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Afghanistan: The Revolution After Four Years

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An Intelligence Assessment

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July 1982

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Afghanistan: The Revolution After Four Years



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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by 
 Office of Near East-South Asia Analysis. It was
coordinated with the Directorate of Operations and
the National Intelligence Council. Comments and
queries are welcome and may be directed to the
Chief, South Asia Division, 

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**Afghanistan:
The Revolution
After Four Years**

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Key Judgments

Four years after seizing power, the Afghan Communists face strong resistance throughout the country. The weak and divided Babrak regime must depend on Soviet troops to counter the insurgency. [Redacted]

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The Soviets are helping the Afghan Communists set up the same kind of party and government institutions that the USSR uses to control its own population. The Soviets are also urging the Afghans to adopt the same kind of social, economic, and political tactics that enabled the early Bolsheviks to consolidate control over the USSR. Most of those programs, however, are implemented by a bitterly divided Afghan Communist Party and by civil servants and military officers, many of whom secretly oppose the Babrak government. The insurgency, moreover, denies these officials access to much of the population. [Redacted]

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These programs have failed to overcome the popular perception that Communist policies threaten Afghan traditions. Moreover, they have failed to establish effective institutions for controlling Afghanistan or for fulfilling promises—ranging from democracy to prosperity. Significant popular support for a Communist government installed by foreigners is probably unattainable, but government programs could create conditions in which the benefits of cooperation and the costs of opposition outweigh, for many Afghans, their dislike for the Communists. Such programs cannot be implemented, however, so long as a large part of Afghanistan remains under insurgent control. [Redacted]

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The Afghan military remains largely ineffective. Overshadowing its other problems is its inability to find men willing to fight for the Communist government, a problem unlikely to be solved until after the government's nonmilitary programs are effectively implemented. [Redacted]

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The Afghan Government faces an impasse that prevents it from dealing with the insurgents:


- Widespread popular hostility toward the government and lack of control in the countryside preclude the recruiting of a loyal army.

Information available as of 1 May 1982 has been used in the preparation of this report.


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- Without an effective army, Kabul cannot establish enough control to implement policies that might gain it some degree of popular acceptance. The weakness of the Afghan Army, moreover, forces the government to depend on Soviet troops for survival, even though the Soviet presence is a major cause of popular hostility. 

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A defeat of the insurgents by Soviet troops appears the only way to overcome this impasse. Moscow, however, has too few men in Afghanistan to suppress the insurgency. The Soviets currently appear to be counting on a war of attrition that will eventually make the cost of continued resistance too high for the insurgents to bear. In the meantime, the Soviets will continue to experience human and equipment casualties and a steady drain on their resources. 

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The Soviet Role

The key to managing the Afghan Government or its programs has eluded the Soviets. Soviet advisers pervade the government, and the Afghan Communists could not survive without Soviet military and economic support. Still, the Soviet ability to control events in Afghanistan, except through military force, is limited. Even in the parts of Afghanistan under government control, effective implementation of Soviet-inspired programs is rare. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

popular hostility to the Communists is so great—in part because of policies pursued against Soviet advice before Soviet troops intervened—that few Afghans are willing to cooperate with the Soviets [Redacted]

[Redacted]

many instances in which the Soviets, apparently reluctant to alienate the Afghan Communists, have negotiated with Afghan political leaders rather than suppress factional disputes in the ruling party or remove unqualified senior officials. Because the Afghan Communist Party cannot furnish enough loyal and capable civil servants and military officers, the Soviets have allowed men to remain in office who through inaction, incompetence, or sabotage frustrate Soviet efforts. [Redacted]

Improving the Government's Image

In the two years since its installation by Soviet troops, the Babrak government has made no progress toward consolidating its position. Babrak's greatest political liability is the presence of Soviet troops, a situation that condemns him as a foreign puppet. Moreover, almost all diplomats, journalists, and scholars agree that he has been unable to convince most Afghans that his government is any less doctrinaire, narrowly based, tyrannical, or anti-Islamic than those of his Marxist predecessors. He has denounced the mass arrests and executions carried out under President Amin, and his rule has been somewhat more lenient than those of his predecessors. Thousands, however,

remain in prison, basic freedoms are denied, and some officials associated with the oppressive Taraki and Amin governments still hold important posts. [Redacted]

