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TALKING POINTS ON SOVIET STRATEGY AND PERFORMANCE IN AFGHANISTAN

The Soviets have settled on a fairly rational counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan after years of illusion and disappointment. This strategy reflects basic principles of counterinsurgency -- such as trying to isolate the population from the resistance; and it is being pursued with typical Soviet ruthlessness -- such as punitive attacks on villages -- and some increased skill as the Soviets become more experienced.

Soviet strategy is a strategy for the long haul. They show no real indication of pulling back from it...yet. Such gestures as the token troop withdrawal are a sham for external political effect.

However, despite the soundness of their strategy in principle and their determination to pursue it, the Soviets are not making identifiable, much less irreversible, progress toward their goals. They are not making gains they can take "to the bank." They make progress, then lose ground. Or they try a smart initiative, and it fails.

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Outside observers, including itinerant journalists who see isolated pockets of the war and hear the anxieties of Peshawar, are sometimes misled into believing that what the Soviets are trying to do is actually working when it rarely is.

The core of the Soviet strategy is really political: To build a communist party and regime that can function and eventually survive without a massive Soviet military presence. Their latest initiative was selection of Najib to replace Babrak. Najib has a record of ruthless effectiveness and can appeal, because of his background, to the Pushtoon tribes.

But in fact his elevation has not made a more effective regime, at least so far, but rather intensified already severe factionalism in the PDPA.

The next part of the political effort is that to supposedly "broaden the base," to draw token non-communist figures into the regime. This is purely cosmetic, but we see efforts being made.

So far they have not achieved anything.

Another aspect of the political effort is to bribe, threaten, or coopt village or tribal populations into cooperation with the regime and rejection of the Mujahedin. We see the efforts being made. Here and there they succeed.

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But we see no pattern of success. And the Soviets have been trying this for years.

Yet another very important aspect of their political strategy -- actually in support of their military campaign against the Mujahedin -- is to simply isolate the resistance from sources of popular support, by physically removing the population, by punishing pro-resistance villages, and by using control of food as a source of coercion. We see the Soviets trying to do this, and here they may be having some degree of slow and grudging success. This is what they did to suppress the Basmachi rebels during the 1920s.

Again, however, while we see the Soviet effort -- and the Mujahedin are properly worried about this -- we do not see an irreversible pattern of success on the Soviet part. In fact, we have reports of some refugees actually going back into Afghanistan, to their home villages, not to cooperate with the government, but to try to resume their lives there and to support the resistance.

The purpose of the Soviet military campaign is not to destroy the resistance outright because, as in all guerrilla wars, this is impossible. Rather it is to keep the resistance at bay, to grind it down to manageable levels of activity, and, thereby, to protect the primary task of building a communist regime on the basis of a few loyalists, a lot of opportunists and a mass of exhausted Afghans.

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The Soviets have improved their tactics, operations, and command and control, largely through experience.

They have put more emphasis on interdicting Mujahedin supplies by ambushing convoys with special forces, with some successes.

They are using more tactical air and artillery

They are giving less emphasis to large-scale sweep operations although these are still used... and continue to involve heavy casualties.

They are giving more emphasis to security of cities and to creating security outposts for interdicting the resistance...at great cost in tying down troops.

Although showing increased skill, Soviet military operations have not established a clear favorable trend in the war.

Soviet special forces tactics have been impressive, but the Muj are learning to get around them and occasionally to counter ambush them. Soviet special forces are impressive only by comparison to relatively ineffective regular troops. The fact is the Soviets have too few of them in Afghanistan to make a dramatic difference.

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Increased Muj anti-air capabilities and experience are costing the Soviets equipment and casualties. Perhaps more important, they disrupt the aggressive use of air, impose a virtual attrition effect.

Continued Muj attacks within the cities indicate that city security, while vital to the Soviet campaign, is not really working. The big attack on the Kabul arms depot is an example.

One has to remember that, although the Soviet military effort is ruthless and highly destructive, it rests on a troop deployment that is relatively small for a country of the size and fragmented character of Afghanistan.

To make a real difference with their own forces alone, the Soviets would have to increase their deployments by three times or more. This could not be done overnight. And to use such force levels effectively, they would have to accept for a considerable period, perhaps several years, a much higher casualty level. This they wish to avoid because domestic unhappiness with the war, although no threat to the Kremlin's policy, is already an inhibition on it.

For all these reasons -- both military and political -- the building of a DRA army is the most vital link in the Soviet strategy.

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In a word, they are trying very hard to build an Afghan communist army and to shove more of the military burden onto it. But they are not succeeding. Conscripts desert as fast as they are recruited, and as fast as ever before.

After regime building and their military campaign, the third element of the Soviet strategy is the broad political-propaganda effort to crack the coalition of parties and countries who oppose them in Afghanistan and support the resistance, first and foremost, of course, Pakistan.

Here the Soviets rely on a combination of cajolery and fakery, on one hand, -- of which their behavior in the Geneva proximity talks and their token troop withdrawals [if real at all] are examples -- and outright pressure and intimidation in the form of military probes on the border

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The bottom line, therefore:

The Soviets are trying harder and we are seeing their increased effort.

They are trying harder because they have to. The resistance is also becoming more effective, experienced, and skillful. And Gorbachev, despite the great physical resources of the USSR, does not want an endless war hanging round his political neck while he's trying to revitalize the society and Soviet foreign policy.

The Soviets are not making clear, permanent progress.

The resistance has the need, but also the opportunity to respond to the Soviet strategy, to continue to defeat that strategy. The Mujahedin are increasingly convinced that, in addition to weapons, and the solution to logistic problems, this requires more cooperation at the tactical and the political levels. They are increasingly thinking right about the way to wage this war. That is their greatest potential asset.

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