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Afghanistan-USSR:

Can The Afghan Regime Survive An 18-month Withdrawal Timetable?

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Summary

CIA analysts believe that the Soviet-backed government in Kabul lacks the political institutions and the military strength to survive if Soviet troops were required to withdraw in less than one year following a peace agreement. Under an extended withdrawal period--of three years or more--the Kabul government, however, would have a fair chance of consolidating control and surviving.

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Analysts are divided over whether an 18-month timetable

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would favor the regime or the resistance. Most analysts do not believe that 18 months would be sufficient to allow the Afghan armed forces--even with Soviet help--to significantly reduce the insurgency and consolidate control. According to those analysts, even the prospect of a relatively quick Soviet withdrawal would cause mass desertions from the army and the government, leading to its quick demise.

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A minority of analysts argue there is a slightly better than even chance that the Kabul regime could survive an 18-month timetable, especially if the Soviets made good use of their forces during the withdrawal period and a substantial Soviet advisory contingent remained--backed up by air and artillery. According to this line of reasoning, the replacement of Babrak Karmal by the former intelligence chief Najibullah, gains by Kabul in improving the armed forces and pacifying areas in the north, the buying off of tribes and villagers through economic incentives, the resistance's long-standing divisiveness, and a Pakistani aid cut-off, would probably enable the regime to endure over an 18-month withdrawal period and beyond.

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This typescript memorandum was prepared by
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Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information
available as of 23 June was used in its preparation. Comments are welcome
and may be directed to the Chief, South Asia Division,

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Our Assumptions

We focus on an 18-month timetable because it seems a plausible compromise between Islamabad's call for a 3-6 month withdrawal, and Kabul's offer of three-and-a-half years.

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For the purposes of this memo, we assume that a Geneva-type agreement would be reached within the next six months, that there will be Soviet compliance with its terms, and:

--Islamabad would comply with the letter of the agreement and would shut down all support for the resistance 30 days after an agreement is reached.

--One-third of Soviet forces would leave Afghanistan at that time, with the remaining two-thirds staying in-country for the better part of the withdrawal period, as allowed in the draft agreements now under discussion.

--There would be no provision for a ceasefire in the agreement. [Redacted]

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The Prevailing View -- The Regime Cannot Survive.

Under the above assumptions, most analysts believe that the regime would unravel quickly. This view is based primarily on our judgment that the regime lacks popular support at any level outside of Kabul, is kept in power primarily by Soviet troops and is badly divided on factional lines. All the evidence shows that the Soviets have made only marginal progress toward building a reliable army or party bureaucracy to maintain control. Soviet and Afghan media commentary, [Redacted]

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[Redacted] indicates that Babrak's recent removal from the top post reflected Moscow's unhappiness with his inability to develop programs aimed at consolidating Communist control or building a loyal cadre of dedicated Afghans to someday administer an effective pro-Soviet government. [Redacted]

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The fragility of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was underscored by the factionalism accompanying the replacement of Party Secretary General Babrak Karmal by former intelligence chief Najibullah. [Redacted] revealed deepseated hostility to the leadership change on the part of members of the Parchami faction. In addition to the highly unusual step of staging public protests, many

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Parchami members have become openly anti-Soviet, [Redacted] Moreover, clashes between pro-Babrak and pro-Karmal forces are occurring in the military as Najibullah seeks to consolidate his power there. [Redacted]

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We believe the regime's leaders--and perhaps much of the military leadership--would begin to panic with the withdrawal of the first Soviet troops and either seek to make deals with the resistance or flee the country in order to survive. The disintegration of the party and government structure would quickly follow as mid-and lower-level officials realized that the government was collapsing around them. [Redacted]

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The Soviets already have a keen appreciation of the divided loyalties in the Afghan armed forces. According to press reports, during Babrak's removal in May Afghan Army units were disarmed largely to prevent outbreaks of factional strife. [Redacted]

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We believe the psychological impact of a withdrawal announcement would also set in motion an unraveling in the armed forces. The Afghan army has gained slightly in effectiveness, but still has shown almost no capability to operate without massive Soviet air support or to conduct sustained or successive campaigns. Manpower levels within the Afghan army remain critically low--less than 50 percent of authorized strength--and the officer corps is riddled with disloyal individuals, despite several recent purges. [Redacted] during one five-day period in January, 47 Afghan officers and soldiers deserted from three posts in Paghman, west of Kabul, taking with them their personal weapons, two 82-mm mortars, three rocket flamethrowers, and five light machine guns. [Redacted] Afghan Army Chief of Staff Tani admitted in June that the desertion rate for the first quarter of the year was 35 to 40 percent higher than for the same period last year [Redacted]

