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INSTITUTE OF PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES

STATE SUPPORT TO INSURGENTS IN OTHER STATES RESOLUTION OR WORSENING OF CONFLICT?

By

HARISH VENUGOPALAN

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What are the causes and consequences of interventions by other states in the form of support to insurgent groups? Why do countries intervene and support insurgent groups in other countries?

There could be a variety of reasons. Large-scale human rights abuses/mass killings could lead to intervention. Countries might intervene for their own economic interests. Geopolitical interests could also be a reason: this could be either expanding one's own influence in the region or preventing other major powers from expanding its influence. To deflect attention from crises in one's own country, the governments involved might lend support to insurgent groups in foreign territories. If country A is defeated by country B in a war, country A might be looking for an opportune moment to create instability in either country B or any of the close allies of country B. If the ruling government is overthrown and the insurgents can take over power, the nature of alliances can be changed. Ethnic/religious reasons also prompt countries to come out in support of insurgent groups in other countries. The nature of support could be anything ranging from provision of sanctuary to the rebels, arming the insurgent groups, training, finances, moral support and so on. In this Issue Brief, the question has been studied with the help of two cases: Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. These two cases have been chosen because they are acknowledged as two of the biggest interventions in the last few decades.

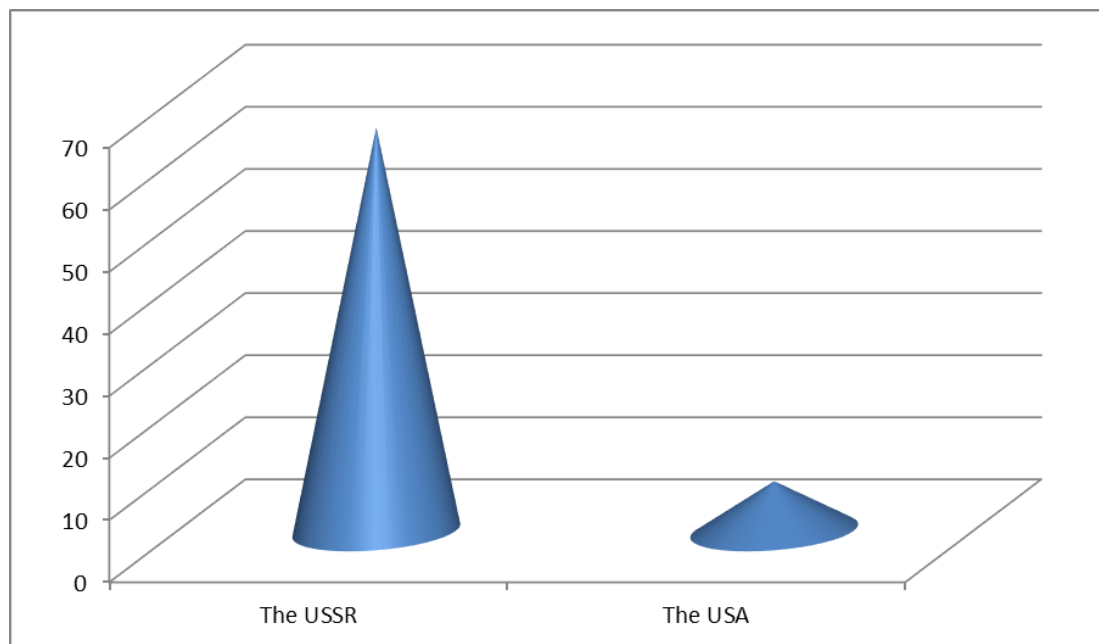
The Afghan conflict involved the intervention of the Union of the USSR and the US, while the Sri Lankan intervention involved a regional power, India. Sri Lanka has seen a longstanding ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils right from the time it attained independence from Great Britain. India got involved in the conflict during the 1980s. Of the

terrorist groups, the most ferocious was the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In Afghanistan, following the Soviet invasion in 1979, the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia along with a few other countries provided support to the Mujahideen in their fight against the USSR.

