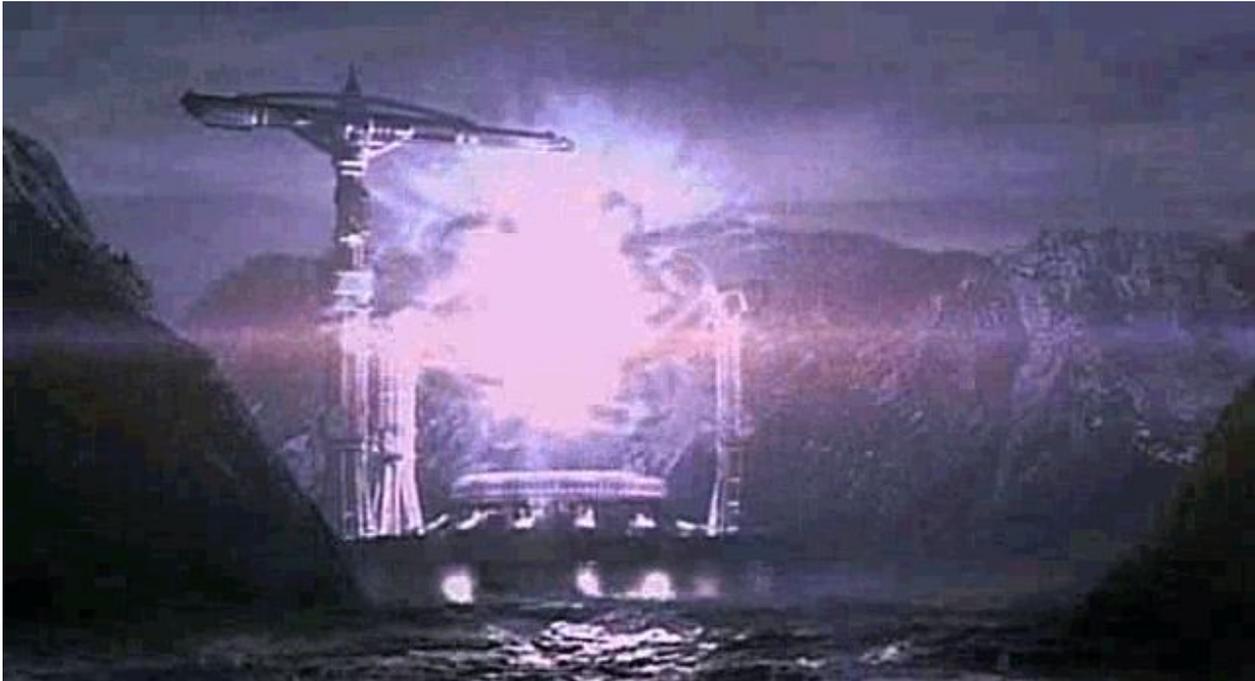


## 2018 marks three Afghan anniversaries

Written by Eric Walberg Эрик Вальберг/ Уолберг □□□□□ □□□□  
Thursday, 05 April 2018 09:50

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1978, 1988 and 1998 were fateful turning points which resounded around the world. All centred around Afghanistan. Hollywood, always a useful barometer, was in sync in a curious way. The film Contact was conceived based on a novel by Carl Sagan written in 1978, but not made till 1998. The heroine Arway goes through a wormhole to Vega and has friendly contact with Vegans who tell her the journey was just humanity's first step to joining other spacefaring species.

Sagan was riding on the last wave of detente in 1978, and wrote a film about the possibility of world peace, depicting the aliens (aka, earth's aliens, the Soviets) as friendly, although the US government almost scuttled scientists' efforts. The US philanthropist behind the mission dies of cancer in the Russian Mir space station, leaving a hopeful □ legacy. But the Soviet Union suddenly became evil again in 1979, and the idea had to go on the shelf until two decades later, when another brief period of detente with the now capitalist Russian allowed the realization of Sagan's dream.

The Afghan snowball started rolling in April 1978, briefly became an avalanche, but looked like it might peter out by 1988, only to pick up steam and become the world crisis by 1998, the aftershocks of which we continue to suffer two decades later. Evil aliens? Force majeure? Systemic? In each case, the US controlled the outcome, and did everything possible to make it worse.

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The 1970s were the zenith of Soviet world power, after the US defeat in Vietnam. South Yemen became the one and only Soviet-style socialist regime in the Arab world from 1970 to 1990. Angola, Mozambique, Somalia, Ethiopia all had socialist revolutions, though they all were bloodbaths, with US and South African troops defending the 'bad guys' to undermine those who wanted socialism.

The Yankees had already dropped more bombs in Vietnam than in the whole of WWII, leaving Vietnam to deal with the aftermath itself. They undermined Cambodia and Laos, but US imperialism was on the rocks' in the 1970s, allowing a window of freedom in international affairs. The □ Cubans came to the aid of the 'good guys' in Angola and Ethiopia with some success. Brave Fidel, defying the angry Americans and taunts of being a Soviet proxy.

But it hardly looked like smooth sailing for the Soviet sponsors of these plucky countries, and it wasn't. Rather than uniting as comradely socialists, Somalia and Ethiopia went to war. Angola and Mozambique were invaded by US proxy South Africa. The devastated Cambodia descended into its Maoist nightmare under Pol Pot, rescued only by long-suffering Vietnam. China was already in league with the US after Nixon made his shocking visit in 1972. These were warnings for future would-be revolutionaries, which in Afghanistan's case went unheeded.