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Babrak has sought unsuccessfully to widen popular support by including prominent non-Communists in the government. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] most senior officials of pre-Communist governments remain hostile to the Communists and the Soviets and some refuse to cooperate even when threatened. The menace of insurgent retaliation deters others. In addition, the Communists' reluctance to give prominent non-Communists real authority reduces the attractiveness of high office. The few who have accepted government positions are suspect to most Afghans, [Redacted] The most prominent, Commerce Minister Jalalar, the only non-Communist in the cabinet, is believed—probably correctly—by many Afghans to be a longtime KGB agent. Some other appointments have led to embarrassing defections including Babrak's economic adviser and a delegate to a UN conference who used the meeting to denounce the Soviets. [Redacted]

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Babrak has been unable to dispel hostility stemming from the belief that his government seeks to destroy Islam. In contrast to his Communist predecessors, Babrak claims to be a devout Muslim; his frequent attendance at religious services is well publicized. Official meetings—including those of the cabinet—begin with readings from the Koran. Councils of religious leaders regularly endorse government programs, citing passages from the Koran to prove regime policies are Islamic. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] most Afghans doubt the sincerity of the government's devotion to religion, both because of the close links between Kabul and the avowedly atheistic Soviet regime and because many government programs are seen as anti-Islamic. For

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Babrak vacationing in the Crimea [redacted]



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example, [redacted]

[redacted] land reform is viewed as contrary to Islamic precepts governing property rights and educational programs as an effort to propagate an anti-Islamic ideology. Most prominent religious leaders are either in jail or openly support the insurgents; those who back the government are generally regarded as traitors to God. [redacted]

Sporadic attempts to demonstrate concern for the interests of minorities by such measures as increasing radiobroadcasts in their languages have had little impact. [redacted]

[redacted] indicate continued strong opposition in minority areas to the government, with most people not even aware of the government's gestures. Those who seek greater freedom from domination by the Pushtuns—who constitute about half the population—regard the Babrak regime, like all of its predecessors, as a Pushtun government. [redacted]

[redacted] no lessening of hostility toward the government since the elevation of the ethnic Hazara Soltan Ali Keshtmand to the prime-ministership, the highest rank for a non-Pushtun in more than 50 years. [redacted]

Promises and Policies

In our view, Babrak's policies have generally failed because they have the conflicting goals of winning popular support and turning Afghanistan into a socialist state on the Soviet model. The land reform program illustrates most of the problems government efforts have encountered. The Taraki government intended the program to win peasant support and destroy the power of the "feudal" landowning elite through redistribution of land, to increase production, and to lay the basis for organizing Afghan agriculture on the Soviet model. [redacted]

Like many other government programs, it reflected doctrinaire Marxist misconceptions about Afghan society. Most peasants had little reason to support the program. Fragmentation of holdings was a more serious problem than large estates. Land reform threatened mutually beneficial relationships between the large landlords and the tenants or small landholders. [redacted]

many peasants regarded land redistribution as stealing and hence anti-Islamic. In any case, the government lacked the power to enforce the program or to

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protect those to whom it gave land. Realizing the program was only fueling resistance, the Taraki government eventually announced it had been completed ahead of schedule and quietly abandoned it [redacted]

Notwithstanding earlier failures, the Marxists still seem to regard the program as both a means of restructuring Afghan society and—despite widespread opposition—winning rural support. Babrak announced that land reform would be one of his immediate goals. His government did little about the program until the summer of 1981, when it announced a revised program that virtually abandoned the original Marxist goals in favor of winning popular support. Almost anyone who agreed to support the government would have his holdings restored, and the government would even help military officers increase their holdings. Still, the government kept grievances alive by discussing such unpopular institutions as “cooperative” farms, and in January it issued a probably fictitious survey of land reform that both promised that reform would follow Afghan traditions and proposed measures that violated those traditions.

