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**Gregory Winger. "The Nixon Doctrine and U.S. Relations with the Republic of Afghanistan, 1973-1978: Stuck in the Middle with Daoud." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19:4 (Fall 2017): 4-41. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws\\_a\\_00763](https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_00763).**

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Review by **Robert B. Rakove**, Stanford University

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In autumn 2001, between the commencement of the U.S. bombing campaign against the Taliban and its inconclusive coda around Tora Bora, Indiana University historian Nick Cullather set about writing a history of U.S. development efforts in Afghanistan. Relying upon materials available in Bloomington, online resources, and a few documents mailed to him by friends, he produced the remarkable article "Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State," noting in his acknowledgments his hope that it would "inspire additional research on the history of the United States in Afghanistan."<sup>1</sup>

Nearly sixteen years after his essay was first published (a revised version reached bookshelves within his subsequent book, *The Hungry World*), Cullather's hope has been only partly fulfilled.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, the U.S. war in Afghanistan sparked renewed interest in an earlier Afghan conflict: the Soviet war in the 1980s. Yet the Afghan-American relationship in the decades preceding the cataclysmic events of 1978-1979 remains largely overlooked.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Cullather, "Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State," *The Journal of American History* 89:2 (September 2002): 512-537.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 108-133.

<sup>3</sup> Leon B. Poullada and Leila Poullada, *The Kingdom of Afghanistan and the United States: 1828-1973* (Lincoln: Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and Dageforde Pub., 1995); and Jeffery J. Roberts, *The Origins of Conflict in Afghanistan* (Westport: Praeger, 2003) both chart the relationship into the 1950s. Important recent works on Cold War-era Afghanistan, which deal with the U.S.-Afghan relationship include Elisabeth Leake, *The Defiant Border: The Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands in the Era of Decolonization, 1936-65* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Robert D. Crews, *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015); Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold*

Gregory Winger has written an important and valuable contribution to the still-emerging literature on U.S.-Afghan relations and the Afghan Cold War. This article, moreover, tackles a particularly ambiguous phase in the Kabul-Washington bond: the second reign of Mohammad Daoud Khan. Daoud, who had served as prime minister from 1953-1963, overthrew his cousin, King Mohammad Zahir Shah on 17 July 1973, and ruled as president of his self-declared Republic of Afghanistan until his own ouster and murder at the end of April 1978.

“Stuck in the Middle with Daoud” (to use its era-specific subtitle) is an incisively researched, clearly written study of an ambiguous, critical phase of Afghan-American relations. Winger makes adroit use of records from a number of U.S. archives, the secondary literature on Afghanistan, and also broader studies of the Cold War. As a result an intriguing depiction emerges of a subtle, briefly successful multilateral effort by Washington and its regional allies to entice Daoud and his newly-established republic into a closer relationship.

Daoud was a particularly enigmatic figure: reticent, suspicious, and ruthless. His earlier government, from 1953-1963, witnessed the high point of U.S. anxiety about the direction of the Kingdom of Afghanistan. Neither the Kennedy nor Eisenhower administrations regarded Daoud as pro-Communist in his outlook, but both fretted about the broader implications of his strident advocacy for the self-determination of Pashtuns in Pakistan.

How strange then that the Nixon administration responded so calmly to his return to power in the summer of 1973, when he took advantage of his cousin’s medical holiday in Italy. The White House had some prior warning. As Winger notes, an emissary from Daoud reached out to the U.S. embassy in Kabul in March 1972, inquiring how the United States would respond if Daoud returned to power. U.S. Ambassador Robert Neumann responded—in phrasing worthy of the fictional Prime Minister Francis Urquhart<sup>4</sup>—that while the United States could not (possibly) comment on the composition of the Afghan government, it would gauge any Kabul regime based upon its policies toward U.S. interests and the general pursuit of stability in the region. Neumann remained uncertain what Daoud had in mind but could not rule out a coup. A conditional green light had been given (13-14).

While chronicling the tacit U.S. role in Daoud’s coup, Winger’s article is also noteworthy for what it does not say. It does not echo the claim, first made by Selig Harrison, and reiterated by Greg Grandin in his recent study of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, that the United States sought to undermine Daoud by backing

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*War Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016). The U.S.-Afghan relationship also receives some coverage in broader studies of aviation and the international activities of the U.S. Department of the Interior; see Jenifer Van Vleck, *Empire of the Air: Aviation and the American Ascendancy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 228-237; Megan Black, “Interior’s Exterior: The State, Mining Companies, and Resource Ideologies in the Point Four Program,” *Diplomatic History* 40:1 (January 2016): 81-110.

<sup>4</sup> The main character of Michael Dobbs’s *House of Cards* trilogy, immortalized on screen by the late Ian Richardson.

fundamentalist rebellions in conjunction with Iran and Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> While the extant diplomatic record does not refute this contention, neither does it support it directly. Winger's article instead illuminates a protracted effort by Kissinger to engage the new Afghan regime. This differs considerably from the earlier 'cool but correct' pattern of U.S.-Chilean relations during President Richard Nixon and Kissinger's three-year campaign to undermine President Salvador Allende. If Washington, Tehran, and Islamabad—or some combination thereof—brandished the stick of covert action against Daoud's republic, so too did they extend some appealing carrots.