It is argued that a desperation to keep their Communist hold over an Asian country combined with feelings of insecurity resulted in the Soviet invasion. For the US' involvement, there were geostrategic reasons along with a possibility of extracting revenge for the Vietnam defeat. In the case of Indian involvement in Sri Lanka, geostrategic reasons combined with Tamil Nadu's identification of 'their Tamil brethren in Sri Lanka' have been cited as the motivations for intervening. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's personal dislike of President JR Jayawardene could have been a factor too.

Both conflicts worsened as a result of the interventions. Later, the insurgent groups turned into terrorist organisations and mounted attacks the same countries that gave them support.

The difference between insurgency and terrorism boils down to the fact that insurgents generally do not target civilians to achieve their political objectives. Terrorists however rely on 'creating terror' to achieve their political objectives - whether they are limited or broad.



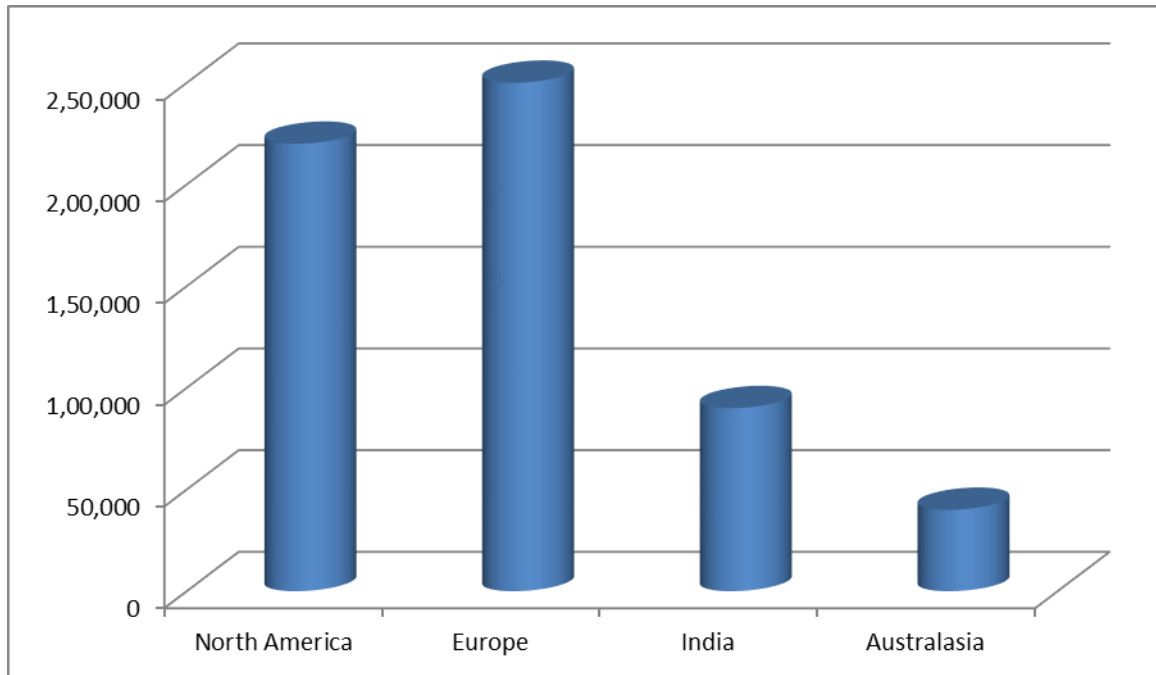
TOTAL MONEY SPENT IN THE AFGHAN WAR (IN DOLLARS AND BILLIONS)

Source: Samad, 2011, p.78.¹

THE TWO INTERVENTIONS: A COMPARISON

In a comparison of the Indian and the American interventions, there are three similarities that can be identified. Both were failures – as many interventions are. More importantly, both were covert operations undertaken by their respective intelligence agencies, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Research & Analysis Wing (RA&W). There is a third similarity that has not received as much attention in the literature on the subject: both seem to have started much before than the generally accepted commencement period. At the beginning, the US channelled and routed funds and ammunition through Pakistan since they did not want to be seen as funding the Mujahideen.