Other programs have had similar problems [redacted]

[redacted] efforts to give women greater freedom—by such measures as abolishing dowries and forbidding forced marriages—have pleased a few Westernized Afghans but alienated most of the population—including most women—who view such programs as attacks on the family and religion. [redacted] programs to establish rural schools and teach adults to read are regarded as efforts to interfere in local affairs and corrupt the youth—especially girls. The destruction of thousands of schools by ordinary villagers as well as by hardcore insurgents demonstrates both the adverse popular reaction and the government’s inability to carry out the program. [redacted]

Marxist Prosperity

The Marxists have tried to justify the changes they seek in Afghanistan by pointing to potential material benefits. Four years of civil war, however, have brought shortages, inflation, unemployment, and virtually no sign of improvement. [redacted]

In agriculture the government has announced an increase in the area under cultivation, but even if the claim is true, this most important sector of the economy faces serious problems. The flight of 2 million or more refugees has in some parts of the country drastically reduced the manpower available for labor-intensive phases of agricultural activity such as the harvest. The livestock population has been reduced by the exodus of herds belonging to refugees, by increased slaughtering, and by diseases resulting from inadequate nutrition. [redacted]

Agricultural problems have hurt the government more than they have the insurgents. [redacted]

[redacted] have confirmed reports of serious food shortages in a few isolated areas, but they also report that the standard of living in most of the country—although low—is no worse than before fighting began. [redacted]

[redacted] the fighting has not interrupted the crop cycle. The disruption of the transportation system, the government’s inability to collect grain and other agricultural products in insurgent-controlled areas, and the reluctance of some farmers to sell to the government, however, have created serious shortages in government-controlled areas. During 1981 Kabul announced agreements to import 215,000 tons of wheat from the USSR. [redacted]

The small industrial sector suffers from shortages of fuel, raw materials, spare parts, and labor. In 1981 shortfalls in the processing of such major products as sugar beets and vegetable oil more than offset announced gains in lesser fields such as natural gas and printing. [redacted]

industrial aid projects are five to 10 years behind schedule because of suspended economic aid from the West and the lack of security at many sites. The few Soviet-sponsored projects under way are intended to ease military supply problems. [redacted]

According to Afghan Government statistics, government revenue collections are at a record low. Import duties—formerly the most important source of revenue—have plummeted, revenues from tourism have almost stopped, and in most of the country the

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government cannot collect taxes. Official statistics also indicate that the 1981 budget was financed primarily by Soviet grants and loans and by drawing down \$11 million monthly in foreign exchange reserves—compared to an average rate of \$6 million a month in 1980. Additional Soviet subsidies in early 1982 and the purchase of goods from the USSR rather than non-Communist countries have kept foreign exchange reserves stable this year. [redacted]

Mechanisms for Control

The Communists have been unsuccessful in maintaining institutions to control the population. [redacted]

[redacted] the Babrak government has been unable to establish effective local government in most of the country. Officials appointed by Kabul are frequently isolated in district or provincial capitals without the means and often the will to extend their authority into the countryside. In many places local governments are controlled by village elders acting independently or by local insurgent leaders. In some places rudimentary governments responsible for larger areas—in central Afghanistan the greater part of three provinces—reportedly are developing in opposition to central authority. [redacted]

Kabul's efforts to buy off or win over local leaders have usually failed. One tactic has been to promise almost complete autonomy to a village or tribe if it stops fighting. Such agreements, however, in effect turn over an area to the insurgents and end—usually quickly—when the government tries to exercise its authority. Although promises of arms, money, or support against traditional enemies have won the support of a few tribes, tribal contingents have proved highly unreliable in combat. [redacted]

[redacted] some tribal leaders take the bribes and continue fighting against the government. [redacted]

Kabul lacks the military power to impose in most of the country the new system of local government that it announced in September 1981. Despite some gestures toward Afghan tradition, the system is modeled on the Soviets in the USSR. The announcement of a program that cannot be implemented but that so clearly reveals the intention to turn Afghanistan into a Soviet-style state suggests a judgment by Afghan

leaders that efforts to establish local government will be futile until the insurgents are defeated. The Communists, anticipating that the reaction would be strong only if they tried to implement the system, may have decided there was no need to propose less than the program they wanted. [redacted]

