The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Edited by Amin Saikal and William Maley. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989. 171 pp. $34.50 (cloth), $8.95 (paper).

Books rushed into print to capitalize on broad interest in major political developments almost inevitably date quickly. A collection of articles on the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan would seem soon destined to be overtaken by events. Certainly, there is much about the Afghan experience—from the fall of the monarchy in 1973 and the communist coup of 1978, through the Soviet invasion of 1979 and the decision in Moscow to end the armed intervention, to the failure of the Kabul government to crumble following the Soviet pullout—that was poorly predictable as to occurrence or consequences. The surprise here is that editors Amin Saikal and William Maley have put together a collection of essays identifying the implications of the pullout of February 1989 and the background for Moscow's decision that promises to have extended value.

The ten essays in this well conceived book focus on the impact of the war and withdrawal on Soviet domestic politics, the expected adjustments in Soviet foreign policy and alliance structure, and the regional and global consequences of a de-Sovietization of the conflict. The editors in their introduction provide a brief but useful historical backdrop to the Soviet intervention and eventual pullout. In a following chapter Maley offers a careful assessment of the Geneva Accords of April 1988 that paved the way for Moscow's retreat. Maley reviews the documents, finding important legal flaws in the text, but suggests that the accords be judged primarily by political criteria. On this account, he judges the major weakness to be the omission of any provision for self-determination. Indeed, subsequent events suggest a tragic, missed historic opportunity to assure a viable interim government in Kabul following the Soviets' exodus.
Louis Dupree, who died about the time this book was published, brings to bear his vast anthropological knowledge of Afghanistan to discern the cultural factors that led to the Soviets' political defeat and can be expected to establish post-withdrawal patterns. Dupree then turns to a subject that held much of his interest in recent years—the refugees in Pakistan. Distinguishing the several categories of refugee, he assesses the likelihood of their return. Prescribing for the future, Dupree argues that development should begin at the bottom rather than with a centralized, hence probably inefficient, bureaucracy. Although, along with most observers, Dupree underestimated the survival potential of the Kabul government, his longer vision of an Islamic Federated Republic based on provincial semi-autonomy will probably hold up.

The crises for the regions of South and Southwest Asia created by the Afghan war and especially the Soviet invasion are detailed by Amin Saikal. Pakistan was fearful for its national integrity and security; but the regime of Zia ul-Haq is seen as having gained in military support, economic activity, and political advantage over the domestic opposition. India's self-serving position in the conflict is described, as is an isolated and preoccupied Iran's attempt to offer limited support to the resistance while avoiding the full antagonism of the Soviet Union. Saikal's prediction of greater cooperation among resistance forces and an emerging international consensus has yet to be demonstrated. Saikal is nonetheless convincing when he argues that an Afghanistan collapsing into anarchy cannot be discounted and that its consequences for the Afghan people would be disastrous.

Subsequent chapters by T. H. Rigby and Geoffrey Jukes survey the impact of withdrawal on Soviet politics and its armed forces. Rigby doubts deep domestic political implications. Yet, in discussing how Afghanistan fits the general pattern of Soviet-Third World policy in the 1970s, he finds that the withdrawal has major implications for theories of historical inevitability and Third World development. Jukes' carefully reasoned essay concludes that the Soviet military never regarded the Afghan conflict as an entirely serious commitment and that, because the decision to leave was a political one, the military had little input.

Robert Miller, after distinguishing among the kinds and levels of Soviet alliances and evaluating Moscow's experiences, cogently argues that the Afghan experience epitomizes the problems in an era of "new thinking" for states with a "socialist orientation." Miller points out how strategies of "national reconciliation" have become necessary for old clients in view of the costs of maintaining commitments. He wrongly discounted, however, the likelihood that the decision to leave Afghanistan could figure in an East European liberalization once the threat of Soviet intervention was removed. Following a more predictable course are Sino-Soviet relations, examined in an essay by Leslie Holmes. Whatever happens in Afghanistan, Holmes does not expect relations to be deflected from their slowly growing improvement.

Richard Falk's penultimate chapter considers the broadest international implications of the withdrawal. He accurately intuits that Soviet forbearance in Eastern Europe would become more likely after the failed military intervention in Afghanistan. The manner in which the Afghan