Before looking at when it started, it is important to ask why the interventions occurred in the first place. As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, the 1983 riots of Colombo led to widespread anger and resentment in India, especially in Tamil Nadu, over the treatment meted out to the Tamils.² The widely held theory is that the intervention started only after the riots. But if India had started its intervention much before, there might have been murkier reasons for the it. Evidence suggests that India started its covert support to the rebels much before 1983, although it is true that it was expanded and done more boldly after the 1983 riots. Rohan Gunaratna and Gamini Keerawella have stated that military training facilities for Sri Lankan Tamil insurgents existed in India before the 1983 riots. MR Narayanaswamy talks about a LTTE training camp that was set up in Madurai in 1982. When a shoot-out happened between the LTTE chief Prabhakaran and his colleague Uma Maheshwaran at Pondy Bazaar in Chennai in 1982, the insurgents were apprehended. But India refused to hand them over to Sri Lanka.³ These events point to the fact that India's support to the insurgent groups started much before the 1983 riots.



SRI LANKAN TAMIL POPULATION ABROAD (AS OF 1997)

Source: Rupesinghe, 1998, p.301.⁴

In Afghanistan, immediately after the coup through which Daoud came to power in 1973, Pakistan realised that Afghan nationalists coming to power might not be in their best interest. Pakistan thus began to establish contact with Afghan Islamists like Hekmatyar, Masood, Rabbani and so on.⁵ Pakistan also wanted to get the US involved, and was instrumental in establishing relations between the Afghan Islamic opposition and the CIA between April and May 1979.⁶ Naseerullah Babar, who was Inspector General Frontier Corps, claims that well before the Soviet invasion, he had become the bridge between the Pakistanis and the Americans and that he had sent Rabbani and Hekmatyar to the American diplomats for an 'evaluation'.⁷ The former director of the CIA Robert Gates also confirmed that the American intelligence services began to aid the Mujahideen six months before the Soviet intervention.⁸ Thus the version that the US was shocked by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan might not be true.⁹ But why did the Soviets invade at all?

Even considering that the American support to the Mujahideen began earlier than was believed, this alone could not have been the reason. Barnett Rubin holds that there was a shift in the Soviet policy towards third world countries in the 1970s because of the ouster of President Sukarno in Indonesia and the expulsion of Soviet advisers in Egypt.¹⁰ In 1972,

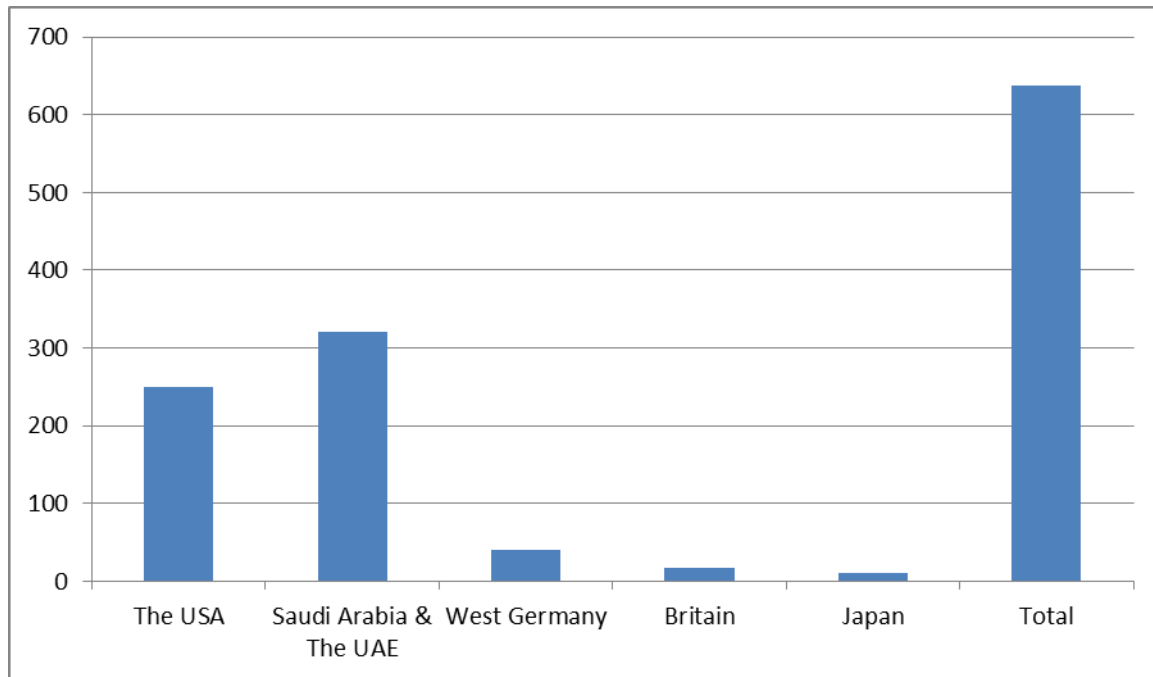
Soviet advisers were expelled by the Egyptian President al-Sadat. The US denied any role in it. But recent evidence from US archives show that the Americans were aware of it as early as 1971 and also worked actively towards it.¹¹ As mentioned, the Sukarno overthrow could have also played a reason.