The Communist Party

The Kabul government's main political instrument—the People's Democratic Party—has failed to control even Afghanistan's Communists, let alone the populace. [redacted] the party has only about 18,000 members—not the 75,000 to 100,000 it claims, and even Soviet propagandists have at times contradicted Kabul's claims. Prospects for the party gaining new supporters are dim. In rural areas those proselytizing for the party can travel safely only with a strong military escort. A few join in hope of obtaining personal benefits, such as promotion in the bureaucracy or the military, but the party has nothing to offer most Afghans. Most potential party members believe they have little chance to advance in the party, and the disadvantages of membership outweigh the benefits for many. Party members are prime targets for assassination by urban insurgents—27 reportedly were killed in Kabul in one three-week period late last year. Adding to the unpopularity of party membership are efforts by party leaders to force members into the Army. [redacted]

[redacted] there is rampant disunity and disloyalty within the Afghan Government. Fighting between the rival Khalq and Parcham factions may account for as many deaths of party members as insurgent activity. Even some members of Babrak's Parcham faction object strongly to his reliance on Soviet support. Although there is no firm evidence of tensions between Babrak and Prime Minister Keshtmand, the latter could eventually become a focus of opposition to Babrak. [redacted]

There is little chance the party will resolve its major problems. The Soviets—fearful of reducing what little support they have in Afghanistan—have been unwilling to allow either faction to purge the other. Moreover, Soviet efforts to resolve party differences have

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been fruitless. A year ago Moscow apparently tried to work out a compromise, one element of which would be the appointment of a prime minister acceptable to both sides. [redacted]

Moscow was soon faced with Khalqi demands for virtual control of the government and Parchamist refusals to yield power. After more than a month of negotiations, Moscow abandoned its effort, sided with Parcham, and allowed Soltan Ali Keshtmand—one of the most anti-Khalqi of Babrak's supporters—to become prime minister. [redacted]

In late 1981 the Soviets began organizing a party conference that they apparently hoped would encourage unity among the Afghan Communists, resolve factional differences, increase support in the party for government policies, and enhance the party's authority and legitimacy in Afghanistan. In generally honest elections for delegates, the Khalqis made a strong showing, but Parchamist officials ignored some of the results and chose their own delegates. The two-day session, which opened in Kabul on 14 March, was completely controlled by the Parchamists, who allowed no serious attempt to deal with the party's many problems. The Soviets presumably decided that factional differences were still so great that it was safer to concede to the Parchamists' control of the gathering than to allow a bitter fight over party organization and policies. The heavyhanded methods used to guarantee Parchamist control nevertheless added to Khalqi resentments against both Babrak's followers and the Soviets. [redacted]

Party fronts to attract specific social groups have been less successful in Afghanistan than elsewhere, partly because Afghan society is loosely organized and traditional. In other countries, for example, Communist-controlled labor fronts have co-opted the membership of non-Communist unions; in Afghanistan almost no labor unions existed when the Communists seized power, and the government created most of those organizations that now comprise the Central Council of Trade Unions. [redacted]

Afghan fronts are used primarily to generate propaganda directed at foreign countries rather than to win support or exert control in Afghanistan. For example, the primary function of the Democratic Organization for Afghan Women is to remind world opinion of the

contrast between the government's progressive policies toward women and the much more traditional views of most insurgent leaders. Most of the fronts seem to do little more than issue occasional statements in support of Kabul's policies; they apparently do not even seek new members, at least outside Kabul. [redacted]

The only group not concentrating on propaganda, the Democratic Organization for Afghan Youth—patterned after the Soviet Komsomol—has gradually become an adjunct to the military rather than a mechanism for organizing Afghan youth. The Afghan press reports that the group has sent a few military units to fight in the countryside and also provides recruits for the Defense of the Revolution Organization, a local defense force. Finally, the group tries to reinforce discipline and propagate Communist ideology in the military establishment. [redacted]

The way in which the government established the Vast National Fatherland Front was a further indication that Kabul finds these organizations useful primarily for generating propaganda. Provincial representatives, "prominent" individuals, and 12 front organizations formed the Fatherland Front at a preliminary meeting in December 1980 and a founding meeting in June 1981. The organizers of both meetings clearly devoted efforts to staging a well-publicized gathering, but they evidently paid little attention to the Front's ability to organize the Afghan people. [redacted] in selecting provincial delegates the only consideration seems to have been to ensure that the government could claim every province was represented, if only by civil servants from Kabul posing as provincial delegates. The government failed to bribe or coerce prominent non-Communists into attending in order to give the sessions more credibility. [redacted]

