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ARC OF OVERREACTION

Wrong Moves on Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is not, as President Carter would have us believe, "the greatest threat to world peace since 1945." Nor, as his pugnacious adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski is quoted in *Time* as saying, is it "a watershed event." It has, however, been the occasion for some of the most undiluted irresponsibility and crass demagoguery on the part of a U.S. Administration for many a long year. And the U.S. response—rushing to shore up a crew of petty tyrants and religious obscurantists in West Asia—has sowed the seeds of new international crises in the future. The Russians don't need to do anything to take advantage of their position in Afghanistan to weaken the West's position in the "arc of crisis": they just have to sit back, as they did in Iran, and let the West hang itself.

Looking beyond the confusion of immediate events, we should understand several general propositions. First, the Russian intervention in Afghanistan does not represent any change in international strategy on their part. Afghanistan is a country that has, since 1955, been militarily dependent on the U.S.S.R. It is a country that borders the U.S.S.R. And, since April 1978, there has been a Soviet-backed regime in that country. The Russians intervened because the regime of the incumbent President Hafizullah Amin was tottering. He was responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent people, and incapable of reaching any settlement of the country's problems. No one would have thanked the Russians for not intervening: i.e., for keeping Amin in power. And there is no way, given the international balance of power, that the Russians could have abandoned the country altogether to a triumphant horde of Moslem insurgents, who would, in all likelihood, have fallen to fighting one another for years to come. It was the internal situation in Afghanistan itself that dictated the Russian intervention, a situation which, as I explained in an earlier *Nation* article (see Halliday, "Afghanistan—A Revolution Consumes Itself," November 17, 1979), the Russians were certainly to blame in having brought about. Their desire was to stabilize a situation that had spiraled out of control, not to make some further strategic advance. Russia does not have a

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Tudeh Party has been seriously compromised. The talk about the Russians using Afghanistan as a steppingstone is thus strategic whimsy. The last way to have influenced Iran was to invade Afghanistan. Nor are the Russians making some major thrust for Persian Gulf oil. Apart from their production difficulties, they still have the largest oil output of any country in the world—12.4 million barrels a day. And all the rhetoric about "warm-water ports" is overblown. Obviously, the Russians would not refuse an unconditional offer of a warm-water port any more than the Americans would, but they already have such facilities in Aden, and these ports have a lot less significance than they used to have in a premissile age.

At this juncture, the Russians are not planning a permanent military annexation of Afghanistan. Nor will they become involved in a "Vietnam-style situation." The Russians appear to be intent on staying long enough to buy time for the new regime to build itself up, and in particular to reconstruct the army and the administration. They know that the mountain tribes will fight if they think the Government is weak, and will be much less likely to do so if the Government is strong. It is in this psychological-political dimension, rather than in purely military terms, that the numerical weight of the Russian involvement must be evaluated. This massive presence does of course entail the risk of a major nationalist counterreaction, and the Russians are certainly disliked. But they will do all they can, with arms and economic inducements, to build up a strong new Afghan Army, and although the rebellion will take some years to be reduced, the Russians would hope progressively to hand over internal security to this new army while continuing their long-standing supply of arms, equipment and officers. For their part, the rebels would have to transform their whole mode of social organization if they were to sustain a protracted and large-scale war against the Government forces. The reasons why it is not another Vietnam follow from this: unlike the National Liberation Front, which was organized by a political party and had a coherent revolutionary ideology, the rebels are divided among themselves and cannot sustain the kind of military struggle needed to undermine permanently the Russian forces. One cannot help feeling that, beyond the obvious *Schadenfreude* of seeing the Russians in trouble, Americans who use the Vietnam analogy are trying to debase their former foes, to equate the Marxist guerrillas of the Mekong Delta with the ultraconservative tribesmen of the Hindu Kush. If one adds to this the facts that: (1) the Afghan mountains offer little cover and are therefore vulnerable to helicopters and