan, as I think we all do. But he legitimately points to the dangers in trying to implement such a program without sufficient mass support, particularly among those most affected — the peasantry.

Another section of the left, however, sets up criteria which are perilous indeed. Sam Goldbloom, for example, writes:

...with a population which is 95 per cent illiterate, where the working class is only one per cent, where feudalism and the fundamentalist Islamic religion has kept the people in the dark for ages...this nexus can be broken only by a small group drawn from the intellectuals, progressives of various shades, including church leaders, and the nucleus of a marxist party. (Tribune, May 7, 1980).

While in Viet Nam recently, I had it put to me concerning Afghanistan that "there are two kinds of revolution, one from the top and one from the bottom".

I replied that this was the first time I had heard such a view advanced by marxists, who always stressed the vital element of self-emancipation. I queried how the Vietnamese revolution could have survived had it lacked peasant support.

China, Cuba, Yugoslavia are also examples of mass involvement, however different the forms these revolutions took. They also refute the suggestion that "illiterate peasants lack revolutionary potential. Leadership is, of course, necessary. But is it an acceptable revolutionary model for a leadership to proceed without mass support, whether in a Third World or capitalist country? And then to virtually make it obligatory to support the entry of massive outside force to make up for the internal lack?

All accounts of the situation in Afghanistan I have read, including those from supporters of what was done, admit the lack of peasant support. I won’t canvas the evidence here, but suggest, for example, a reading of Fred Halliday’s article in New Left Review, No. 119.

As to the general principles involved concerning acceptable outside aid, I suggested the following: political solidarity; material aid to remain under local control; aid not replacing local effort as the main force (Afghanistan, p. 76).

These may be inadequate criteria, but Jack does not suggest any others.

Imperialism active

Jack says: "another view proceeds from the unspoken assumption that imperialism is not active in attempts to undermine and destroy revolutions in Third World countries". I don’t know who on the left assumes this: I certainly don’t.
The point is rather that imperialism is active everywhere, and if that alone were enough to justify intervention, armies would be marching all over the place (as some of the Trotskyist groups clearly want) and there would be no need for analysis of concrete cases.

One has to consider not only whether intervention is justified, but also whether that intervention will improve the internal situation. In Afghanistan, on both counts, the answer seems in the negative.

Jack thinks he finds a conflict between what I wrote and what Denis Freney wrote. My point was that the outside forces as seen on TV could hardly be taken as the main problem; Denis was pointing to evidence of the deteriorating internal situation. Our points are complementary rather than being in conflict.

Czechoslovakian parallel?

It is certainly not CPA policy to equate the two situations and few people in our party draw a parallel with Czechoslovakia in 1968, except perhaps in regard to involvement of Soviet forces in changing a leadership.

Jack may believe that the Soviet leadership no longer involves itself in this activity in general and did not do so in Afghanistan in particular. I hope it is true, but remain sceptical and think there was more than just a “chaotic situation” when Amin was done in.

Nor do I think Jack’s assumption that Amin was the main source of factional conflict in the PDP is well established, except in the hindsight of the victors, who also now conveniently discover an association with the CIA.

Self-determination

Jack sees a danger of becoming rigid and one-eyed in defending the right of self-determination. I see a danger in this right being swept aside in the march of the big battalions and the demand to line up as required by self-appointed arbiters of strategy in “the class struggle on an international scale”.

This is not equivalent to viewing the principle of self-determination abstractly, and in the concrete case of Viet Nam I wrote:

(Our) support (for Viet Nam) is based on recognition that the Pol Pot regime, aided and abetted by China, invaded Viet Nam and refused all efforts at negotiation, and that Chinese hostility, soon to be manifested in military invasion, posed a threat to the continued existence of a genuinely independent Viet Nam.

Destruction of the detested Pol Pot regime was a by-product and would not of itself justify Vietnamese intervention. And we believe that they should withdraw at the earliest possible moment, leaving the Kampuchans to exercise their right to self-determination. (Afghanistan: page 76)

Following a visit to Kampuchea and Viet Nam in June, the CPA delegation was able to further concretise the conditions under which we think that withdrawal should occur. (Tribune, July 2, 1980)

In Uganda, also, overthrow of the regime of Idi Amin was effected by Tanzanian forces and dissident Ugandans following a destructive invasion of Tanzania.