The Military Solution

With little prospect that its political and social programs will give it effective control of Afghanistan, Kabul appears to be counting increasingly on a military solution. Several public statements by Babrak in recent months appear to make combating

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the insurgency—rather than pursuing reform—the highest priority for the party. The Afghan press still gives a distorted version of events, but over the past year it has stopped pretending that the insurgency is a minor problem and now reports extensive fighting. It recently noted, for example, that forces subordinate to the Interior Ministry had been in 5,200 clashes with insurgents in 1981. [redacted]

When military and other programs conflict, priority is almost always given to the military. Communist leaders have been willing to risk damage to both the party and the youth organization by forcing members into the Army. The government almost certainly was aware that its attempt to call up several hundred thousand reservists in September 1981 would be unpopular. The speed with which it began exempting men, however, suggests it did not anticipate the severity of the economic disruption caused by the flight of reservists. Forced conscription also fuels public resentment. Economic programs that might win popular support have been largely abandoned—the emphasis is on those directly related to the war effort [redacted]

The government's armed forces, however, almost always cannot or will not cope with the insurgents. The few major offensive operations the Afghan Army has staged without significant Soviet participation have been failures. [redacted]

[redacted] in the spring of 1981 an Afghan offensive designed to block a major insurgent supply route in northern Paktia Province collapsed quickly, in part because of desertions that included the defection of almost all of one regiment. In the summer of 1981 Soviet advisers ordered Afghan units and a group of untrained cadets to clear insurgents from the Paghman area near Kabul. [redacted]

[redacted] over 5,000 Afghan troops participated in the ill-fated operation in which 267 were killed, 400 deserted or were missing, and 180 vehicles were lost. Afghan forces have fared just as poorly when they had significant support from Soviet troops. [redacted] in

August and September 1981 the Afghans suffered heavy losses in men and equipment in the fourth joint effort to clear insurgents from the Panjsher valley

north of Kabul—an effort that accomplished even less than previous attempts to wrest control of the valley from the resistance. [redacted]

Probably because of the repeated defeats, exclusively Afghan offensive operations have become rare. Units in northeastern Afghanistan reportedly almost ceased offensive operations between July and October 1981. [redacted]

[redacted] special units, such as commandos, carry out small-scale raids, but in large-scale operations Afghan units are generally used only in support of Soviet troops, and even then results are usually disappointing. One of the few important Afghan clearing operations this year was in Samangan Province in March. [redacted] the Army, although accompanied by a Soviet unit, suffered heavy losses and lost control of three districts in a week of fighting [redacted]

Afghan troops seem unable to respond effectively to insurgent ambushes of road convoys. Their tendency to slow down or stop when under fire—without returning fire effectively—leads to high casualties, and a lack of coordination among convoys, main garrisons, and the Air Force makes matters worse. Afghan units are also unable or unwilling to counter insurgent attacks in the main urban areas. Only major Soviet efforts have been able to bring the second- and third-largest cities—Herat and Qandahar—under tenuous government control. [redacted]

Afghan soldiers and police in isolated towns and military posts maintain what government presence exists in much of the countryside. In many areas, however, these units survive because commanders have established tacit arrangements with local insurgent groups. In exchange for noninterference, the insurgents bypass the cooperative garrison and attack other Afghan posts, convoys, and Soviet units. [redacted]

[redacted] some Afghan commanders have bought immunity from attacks by supplying arms and ammunition to the insurgents. [redacted]