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Most analysts believe the Soviets would have to reduce the scale of their military activity against the insurgents considerably during the withdrawal period and would be unable to deliver a knockout punch against them. To execute a highly visible withdrawal, they believe approximately 40 of the present 110 combat maneuver battalions would be removed to meet the initial withdrawal requirement of the proposed agreement (see box: How the Withdrawal Might Look). The Soviet loss of over 35 percent of their combat units will force them to focus most of the remaining combat and support units on security for the withdrawing forces and lines of communication, while attempting to reduce risks to remaining units. Under this withdrawal scenario, the early departure of the airborne division from Kabul--one of the most active offensive units in-country--would, in our view, constrain Soviet offensive or rapid response capabilities, as well as redistribute the burden for securing Kabul. [Redacted]

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[REDACTED]

We believe that sufficient military supplies will be available to the insurgency to allow it to challenge the Kabul regime. Prior to the enactment of an agreement, the insurgents would cache weapons and ammunition inside Afghanistan--something which is already taking place. Although loss of military assistance from the Pakistanis would be a blow, it would require the insurgents to return to small-unit, less resource-intensive tactics--to which they are particularly suited. We also expect deserting Afghan military personnel--many with weapons and equipment--to increase as Soviet withdrawals take place and to play an important role in supplying the insurgents. Captured weapons and ammunition from vulnerable Afghan paramilitary units--police, border battalions, and local militias--will also provide needed arms to continue the insurgency. Operations against the Kabul regime under these conditions, in our opinion, could continue almost indefinitely, albeit at a low level. [REDACTED]

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If and when an agreement is signed, we believe the insurgents would continue to use Islam as a rallying point for opposition to the Najibullah regime. We believe the intensity and long duration of the war have intensified religious opposition to the regime's Leninist policies. Despite factionalism, many insurgent groups share a strong belief in--and are highly motivated by--Islamic religious ideology. In some areas, this opposition has been personified in the mullahs, who have assumed new political and military leadership roles. [REDACTED]

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A key variable in this scenario--and one on which we have little information--is the possibility that a substantial Soviet advisory presence might be allowed to remain under a Soviet-Afghan bilateral agreement that will accompany the Geneva agreement. The bilateral, which spells out the length of the withdrawal timetable, could also oblige Moscow to provide continued air support for Afghan army units from planes based in the Soviet Union. We believe Soviet advisors--present down to the battalion level--and their ability to call in Soviet artillery and air strikes are largely responsible for the recent slight improvement in performance of the Afghan army, particularly during recent sweeps in eastern Afghanistan. Most analysts believe that a substantial Soviet advisory presence--with air support from planes based in the Soviet Union--would enhance the staying power of the Afghan army, but not enough to ensure the regime's survival. [REDACTED]

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The Alternative View

The minority view argues that Soviet artillery and air support could be decisive during the 18-month withdrawal period. These analysts believe that there are already signs that the regime is gradually expanding its control, building a political infrastructure and improving the ability of its military forces. These analysts argue that the regime will be able to

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conduct a reasonably intensive military campaign against resistance forces during the 18-month withdrawal period because of continuing air support from planes based in the Soviet Union and because the Soviet military position--including supporting artillery units--will be strongest in the most critical areas of eastern Afghanistan. Under these circumstances, these analysts believe that the regime would have a slightly better than even chance of enduring a Soviet withdrawal and standing on its own after the withdrawal was completed. [redacted]

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Analysts who hold this view expect the Soviets to act vigorously to keep the pressure on to ensure the regime's survival. They expect Soviet-Afghan forces to maintain, if not intensify, their attacks on insurgent supply caches, resistance bases, and logistics lines during the withdrawal period. Moscow will probably prefer to support Afghan ground units with heavy Soviet air and artillery support to boost Afghan Army morale and ensure that any successes appear to be theirs alone. This strategy has already been used with some success during the Army's capture of an insurgent base camp at Zhawar Kili in April and in the Qandahar area, although its sweeps in Nangarhar Province proved less fruitful. Our estimate of Moscow's preferred withdrawal scenario, moreover, indicates that the Soviets will be well-positioned in Eastern Afghanistan--with Spetsnaz troops, air, and artillery assets. All Spetsnaz and artillery units, for example, would remain in place in the east, and could be bolstered by redeployments from the south and west, if necessary. [redacted]