One could call this the Nixon Doctrine in action—and indeed Winger improbably manages the feat of depicting the U.S. relationship with a nonaligned power through that lens. Bolstered by the high price of oil and a shiny new arsenal, the Shah of Iran was able to promise Daoud \$2 billion in development aid, the bulk of it intended to fund the construction of a railroad that would link his country to Iranian ports—thereby liberating it from economic dependence on the Soviet Union and unfriendly Pakistan (29-30). The article substantially reinforces the emerging view of the Shah as a willful, independent actor.<sup>6</sup>

Yet another Nixon Doctrine came into play, with particular effect in Afghanistan, and its inclusion in this article would have significantly complicated the story. The history of U.S. Afghanistan policy is frequently that of a modest, cautious country policy, cognizant of the limits of U.S. power in a remote country adjoining the Soviet Union, being superseded by the short-term imperatives of one or another occupant of White House.

In this case, Cold War imperatives competed with Nixon's 'War on Drugs.' For much of the 1970s, the Kabul embassy pressed its host government to combat the cultivation and export of opium and cannabis. Nixon viewed Afghanistan as a battlefield in the war on narcotics, and this may explain why his administration received news of Daoud's coup so calmly. Daoud's authoritarian republic would prove a more effective ally in this endeavor than the constitutional monarchy that it had replaced.<sup>7</sup>

Greater Afghan cooperation in the fight against drug traffickers—whom Nixon had dubbed “a menace not to Americans alone, but to all mankind” and “literally the slave traders of our time”—offered one index of improving Afghan-American ties.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as Winger chronicles, the prominence of Marxists from the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), and Daoud's antagonism toward Pakistan posed ongoing challenges. Over time, wooed by Washington and Tehran, and intimidated by his northern neighbor, Daoud

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<sup>5</sup> Diego Cordovez and Harrison, Selig S., *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 16; Greg Grandin, *Kissinger's Shadow: The Long Reach of America's Most Controversial Statesman* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2015), 130.

<sup>6</sup> See Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Crews, *Afghan Modern*, 217-227.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Nixon, “Remarks to the Washington Conference on International Narcotics Control,” 18 September 1972, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=3578>.

changed course. He engaged in a slow purge of PDPA members from his cabinet and moved toward détente with Pakistan.

The article conveys a certain ambivalence—understandably given the lack of evidence—concerning the role of the Soviet Union in the fall of Daoud’s republic, and the resulting failure of U.S. policy. It appears reasonably clear that Daoud displeased his northern neighbor, with his westward turn and repression of the PDPA. Even so, four decades later, we still lack convincing evidence of direct Soviet involvement in the events of April 1978. Thus, it is unclear how we should read the assertion that “the unwillingness of the USSR to abide by U.S. gains in Kabul” set the calamities of 1978 into motion (5).

Here, Winger refers to the evanescent 1977 accord forged between the rival wings of the PDPA, the Khalq and Parcham, attributing this to Soviet appeals. There is, presently, a consensus among authors that Soviet blandishments were responsible for the (short-lived) agreement between the two rival factions, so Winger’s article stands on solid ground here.<sup>9</sup> Even so, with all that we have learned since the Cold War about the autonomy of Communist parties, it is worth asking what we really know about this episode. Contrary to early accounts, which treat the endeavor as an explicitly anti-Daoud act, Moscow had sought to end the feud for at least three years.<sup>10</sup> In 1977, it enjoyed the assistance of the Iraqi and Indian Communist parties (which are treated in the secondary literature as subservient to Moscow). By then, as well, Daoud’s hostility toward both the Khalq and Parcham was apparent, and both were already plotting to overthrow him.<sup>11</sup> The time, in short, was ripe for Afghan Marxists to stand together, or most assuredly they would all hang separately.<sup>12</sup> Even then, the burden of Daoud’s overthrow did not distribute equally. Separate accounts give the Khalq the lion’s share of credit for the events of April 1978.<sup>13</sup> The Soviets were, by most accounts, swept along by events, perhaps compelled to give spontaneous support to a coup that they would never have authorized. This actually reinforces a key point of the article, as expressed by Winger: “the autonomy of local actors and their ability to act independent of their respective Cold War patrons (40).”

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<sup>9</sup> Abdul Samad Ghaus, *The Fall of Afghanistan: An Insider’s Account*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey’s International Defense Publishers, 1988), 193-194; Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 17-18; Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), 109-111.

<sup>10</sup> See “DECREE of the Secretariat of the CC CPSU—An Appeal to the Leaders of the PDPA Groups ‘Parcham’ and ‘Khalq,’” 8 January 1974, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI (formerly TsKhSD), f. 89, op. 46, d. 103, ll. 31. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112505>. Abdul Samad Ghaus, the sole surviving memoirist of the Daoud regime, believed in 1988 that the Soviet Union had not made a serious effort to end the split before 1976-77. See Abdul Samad Ghaus, *The Fall of Afghanistan: An Insider’s Account* (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey’s International Defense Publishers, 1988), 194.

<sup>11</sup> Ali Ahmad Jalali, *A Military History of Afghanistan: From the Great Game to the Global War on Terror 1800-2015* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), 352.

<sup>12</sup> Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 184.

<sup>13</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 24–28; Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), 111-113.

Nearly three decades after the end of the Cold War, this is not a novel point. It remains, however, an important one, and the case of Afghanistan proves it emphatically. “Stuck in the Middle with Daoud,” above all, highlights the fragility of a détente system that could be undermined by willful Afghan actors and their reluctant great-power patrons. Winger has made a strong contribution to the study of pre-cataclysm Afghanistan, and the broader study of the 1970s.

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