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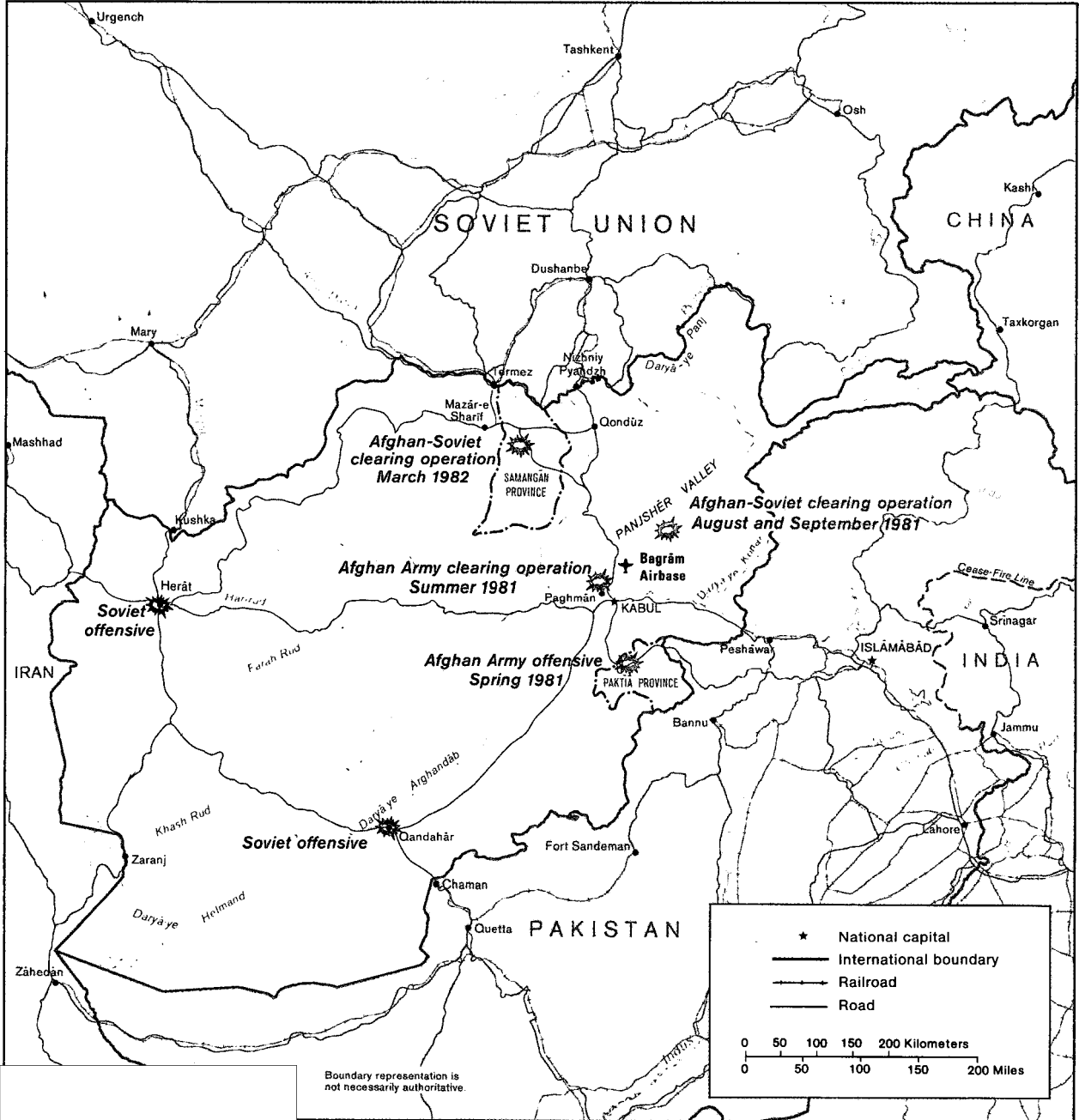
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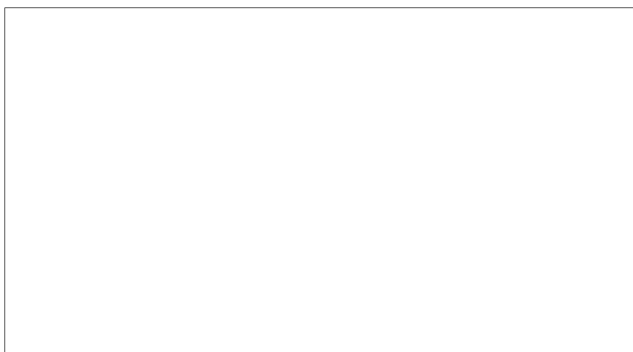
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The Soviets indirectly control the Afghan Army but have little contact with most of its soldiers. Roughly 3,500 Soviet advisers are attached to Afghan units down to the battalion and perhaps company level and must approve all orders. Soviets routinely approve and oversee all combat operations. Soviet orders, however, are implemented through Afghan officers and non-commissioned officers. These men are still largely responsible for the handling of Afghan troops—especially at the lower echelons where direct supervision by Soviets is rare. [redacted]