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The early actions and regime media coverage of Najibullah [redacted] suggest that the new administration will also be pushing in several areas--political and economic--to build a strong party and increase popular support. Najib has the vigor that the ailing Babrak Karmal lacked. He has already cut back Kabul's more radical social and economic programs, paid more attention to Islam, invited non-party participation in the government, and spent a good deal of time and money bribing tribes and local elites to remain neutral in the conflict, if not to actively support the government. [redacted]

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The minority view believes this strategy has begun to pay limited dividends. Attempts by Kabul officials to secure the cooperation--or at least neutrality--of tribal chiefs in Qandahar, Zabol and Helmand Provinces are making sufficient inroads to be of concern to Afghan resistance leaders, [redacted] US academic experts on Afghanistan believe Kabul also is having more success gaining the cooperation of border tribes in Paktia and Nangarhar provinces, to the detriment of resistance logistics in these areas. Najib can take some credit for these successes: as head of the Afghan intelligence directorate he orchestrated several councils of pro-government tribal leaders; his Pashtun heritage should help the regime expand these efforts during his tenure as party chief. [redacted]

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These analysts also believe the regime will be able to manipulate tension between ideologically motivated "young turks" in the resistance and local elites--such as tribal or village chiefs--to advance pacification efforts in some local areas. Because the power of traditional elites is threatened by militant resistance commanders seeking revolutionary change and an Islamic government, they believe at least some tribal leaders will strike deals during the period of uncertainty following the Soviet withdrawal in an effort to preserve their authority. Even a moderately successful tribal policy would, in their view, allow the government to create enclaves of peaceful territory to which the Afghan refugees could return. [redacted]

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The Afghan government is increasing its control over major cities--a strategy we believe will form a basis for expanding their control over Afghanistan after the Soviets leave. The government has improved its position in Kabul by enlarging its defense perimeter--through the construction of outposts and bypass roads--and placed the responsibility for manning these defenses largely in Afghan hands. According to the US Embassy in Kabul, this has effectively reduced insurgent activity to a nuisance level and allowed the Afghan regime to consolidate its control of the capital last year, when the city was noticeably quieter and security forces much less evident than in the past. [redacted]

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Although the regime cannot claim the same level of control in Qandahar or Herat, it is beginning to apply the lessons it learned in Kabul.

[redacted] Soviet-Afghan forces recently began to extend their perimeter security around Qandahar and to build bypass roads in an effort to eliminate the very strong insurgent presence in the city with some success in our view. Even in the insurgent bastion of Herat--where Ismail Khan has waged a determined effort despite problematic supply lines--the US Embassy reports that a significant number of government offices are functioning. [redacted]

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The minority view argues that the 18-month withdrawal scenario would probably enable the regime to build on these marginal gains--allowing Kabul to gain control of the cities and major lines of communication to the Soviet Union, while undercutting insurgent control of other areas (in the south and west) through continued heavy aerial bombardment and terror tactics against civilians. [redacted]

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The analysts who hold this view do not believe the Soviets see control of the entire country as essential to the survivability of a Communist regime. Afghanistan has never had a strong central government, but rather has been a loose confederation of regions and tribes that have made political accommodations with whoever was in power in Kabul. We thus expect Soviet strategy to focus on fatally weakening the insurgency in the north and east--the most strategically important areas--in the hope that the troublesome southwest would eventually follow suit. [redacted]

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Because the insurgents would be cut off from their major sources of external support under the draft agreement now being negotiated, the analysts who hold this view believe that the resistance would almost certainly experience a serious degradation of its combat capabilities as arms caches are depleted. They also believe the loss of Pakistani sanctuaries--a critical ingredient in other guerrilla wars--will be a major setback for insurgent military capabilities and, in turn, morale. [REDACTED]