Even Pakistan had its (troubled) moment of Soviet quasi-socialism under Zulfikar Bhutto, president and then prime minister 1971--79, who in 1974 became the first Pakistani leader to make a state visit to Moscow, and managed to get a grudging peace with Afghanistan in 1976, nationalized industries, attempted land reforms, hinting at a new (successful) turn away from the US. It was a heady time for anti-imperialists.

### 1978 - the Saur [revolution] coup

Lame duck Afghan president Sardar Mohammed Daoud was ripe for the picking, and his fury at Moscow for their support of Pakistan over Afghan revanchism\* prompted him to turn to the US, now eager to stop more Soviet 'victories' in the still hot Cold War. The coup in Afghanistan in 1978 looked like the icing on the Soviet cake of world socialism, but the cake, unexpected and unwanted by Moscow, carried a time bomb. The 1978 coup by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was called precisely that in Soviet media, but the genie was out of the bottle and the ongoing Soviet aid continued and could only increase, given the premature Afghan baby was already on life support.

Andropov saw this clearly and vehemently argued against sending troops. He told the Politburo in March 1979: "We must consider very, very seriously the question of whose cause we will be supporting if we deploy forces into Afghanistan. It's completely clear to us that Afghanistan is not ready at this time to resolve all of the issues it faces through socialism. The economy is backward, the Islamic religion predominates, and nearly all of the rural population is illiterate. We know about Lenin's teaching about a revolutionary situation... it is not that type of situation. We can suppress a revolution in Afghanistan only with the aid of our bayonets, and that is for us completely inadmissible." Afghanistan was not Czechoslovakia, and Andropov realized that another intervention like that would be the kiss of death.

At that point it was starry-eyed poet Nur Mohammad Taraki who was nominally the chief revolutionary, though he was in fact a front for the struggling factions between moderates (Parcham) and Maoist-type radicals (Khalq). Andropov could have added the pragmatic advice of Turkish strongman Mustafa Kemal Ataturk to then Afghan Amir Amanullah in the 1920s (heeded by Castro in Cuba): You need a strong, loyal army and bureaucracy in order to undertake ambitious reforms in education and to end restrictions on women. The Afghan dreamers -- Taraki and the Khalq leader Hafizullah Amin -- ignored this vital advice and both were assassinated.

Lenin had made it clear in 1920 at the Comintern congress in Moscow that liberating the colonies would require alliances with bourgeois-nationalist liberation movements (viz. Mustafa Kemal in Turkey, Reza Shah in Iran, Amanullah Khan in Afghanistan, Sun Yat

Sen in China), □ that the rush to communist insurrection would be foolhardy. This was confirmed at the September 1920 congress of peoples of the East in Baku Azerbaijan, attended by revolutionaries from the Dutch east indies, Iran,\*\* India, China and Japan. Only Zinoviev and the young Indian Roy wanted to build communist parties to organize peasants and workers to establish Soviet-style republics right away.

The 'great leader' Taraki pleaded for Soviet troops to stabilize 'his' regime. He told Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin to put Afghan flags on the tanks and send Uzbek soldiers who could pose as ethnic Afghans. Taraki wavered back and forth between the moderate Babrak Karmal and the fanatic Amin, a textbook psychopath, with spies warning him of plots, and his own plots against internal enemies multiplying. His reign of terror mercifully left Karmal alive, shipped to Czechoslovakia as ambassador.

Taraki was murdered by Amin, who issued edicts on land reform and education, sending young idealists to villages to enact the reforms, where they were promptly shot. The anti-regime revolt spread like wildfire. The Allah-u-akbar organization sprang up, with processions, and nighttime sessions on rooftops across the land to intone the azan, emulating the campaign in Pakistan that encouraged Zia ul-Haq to overthrow Zulfikar Bhutto and execute him in 1979. Iran had its Islamic revolution in 1979. Islam was on the march.

It was an impossible situation for the Soviet Union. Abandon a revolutionary government? One that was on its vulnerable underbelly, with now-hostile Pakistan a US client? The US slavered at the Soviet quandary. Suddenly the Cold War tables were turned. Socialist Bhutto was gone, Afghans were in revolt against communism. A new anticommunist client of anticommunist client Pakistan. How could Reagan resist?

Karmal came back from Prague on a Soviet plane. He did his best, setting up a department of Islamic affairs for first time in Afghan history. He renovated and built 600 mosques. Provincial schools taught in ethnic mother tongues, newspapers from Central Asian republics showed what advantages Soviet support would provide. Teaching emphasized historical and cultural affinities between ethnic groups in north and Central Asians across the Amu Darya. He lobbied Pashtun tribes with food, cash, non-interference in customs and traditions. In 1985, a high jirga of the tribes 4,000 (1,000

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**exiles from Pakistan) was convened, where he resigned and passed the reigns to Dr Mohammad Najibullah.**

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**\*In 1893, the British made Afghan Amir Abdur Rahman Khan sign an agreement in which the ethnic Pashtun and Baloch territories were divided by the Durand Line. This was a standard divide and rule policy of the British and would lead to strained relations over 'Pashtunistan' with the later new state of Pakistan.**

**\*\*British aircraft—based in Persia—bombed the ship in which Persian delegates were crossing the Caspian Sea to Baku: two were killed and several wounded.**

### [Afghan anniversaries Part II](#)

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### [1988 - fatal turning point](#)

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