Does this mean that the blame lies entirely with the US in having provoked the Soviet intervention? It is important to recall the so-called Brezhnev doctrine, which emphasised the right to intervene in Eastern Europe to safeguard socialism. In Asia, it was demonstrated for the first time in Afghanistan.¹² A friendship treaty was signed between Taraki and Brezhnev on 5 December 1978 that became the justification for the USSR to send troops into Afghanistan a year later.¹³ Brezhnev, justifying the armed presence of the Soviet troops, said that the USSR's forces were there in response to the call of the friendly government of Afghanistan.¹⁴ But the fact is that the head of state of an independent country was eliminated and his replacement was a Soviet puppet.¹⁵ The Iranian revolution that took place at the end of 1978, where the Shah was overthrown by supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini, could also have played a role in making the USSR insecure.¹⁶ Once Amin took over in Afghanistan, he started including non-Communists. He also attempted to have better relations with the US, Pakistan and Iran.¹⁷ So, a combination of external and internal factors could have played a role in the Soviet invasion. Even if Amin getting closer to the West was one of the reasons - if not the main reason - for the Soviets to invade Afghanistan, the invasion is still not justified because as a head of state, Amin had every right to choose who he wanted to have close relations with. Similarly, scholars have suggested that India's intervention was due to the fact that Sri Lanka was looking at developing closer relations with the US.

Pakistan also did not distribute the funds and weapons in an even manner. They were partial by favouring groups like Hekmatyar's because it helped their cause. India followed the same approach in Sri Lanka with the Tamil Nadu politicians wrangling among themselves for favours. MG Ramachandran supported the LTTE while his rival Karunanidhi supported the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO).

With regard to funding for Afghanistan, estimates say that between one third and one half was diverted by Pakistan. They were also accused of keeping the best weapons for themselves and handing over its 'past-their-prime' weapons to the Mujahideen. In 1984, the

CIA insisted that not more than 10 per cent got lost in this way. In 1986, CIA analysts acknowledged that at least 20 per cent of the weapons were diverted in this manner. Finally, a US National security agency estimated that at least 30 per cent would have been lost in this process of transfer.