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According to analysts who support the alternative view, longstanding resistance weaknesses--disunity, preoccupation with emigre politics, and dependence on external supplies--will undercut its ability to meet a determined Soviet-Afghan effort. Although some commanders--notably Ahmad Shah Masood in the Panjsher Valley--are relatively well-placed to cope with a cutoff of these supply lines because of their effective military organization and attention to building caches, they believe that many resistance groups would simply collapse under the shock of such an abrupt change. The disunity of the resistance leadership both in Peshawar and inside Afghanistan will also limit the resistance's military effectiveness. They would expect this infighting to intensify as the Soviet withdrawal approaches--a time when each group will be increasingly focused on gaining political and military advantage for the ultimate struggle for power in Kabul. We believe this will make it easier for the Soviets and regime forces to gain the upper hand militarily. [REDACTED]

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Key Factors to Watch

The following list represents the variables we believe are critical to assessing the relative strengths of both sides during the period leading up to the signing of a peace agreement and beyond. Much of what occurs during a withdrawal rests on local perceptions of who is winning, shifts in morale, and other intangibles. [REDACTED]

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Afghan Army Performance: The ability of the regime to develop unit cohesion and better morale in the Afghan Army will be a key element if it is to survive even the initial hints of a Soviet pullout. We believe the frequency of independent Afghan Army operations, its ability to follow up on intelligence and preempt insurgent attacks, to capture insurgent base camps and caches, to disrupt supply routes, and to prevent or slow desertions will be indicators of the Afghan Army's performance. [REDACTED]

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Development of Reliable Political Cadre. Second only to the risk of Army collapse is the risk of disintegration in the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan and the government's bureaucratic infrastructure. Indicators of regime collapse from within would include increased factionalism in the Party; frequent purges; evidence of tribal chiefs and others siding with the insurgents; reduced travel of high-level officials

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because of security concerns; and defections of party members to the resistance. [Redacted]

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Resistance Capabilities and Morale. Insurgent operations are hampered by political disunity, poor leadership, and insufficient training in guerrilla tactics.

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Morale is the hardest element to measure in an insurgency, the most susceptible to cyclical changes, and yet one of the key elements to insurgent success. The loss of external support will probably be extremely demoralizing to the resistance, perhaps causing defections of some leaders and a greater polarization of the resistance political spectrum. To assess morale changes, we will need to pay attention to how well the insurgents are able to defend their base camps, logistics routes, and caches, and to the ability of the resistance to establish external supply routes through Iran. [Redacted]

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Refugee Movements. The size of the number of refugees willing to return to Afghanistan when the agreement is signed should indicate the degree of confidence they have in the government's ability to provide for their security. [Redacted]

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How The Withdrawal Might Look*

The Soviets will design a troop withdrawal that will leave them in as strong a military position as possible, while remaining believable to Pakistan, the United States, and the world community. At a minimum, the Soviets will want to protect their lines of communication while withdrawing and put out "fires" the Afghan troops cannot handle on their own. Such a withdrawal would, in our view:

- Leave a sufficient Soviet presence in all major regions of the country to maintain government control of important cities and lines of communications.
- Leave the strongest Soviet presence in eastern Afghanistan to protect Kabul and patrol the Pakistani border.
- Leave all Spetsnaz units in place. We do not believe the Soviets could increase the number of Spetsnaz units prior to implementing a withdrawal and still appear sincere.
- Require that support troops be pulled out along with the troops they support.
- Involve pulling out the airborne division from Kabul, but leave in place other airborne forces and Spetsnaz units. We believe the Kabul-based airborne division would be removed because of the improved security in the capital and the ease with which it could be reintroduced.

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*Troop withdrawal arrangements are to be part of a bilateral Soviet-Afghan agreement, the details of which will probably not be made available to Pakistan. [Redacted]

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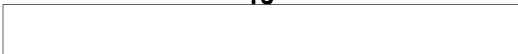


The Soviets probably would not decrease their fighter-bomber strength in Afghanistan and might increase their utilization of air assets based in the southern USSR to support Afghan Army operations. Helicopter strength would probably be reduced by about one-third.

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Sufficient logistic and maintenance support and command and control assets would remain throughout the withdrawal and could occasionally function at peak levels, in our view. The Turkestan military district would have to assume a greater support load, but the Soviets have greatly improved over the period of the war the military infrastructure in Turkestan to better support operations in Afghanistan.

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DDI/NESA/SO/A: [Redacted] (11 July 86)

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