

The Great Game in Afghanistan: Rajiv Gandhi, General Zia, and the Unending War, by Kallol Bhattacharjee, Noida, Harper Collins, 2017, pp. 300, Rs 599

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A journalist by profession, Kallol Bhattacharjee has written extensively on South Asian affairs and on conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. In writing *The Great Game in Afghanistan*, he has researched extensively into the personal records of John Gunther, who was the United States (US) Ambassador to India between 1985 and 1988. The author was also fortunate to be able to hold extensive interviews with Gunther post-2014 with Ambassador Ronen Sen, who was Rajiv Gandhi's diplomatic aide in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) during this crucial period. He has also researched many other sources, especially after 2014 when the National Archives of the US were declassified, and became available to him. For personal reasons, John Gunther had maintained a very detailed and systematic record of various personal and official exchanges and stored them in a private library in his retirement home in Paris. To this, the author was given unhindered access.

The Great Game in Afghanistan is an interwoven account of many stories. The narrative is based on the divergent and mostly conflicting interests of various powers involved in Afghanistan, and the critical

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roles played by then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi; US President Ronald Reagan; the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev; Pakistan President Zia Ul Haq; President of Afghanistan, Mohammed Najibullah; and various Mujahideen chiefs operating in that troubled country. The major issues at stake that were being negotiated included the Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan and the arrangements for the governance of that country thereafter. While the umbrella was provided by the peace talks being conducted at Geneva under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), actual diplomatic parleys and adjustments were being negotiated in different world capitals. In the book, Bhattacharjee narrates some of the more relevant issues discussed and agreements arrived at during these occurrences.

By the mid-1980s, the USSR had clearly indicated that it was considering withdrawal from Afghanistan. This was due to the increasing armed resistance that they faced and the introduction of Stinger missiles, which were inflicting critical helicopter and manpower losses on the Russians. Other internal factors—that were later to lead to the USSR's break-up—were at a nascent stage. Finally, the economic costs of the war were also proving to be too heavy. At the same time, the USSR wanted to ensure a systematic withdrawal, along with the installation of a friendly government in Afghanistan so that their own security and continuing influence could be ensured. Thus, the Soviet Union was happy to support the ongoing Geneva talks under auspices of the UN. In this scheme, the deposed Afghan monarch King Zahir Shah would come out of exile and assume the duties of Head of State, with Najibullah wielding real power.

On his part, General Zia of Pakistan wanted his influence in any future arrangements in Afghanistan to retain what he called 'Strategic Depth'. The ace up his sleeve was his control over the various Mujahedeen groups fighting the Soviets at his bidding. At the same time, he was keen that the US should continue to provide Pakistan with both financial and military assistance. The quantum of arms Zia sought was not merely for the ongoing war in Afghanistan but also to cater for a future war with India. Above all, he wanted the US to turn a blind eye towards the nuclear weapons developments taking place in Pakistan. In brief, General Zia was willing to be the 'Instrument' for the US in Afghanistan, but at a price that he determined.

In addition to the existing Soviet support, Najibullah, was very keen on Indian support as it gave him greater legitimacy and support within Afghanistan. He supported the Geneva talks as long as they retained him

in power. He was the only leader who was capable of dealing ruthlessly with various factions in Afghanistan.

For its part, India was interested in the Soviet withdrawal, stability in Afghanistan, better Indo-Pakistan relations and, above all, a nuclear free South Asia. All this could only become possible with American support.

The arrival of seasoned diplomat John Gunther as the US Ambassador to India, saw an upward shift in Indo-US relations with a gradual mending of past differences. Gunther sympathised with the Indian desire for greater trade and technology transfers. He also agreed with Indian views on Afghanistan. Such views earned him lots of friends in India, and direct access to the PMO—and even the PM. The US definitely wanted the Soviets out of Afghanistan and the establishment of a stable government in the war-ravaged country. In Washington's assessment, American influence in Afghanistan in the future was better assured with Pakistan's support, even though they welcomed the improvement in the relations with India.

As things turned out, in his final years, American President Reagan lost some control over his State Department and the Senate. Some senators with views inimical to Indian interests were able to push through amendments which were grossly unfair to India, and were not based on correct facts. Ambassador Gunther's advice was not only ignored, he was also hounded out of the State Department on grounds of ill health and mental instability. The US Senate not only turned a blind eye but also indirectly colluded with Pakistan's clandestine development of nuclear weapons. Throwing their rational assessments aside, various American agencies delivered a colossal supply of arms to Pakistan—far beyond those needed by the Mujahideen. Rajiv Gandhi was thus let down by the US government; Indo-US relations deteriorated and the result was a continuing tragic situation in Afghanistan. Gross miscalculations by the Americans were deftly exploited by General Zia. The lack of judgement and short sightedness displayed by the US at this stage also laid the foundations of the growth of international terrorism at a scale previously unimaginable.

The book shows that Rajiv Gandhi, having been betrayed by the US State Department and the Senate, was still in a position to act as a spoiler. He invited Najibullah to India for an official visit, gave him importance, and was able to impede the implementation of Pakistani, and indirectly the American, plans, to some extent. It is, therefore, revealing to learn of India's influence in Afghanistan's affairs.

Bhattacharjee has included many anecdotes and interesting details of events not previously recorded. There are accounts of the painfully slow and laborious diplomatic parleys that went on for long years over Afghanistan. There is also a clear impression of the falsehood and deceit employed by Zia ul Haq towards the US, USSR, and the UN-appointed negotiator for Afghanistan, in order to gain advantages in the latter. The Soviets were especially annoyed over the unnecessary loss of lives when Pakistan acted against the assurances given, while covering the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. He has also tried to find the answer to the key question: 'Who killed General Zia?' Was it the Americans, the Russians, or the Israelis? Did Zia pay the price for his deceit with the Russians? However, this question has been left unanswered by the author while briefly analysing the connected events and the varied interests of countries involved.

The arrangement of the subject matter, and the back-and-forth narration of events by Bhattacharjee has led to some repetition and confusion regarding the sequence of events. It is possible that this was unavoidable to some extent. The reader will have to pay particular attention to comprehend the correct sequence of events. Having said that, the book is engrossing, fast moving, and contributes to our knowledge of how international affairs are conducted, while also highlighting the tragic turn of circumstances owing to miscalculations and pettiness.