AID TO THE MUJAHIDEEN IN 1985 (IN DOLLARS AND MILLIONS)

Source: Bradsher, 1999, p.219.¹⁸

Even though Sri Lanka's conflict escalated in the 1970s, India was careful not to interfere in Sri Lanka's domestic politics. India moved to resolve the Kachatheevu dispute by agreeing to give up any rights over it.¹⁹ This was done under the leadership of Indira Gandhi.²⁰ During the 1970s, on several occasions, the Tamil Nadu government arrested and deported a number of Sri Lankan Tamil insurgents. Even after the anti-1977 Tamil riots, only mild protests followed. This was because the Prime Minister Morarji Desai did not want an escalation of the Sri Lankan issue. Neil Devotta argues that the situation after 1971 along with the pro-Western foreign policy pursued by Jayawardene in the 1970s and 1980s prompted India to take up a hegemonic role in South Asia.²¹ India, under Indira Gandhi, carved Bangladesh out of East Pakistan in 1971. That might have given Indira Gandhi the confidence that she could try the same in Sri Lanka and get away with it.

In addition, Sri Lanka leased out an oil tank firm in Trincomalee to a company with American connections. The *Voice of America* radio was given permission to set up an additional



transmission facility.²² So it is possible that these could have been seen as provoking Indira Gandhi as it went against the so-called 'Indira Doctrine'. A statement in this doctrine reads, "India will neither intervene in the domestic affairs of any states in the region (unless requested to do so), nor tolerate any such intervention by an outside power." If external assistance is needed to meet an internal crisis, states should first look within the region for help. But the fact is that these statements were never made by Indira Gandhi and were taken from a think-tank report.²³

One reason for India's support towards Sri Lankan insurgents could have been Indira Gandhi's personal rapport with Prime Minister Bandaranaike and her dislike of Jayawardene. In fact, Bandaranaike's friendship with Indira Gandhi was so cordial that some people criticised the unhealthy effect it had on the two countries. When Indira Gandhi imposed emergency in 1975 and was greatly censured, Bandaranaike was one of the few people who came out in defence of her.²⁴ To answer the question of whether a personal dislike could play a role in a country's foreign policy, one needs to answer the question, would Indira Gandhi have armed the insurgent groups if Bandaranaike had been Sri Lanka's leader? Complicating this picture was Jayawardene looking to the West for stronger ties.

CONCLUSION

It is quite strange that India, which had always accused Pakistan of supporting pro-Khalistan secessionist movements in Punjab, went on to do exactly what it accused Pakistan of doing, in Sri Lanka.²⁵ India's political and military intervention in the 1980s resulted in its longest and most expensive war with the loss of 1,155 soldiers at an estimated cost of US\$750,000.

What did India gain as a result? Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by LTTE terrorists, the very same terrorists that his mother and other Tamil Nadu politicians nurtured. The Tamil Nadu politicians competed against each other to be seen as saviours of Tamils for their narrow political gains.²⁶ The LTTE destroyed the 1987 accord which could have seen unimaginable rights being given to the Sri Lankan Tamils. Since then, the LTTE rejected three autonomy plans offered by Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1995, 1997 and 2000.²⁷ The LTTE killed all their fellow insurgent groups, politicians, whether Tamil or Sinhalese, and ordinary civilians - Tamil, Sinhalese, and foreigners - and finally destroyed themselves. India's attitude towards

the LTTE changed gradually. There seems to have been a major change in Indian foreign policy with regard to interventions, but only after the Rajiv Gandhi assassination.

In Afghanistan, the US saw the opportunity to avenge their Vietnam defeat. Elizabeth Gould and Paul Fitzgerald wrote that the US used Afghanistan to give the Soviets their Vietnam.²⁸ Brzezinski brags about the same in an interview, saying that he wrote to President Carter to welcome the opportunity to give the USSR its Vietnam War. These point to the fact that many in the US were filled with a frenzy and excitement that they would be able to 'bleed' the Soviet Union and extract revenge for their Vietnam defeat. That would have been a major reason for its support to the Mujahideen.

