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The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

On 27 December the Soviet Union toppled the government of President Hafizullah Amin and installed a new regime headed by Babrak Karmal. The coup was supported by a major Soviet military operation designed to ensure that the new regime retains power. The open-ended nature of the USSR's commitment to control Afghanistan in the face of what is likely to be protracted insurgency means that Soviet military forces will be involved there for the foreseeable future. This in turn will have profound implications for southwest Asia and could substantially influence the future course of Soviet foreign policy as well.

Soviet Motivations

The Soviet invasion followed almost two years of gradually increasing Soviet military support for the Marxist Afghan regime that took power as a result of the April 1978 revolution. But the instability of Marxist Afghan politics, the ineffectiveness of the new leadership and its counterproductive policies, and a growing tribal-based insurgency threatened the pro-Soviet regime's control over the country.

Moscow was deeply concerned throughout 1979 with the regime's ability to hold onto power. Moscow recognized that the Afghanistan military was becoming increasingly ineffective and that the insurgents were extending their operations throughout the country.

Throughout the year, the Soviets tried to get an effective government in Kabul that could deal with the growing problems. The Soviets wanted a regime better able to win military and tribal support. Moscow was involved in intrigues with former President Taraki to oust Amin in the summer of 1979. But Amin turned the tables on Moscow and, in a bloody coup in mid-September, ousted Taraki and his supporters. Amin's move--only days after Soviet President Brezhnev met with and personally endorsed Taraki--may have added a personal dimension to Moscow's interest in removing him.

The Soviets thought Amin was alienating the military, was failing to establish broader political support, and was unresponsive to Soviet counsel. Moscow probably thought his government was losing ground against the insurgents.

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The Soviets probably considered installing a non-Marxist government in Kabul. But Moscow must have decided that it needed greater control over Afghanistan than reliance on such elements would have allowed.

#### Soviet Security Concerns

In the first instance, the Soviets probably were motivated to move into Afghanistan less by the positive benefits to them of maintaining a Marxist regime in power, than by the negative costs if it had been defeated. They probably perceived that the continued deterioration of the security situation would at best have led to prolonged fighting, further coups, and political chaos. At worst, they may have thought it would have led to the installation of an anti-Soviet regime that might have sought to develop ties with Iran, the United States and China.

Such a development would have been a blow to Soviet prestige and could have damaged Soviet credibility with other client regimes, which might reassess their ties with Moscow if the USSR failed to save a revolutionary government on its very borders. Coming at a time when the United States was beginning to reassert its presence in the Indian Ocean, the Soviets might have seen it as creating an image of Soviet weakness.

Moscow has claimed that it intervened in response to foreign intervention in Afghanistan and because the country might have become a "bridgehead" for activities by Soviet "enemies" against the USSR itself. While the Soviets probably do not believe such hyperbole, an unfriendly government in Afghanistan would have put another hostile or unstable regime along the USSR's southern border. The prospect of an unstable regime alongside Iran probably particularly troubled Moscow. The political disarray that has accompanied the hostage crisis in Tehran may have intensified these fears.

Finally, Moscow may have been concerned by long-term implications for Russian domination of Soviet Central Asia. Although Moscow is not now confronted with significant unrest among its own Muslim population, the predominantly Russian leadership may have been troubled by the possibility of having yet another militantly Islamic state on its border.

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### Potential Benefits

Moscow probably also saw geopolitical benefits from dramatic, forceful action. It would be a clear demonstration of Soviet power--and willingness to use it--that would have a positive impact on neighboring states and on Soviet clients. It would contribute to Moscow's strategy of encircling China.

Moscow may have thought Soviet control over Afghanistan would pressure Iran and Pakistan to accommodate to Soviet policies. It would leave Pakistan isolated between a pro-Soviet India and a Soviet-controlled Afghanistan. In the event that either Iran or Pakistan fragmented or deteriorated into political chaos, it would provide Moscow with a potential bridgehead for extending its influence in such areas as Baluchestan. Over the longer run, Moscow may have thought control of Afghanistan could contribute to Moscow's longstanding attempts to improve its position in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean.

### Opportune Timing

The Soviets undoubtedly saw almost no risk of outside military reaction. For one thing, Tehran and Washington were preoccupied with the hostage problem.

Indeed, Moscow might have thought the United States could be induced to acquiesce in the Soviet invasion in return for Soviet nonobstruction of US pressure on Iran. Furthermore, the West was occupied with the Christmas season. This would lead to a less intense foreign reaction. Moscow's Czech experience--when the sharp Western reaction soon led to business as usual--probably also comforted the USSR.

The Soviets probably thought the negative trends in Soviet relations with the West made this as good a time as any for its move. The Soviet action came at a low point in US-Soviet relations. The Soviets saw the SALT treaty in deep trouble and probably expected few new initiatives from the United States during an election year. Moscow said the NATO theater nuclear force decision had "destroyed the basis" for serious negotiations in West Europe on Brezhnev's arms proposals. Relations with China were already bad, and Moscow had no expectation that the negotiations with Beijing set to resume in early 1980 were going anywhere.

