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MEMORANDUM

SOVIETS OPTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN


The recent Soviet troop withdrawals from Afghanistan were largely a political ploy; they do not affect Soviet military capabilities in the country. President Brezhnev's assertion that life is gradually returning to normal may be overdrawn, but it does suggest that the Soviets do not anticipate an imminent need to substantially increase their forces in Afghanistan over the near term. Over the longer term, the Soviets continue to have three broad options for dealing with Afghanistan:

- They could decide--perhaps after the Olympics or at the end of this summer's fighting season--to pour in more troops and try once and for all to eliminate the insurgents. Any substantial build-up, however, would take time. For example, doubling the size of the force in Afghanistan and creating the necessary support structure could take from six to twelve months.
- They could continue along their present course working gradually to increase the effectiveness and support of the Babrak government, perhaps modestly augmenting their military force and simultaneously continuing to improve its anti-insurgent capabilities.
- They could decide to sacrifice their post April 1978 gains in Afghanistan in order to pursue seriously a political settlement while trying to extract US concessions for a broader regional settlement (i.e. the neutrality of Pakistan and Iran, a drawdown in US force levels in the Indian Ocean).

Below we examine the advantages and disadvantages of the various options as the Soviets might perceive them.

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Option I - Substantial ReinforcementThe Pros

- This option holds out the best prospect for reducing the insurgency to manageable proportions.
- It would show the Soviets as moving decisively to defend their interests.
- It could frighten Pakistan and Iran into ending aid and sanctuary to the Afghan insurgents.

The Cons

- It could reignite the international reaction to Afghanistan and could hamper Soviet efforts to isolate the US from the Muslim world and its West European allies on the issue.
- It could prompt Pakistan to turn to the US for military support.
- It could deepen concerns about getting involved in a Vietnam-type open-ended quagmire as expressed by the Soviet generals in March.
- It would have a more serious impact on the domestic economy than current Soviet operations.

Option II - Hunkering DownThe Pros

- It is the course the Soviets appear to be embarked upon and it would not require any wrenching new decisions.
- The absence of any major new developments in Afghanistan--such as a large troop reinforcement--would facilitate international acceptance of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.
- It would be less costly than the substantial reinforcement option.


The Cons

- Present forces may not be adequate to prevent a further deterioration of the situation; Soviet forces are stretched thin in their efforts to maintain security in the city, keep open key lines of communications and assist in quelling the insurgency.
- Prolonged failure to improve their situation could create an appearance of weakness and expose the regime to greater internal and international criticism.

Option III - A Political SolutionThe Pros

- It would permit the Soviets to extricate their forces and avoid a long debilitating conflict in Afghanistan.
- It would also permit them to resume the major lines of their preferred diplomatic posture toward the rest of the world.

The Cons

- No political solution acceptable to the insurgents would leave the Soviets with a pro-Soviet leftist government in Afghanistan such as they have had since the April 1978 revolution.
- The Soviets could hardly avoid appearing to have suffered a major defeat.
- The leadership which accepted such a solution could be vulnerable to internal criticism.

How the Soviets Might Choose

Our best estimate is that the Soviets over time will have to do more than hunker down, but probably will not embark on as rapid and substantial a build-up as is feasible. In part this is because they are concerned with the impact



on world opinion; in part because the present drain on resources and Soviet lives is tolerable; and in part because they may not yet fully appreciate the extent of their military predicament. Even if they do recognize that the war is going badly, they may be prepared to wage a war of attrition in order to keep the costs down and achieve success over the longer run. We doubt that a gradual limited reinforcement will quell the insurgency. The Soviets may well also step up diplomatic and military pressures on Pakistan. This course, if successful, could weaken the insurgency.

Even if the Soviets decide on pursuing essentially military solutions to their Afghan problem, they can be expected to continue talking about their alleged interest in a political settlement. Additional token troop withdrawals might be forthcoming, perhaps timed to influence the proceedings of the CSCE Review Conference this fall. The Soviets still have a few expendable units in the country.



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