Thus, while analysing particular cases and avoiding an abstract approach, the CPA considers that the principle of self-determination should be upheld for the reasons outlined in Afghanistan, page 75.

An example of the opposite line of thinking is found in the demand that the Eritreans and the Kurds should not, in the “broader interest”, struggle for independence or autonomy (Peter Symon in The Socialist, June 4, 1980).
Maybe they should not — though that is open to question. But if they do so struggle, is their suppression by armed force to be justified in the name of socialism?

And can some country, or trend of opinion within the movement, set itself up as the final arbiters on such questions?

Automatic opposition to the Soviet Union?

Jack says: “The real danger (for the CPA, is not being asked to give unqualified support to any Soviet action but) is that of becoming locked into a position which compels automatic opposition to every ‘difficult’ action of the Soviet Union”.

To indicate the unreality of this assessment, I refer to my Comment on the Viet Nam-China conflict (ALR, No. 68):

We had to think about how to react if the Soviet Union had intervened. The lines along which our thoughts were running were that we would have supported (Soviet) intervention against the Chinese invasion insofar as it helped Viet Nam and was a response to Vietnamese requests. But it would be conditional support — conditioned by the degree to which we judged Soviet actions were also in pursuit of other aims, unnecessarily escalated the conflict, etc.

In supporting Viet Nam and present Soviet assistance to it, are we ‘switching back to the Russians’ in allegiance?

Not at all. We maintain our independent position.

Such an independent position does not preclude, but presupposes, support of, as well as opposition to, particular measures taken by various governments and parties, in accordance with our own assessment of those measures.

Equating blocs?

Nor is equation of the Soviet Union with the United States the CPA’s position. But we are not prepared to passively accept a situation in which we are willy nilly propelled into adhering to a bloc and following a bloc leader. I recently wrote:

It has been said that in a struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States, a ‘class line’ demands that one support the former without reservations against the latter.

If only the world were so simple!

And such an approach would reduce other countries and movements to a passive position, reinforcing the hegemony which bloc leaders are always trying to assert. In this respect, though not in others, they may be equated.

The need today is rather for more forces, more countries and movements to have their own input into the world situation from the anti-imperialist side, for the perceptions of the Soviet leadership, made through the prism of national interests, are not always congruent with the needs of the movement in other countries, or as a whole. (Afghanistan, p.78.)

The present possibility of gravitating to uncritical submergence in one bloc arises particularly from the dangerous polarisation of the world today and the ‘freezing’ of policies and attitudes.

Relations between China and Viet Nam, for example, are pretty firmly set in a hostile course. And these relations do not exist in a vacuum, but are essentially related to the Sino-Soviet conflict, as is China’s lamentable gravitation to closer and closer collaboration with the United States.

We are likely to see more conflict in our region and in other parts of the world — conflicts expressing and pushing further forward the process of polarisation, and making more apparently compelling the demand that we give up our independent policy.

Despite such pressures, and although it is not immediately apparent what can be done to change things, I believe it would be a great mistake to regard the process of polarisation as total and already consummated, final and irrevocable.

The task before us requires much more flexibility than that. We should work to establish relations with all communist parties and radical movements with the aim of bringing our own mite to bear — on our own where necessary and in cooperation with others where possible — to change alignments before they have completely hardened, leaving no one any latitude.

This is one of the aims of the non-aligned movement which Cuba, for example (president of the movement), perhaps now sees more urgently, post-Afghanistan, despite its differences with Yugoslavia.

When we do take up a firm position of support for one side (for example, Viet Nam in the present dispute with China), we should not do so on the assumption that the side we support is, or has to be made out to be, composed only of angels.

If we think it right we should oppose (the Soviet Union in Afghanistan) or criticise (Vietnamese over-sweeping denunciation of everything Chinese, past and present).

We can do so without feeling that we are thereby weakening our anti-imperialist stand. I believe we are rather strengthening it.