In the subcontinent, Moscow probably recognized that Pakistan would be apprehensive, but may have thought the strains in US-Pakistan ties over nuclear proliferation and the Embassy burning made a US-Pakistani rapprochement unlikely. The Soviets may have reasoned that Islamabad would eventually come to terms with the Soviet action. In any event, India has long been the focus of Soviet interest on the subcontinent. The increasingly good prospects for Indira Gandhi's return to power made it likely that the next Indian government would be more pro-Soviet than either the Desai or Charan Singh regimes.

#### The Soviet Operation

The Soviets have undoubtedly been examining their military options in Afghanistan for some time. During his stay in Afghanistan in late summer and early fall, Soviet Army Chief Pavlovskiy probably had as one of his tasks contingency planning for a military occupation of Afghanistan.

The final Soviet Politburo-level decision to invade was probably made in late November or early December. This would have been around the time of the 28 November Central Committee Plenum and the return to Moscow on 6 December of Ambassador Dobrynin--who probably was asked to assess likely US reactions. Increased urban violence in Kabul, rumors of military disaffection and continued insurgent activity during the period may have helped push the Soviet leaders toward their decision.

#### Military Preparations

Soviet military preparations for the move entered into high gear in early December. The Soviets made carefully and systematically to plan and prepare the operation.

In early December some 1,500 Soviet troops were sent to Bagram Airfield north of Kabul to join 400 lightly armed troops that had been there since summer. We suspect that Moscow obtained Amin's approval on the grounds that these troops were to protect Soviet advisers and to ensure the security of his regime.

Additional Soviet airborne forces apparently began to prepare for the operation in mid-December. Ground and tactical air combat forces were assembled. Motorized rifle divisions at Termez and Kushka were mobilized

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and moved to forward staging areas near the Afghan-Soviet border. Soviet reservists were recalled; some interviewed in Kabul at year's end had been activated within the previous 20 days. Tactical aviation forces opposite Afghanistan were reinforced.

### The Coup

The massive airlift of troops and equipment into Afghanistan began on 24 December. The operation provides a vivid example of Moscow's ability to organize and rapidly move an intervention force, and underscores the growth in the Soviet airlift capability during the 1970s.

Airborne units in the western and south central USSR flew to Afghanistan and airborne units already in Turkestan also moved into Afghanistan. At least two regiments--about 4,000 troops equipped with armored vehicles--went to Kabul, while smaller units went to Shindand and Qandahar.

The Soviets continued to mislead Amin about the nature of their movements. On 23 December, Pravda, possibly for Amin's benefit, denied there were Soviet "combat troops" in Afghanistan. Amin may have accepted Kremlin assurances that the Soviet forces were there to guarantee the security of his regime and that some of the flights carried new equipment for his forces. The Soviets apparently got Amin to move to the Darulaman Palace, a residence on the outskirts of Kabul. Some reports indicate they did so on the pretext that this would give Amin better security, but actually to make it easier to eliminate him. Furthermore, on the afternoon of the coup, the Soviet communications minister met with Amin, apparently to indicate that it was business as usual. The Soviets also tricked Afghan army units by taking away their weapons under the pretense that they would give them new ones.

With airborne forces in Kabul, the Soviets moved quickly on 27 December to topple Amin and replace him with Babrak Karmal. An airborne unit went to the People's Place--the Afghan seat of government. Airborne troops along with some Babrak partisans went to the Darulaman Palace and battled loyal Afghan forces. Amin was apparently executed on the spot.

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Heavy fighting broke out near the Kabul radio station and in other sections of the city, but Soviet troops quickly got the upper hand. By 28 December, fighting was sporadic and the Soviets had control. They manned most strategic points and encircled some recalcitrant Afghan garrisons.

Babrak Karmal--who had earlier been in exile in Eastern Europe--apparently arrived in Kabul by plane from the USSR soon after the coup. His initial broadcasts appear to have been tape recordings carried by radio stations in the USSR. His supporters, as well as other Marxist enemies of Amin, some of whom may have been in hiding at the Soviet Embassy, moved quickly to take over government administration.

In coordination with events in Kabul, the Soviets moved two Ground Forces divisions into Afghanistan on 28 and 29 December. The Termez division drove south into the Kabul area. Prior to the movement of this division, Soviet troops secured the difficult Termez-Kabul road, including the Salang Pass. The division from Kushka drove south to Herat--some of its elements also moved into Shindand and other areas.

Some Afghan forces apparently offered limited resistance that cost the Soviets several hundred casualties, especially in the street fighting in Kabul. The number two man in the Soviet MVD (the internal police), Lt. Gen. Paputin, apparently was killed in the fighting. Paputin had been in Kabul in early December, probably to survey the scene for the coup. He may have had the job of getting Amin. Aside from some relatively minor incidents, insurgent tribal forces did not attempt to tackle the heavily armed Soviet troops.

By 1 December, the Soviets had seized control of key cities, airfields and communications routes. But they will face the hard task of subduing the fiercely independent Afghans and considerable additional fighting against the tribal based and Islamic insurgency is in store.

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