[redacted] Afghans frequently ignore, circumvent, or misinterpret Soviet orders, contributing to the failure of both combat operations and efforts to rebuild the Afghan military. This presumably is the result of incompetence, inexperience, poor relations with the Soviets, sympathy for the insurgents, and the desire to avoid combat. Purges and massive desertions have resulted in an officer corps composed of professional soldiers who generally seek to avoid trouble with either the insurgents or the Communists and of party loyalists promoted regardless of experience or competence. [redacted]

Kabul's efforts to improve its armed forces have accomplished little. Recruiting programs clearly have failed. The Defense of the Revolution units formed for local defense and border battalions intended to prevent insurgent infiltration from Pakistan and Iran are even less effective than the regular Army. The division of the country into zones, each headed by a senior party member, which is intended to increase coordination among the various security organizations and give Kabul more control over military operations, did not slow insurgent gains in 1981. [redacted]

There also is little the Soviets can do soon to improve the Afghan military. More aircraft—especially helicopters—could improve air support for ground operations and boost the Air Force's currently weak capability to supply isolated units and evacuate wounded. Training of officers and specialists—about 2,000, including Defense Minister Rafi, are now in the USSR—will raise the professional competence of the military and might create a cadre around which a new Afghan Army eventually could be built, should there be a rebirth of the Army's loyalty, morale, and motivation. As long as most enlisted men and many officers have little desire to fight for the Babrak government, potential improvements in mobility and firepower will have only a marginal impact. [redacted]

Outlook

Both the Soviets and the Afghan Communists will continue to try to win popular toleration, if not support, for the Babrak government and strengthen party and government mechanisms for control of the Afghan people. The reluctance of prominent non-Communists to be associated with the Soviets, the popular perception that those who do cooperate have sold out to the enemy, and the inability of the government to pursue policies—such as reducing the Soviet presence—that would establish its credibility as more than a Soviet puppet almost preclude the formation of a government more acceptable to the Afghan people. The Soviets are trying to build a loyal cadre of Afghans who may someday be able to administer an effective Communist government, but it will be years before such a program will have much impact. [redacted]

Government economic, political, and social programs might not make the government more popular, but they would increase the costs of opposition and make cooperation with Kabul more attractive. For example, development programs, technical and financial assistance for farmers, and positive government influence on marketing and tax policies all could be used to encourage cooperation rather than resistance among the rural population. Greater political control would inhibit cooperation with the insurgents and give the

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government greater opportunities to win over or replace local elites by making it clear that cooperation with Kabul rather than resistance is the route to prestige and power. Social programs would begin the long process of changing the outlook of the Afghan people to one more compatible with a Communist state. [redacted]

The programs, however, cannot be implemented so long as the government presence in much of rural Afghanistan is limited to a few isolated police and army posts. The government can neither protect nor reward those who might be inclined to cooperate with it. [redacted]

As long as the government appears to be a foreign puppet pursuing policies that do not benefit the Afghan people, few will be willing to fight for it. The Army will have to rely on forced recruiting, desertion rates will remain high, and government units will be undependable in combat. [redacted]

With Afghan Government forces unable to hold their own against the insurgents and little prospect that social, political, and economic programs will succeed, the burden of maintaining and extending government authority falls on Soviet troops. The Soviet military

does not appear to be following a strategy designed to bring a quick victory. There are enough Soviet troops to maintain control over the most important areas—such as the capital and major military installations—but Soviet forays into the countryside have brought no lasting control because the Soviets cannot spare men to establish permanent garrisons in the areas they clear. The clearing operations, however, raise the cost of the war to both the insurgents and their civilian supporters and demonstrate Soviet military power. The Soviet generals appear to be basing their strategy on the belief that continued military pressure will eventually make the cost of continued resistance too great for the Afghan people to bear. In the meantime, the Soviets will continue to experience human and equipment casualties and a steady drain on their resources. [redacted]

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