How can Indian and American foreign policy then be evaluated? With regard to India, there is a straightforward answer. India's foreign policy failed in Sri Lanka. After Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi tried to make amends for what went wrong during his mother's tenure. He stopped support to the insurgent groups, pressurised the groups to sit down for talks and literally forced them to sign the Indo-Lanka peace accords, and subsequently, sent the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in to Sri Lanka to oversee the implementation of the Peace Accord. But unfortunately, during this time, support to the insurgent groups from Tamil Nadu continued. In fact the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government was dismissed by the central government for not taking strict action against the LTTE which meant that it was supporting them in a covert manner. Also, India's strategy was to train, arm and support Tamil rebels from various organisations. The aim was to hit back at Jayawardene's government and destabilise Sri Lanka without strengthening the rebels to the point where it could succeed.²⁹

It can be argued that when India supported the insurgent groups, they were merely insurgent groups and were not branded as terrorist organisations. This gives rise to the question, what is the difference between terrorists and insurgents/militants? It is not an easy question to answer - several different definitions can be found in the literature on the subject. One useful definition terms terrorism as "the premeditated, deliberate, systematic murder, mayhem, and threatening of the innocent to create fear and intimidation in order to gain a political or tactical advantage, usually to influence an audience."³⁰ Political scientists and legal experts consider certain determinants that create specific differences between

terrorism and other forms of political violence. For example, it is generally acknowledged that contemporary terrorism, unlike war, does not occur between states and instead is unleashed by stateless organisations against established powers. It defies codes of war that most states agree upon. Importantly, unlike guerrilla warfare or political insurrection, it does not attack military or government centres with an objective to snatch away power. Often it targets unsuspecting victims, usually random civilians, who may have nothing to do with the terrorists' grievances. It is a strategy used by organisations to highlight their grievances and create a kind of terror to achieve capitulation to their demands.³¹ It is clear that the LTTE, when it started with the assassination of Alfred Duraiappa, was an insurgent group. They later graduated into a terrorist organisation by being responsible for the large-scale slaughter of innocent civilians. India provided support to the LTTE covertly first, and overtly later. An unintended consequence of Indira Gandhi's policy of arming the militants was that the assassination of her son, Rajiv Gandhi, by the LTTE.

In Afghanistan, it is widely acknowledged that with the Cold War, the US felt the need to act. But did that have to take the form of support to insurgent groups? More importantly, was Afghanistan of strategic interest to the US? Many academics at the time of invasion did see it as a security threat to the US. As pointed out earlier, George Kennan differed from the popular point of view. Shortly after the invasion, Kennan questioned the official logic by pointing out that the action reflected Russian defensive rather than offensive interests. It should also be noted that Afghanistan had long been regarded as having little importance for the US and Western security. It is neither located near the Indian Ocean nor the Persian Gulf and is defined by its rugged terrain. There was also a lack of infrastructure.³²

The invasion of Afghanistan was a clear foreign policy failure for the USSR. By invading another country, it provoked other powers into intervening. As a result, it lost a lot militarily and economically. It also suffered a loss of its reputation, and these actions contributed to its break-up. Can this be called a foreign policy victory for the US? If it means causing the defeat of the opponent alone, yes. However, foreign policy victories or defeats cannot be defined in such a narrow context. After the war, the US simply walked away, leaving Pakistan with three million refugees and two and a half million drug addicts, according to Benazir Bhutto.³³

Billions of dollars were spent through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to train around 80,000 Afghan Mujahideen and around 30,000 Arab and North African jihadis. One million Afghans died with around four million wounded and two million displaced.³⁴ An unintended consequence was that al Qaeda and Bin Laden were created. It led to the 9/11 catastrophe.

There are other questions that cannot be answered by studying these cases. For example, in cases of genocides, should countries stay silent? Are there some circumstances where support to insurgent groups is necessary? Have there been cases where support to insurgent groups has resolved a conflict? Are there other methods by which a country can intervene? Could a country facilitate talks or use other diplomatic methods? Are United Nations (UN)-led interventions a better route to take?

The wars in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka went beyond the late 1980s and early 1990s. But since the US support to the Mujahideen and Indian support to the LTTE and other militants ended in this period (to a major extent), the periods of war after this falls beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, what it attempts to demonstrate through the cases of Afghanistan and Sri Lanka is that diplomatic routes such as arbitration and negotiation provide a better template for foreign policy successes.

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