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Russia's Motives

Sir,

The Soviet motives in Afghanistan could be more deep-rooted than those ascribed to them by Bhabani Sen Gupta in his article "Afghanistan: The Anniversary Waltz" (December 17-31). The Russian interest in Afghanistan dates back to the Tsarist Times when in 1885 the Panjde incident brought Russia and Great Britain to the brink of war. As a matter of fact, the Russian southward is a result of geographic compulsions. The East-West lie of the Soviet Union has always been its strategic handicap. Due to its shape and location in the extreme North it has been denied the use of warmer waters for navigation. Because of this it has also had to bear the strategic disadvantage of having to divide its naval force into the eastern and western fleets, each incapable of supporting the other except through the Indian Ocean, the Arctic Ocean being unsuitable for navigation. It is this division of forces that resulted in their defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1905. This strategic aspect of the Indian Ocean is therefore as important to the Russians as is the economic aspect. Afghanistan could now provide them with a stepping stone.

Whatever Russia's real interests in the region, they certainly are of a permanent nature. This is amply clear from the fact that the conditions they have laid down for withdrawal are incapable of being fulfilled until they themselves want them to be fulfilled.

If the Panjde incident passed off peacefully it was not because of any moral considerations having come into play, but because of the fact that Russia of those days could not take the risk of an involvement with the British Empire. Today the situation is different. The "balance of terror" that obtains between the US and the USSR precludes open intervention by the former, while no other nation has the capacity or the will to resist the Soviet aggression.

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