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Strategists See New Soviet Offensive

There is a new question mark hanging over the 1980s: What will the Soviets do next? Strategists who have access to the best intelligence available believe the Soviets have embarked on a worldwide strategic offensive.

Their aim, according to the intelligence reports, is double-barreled. First, they hope to gain a stranglehold on oil routes to the West. Second, they want to disrupt any military cooperation between the United States and mainland China.

Here is how the Soviets are going about it: The invasion of Afghanistan already has given them air bases within 500 miles of the Hormuz Strait. This is the exit to the Persian Gulf and the only way out for tankers carrying oil to the western world.

Intelligence reports also warn that the Soviets are preparing to expand their toehold on the Arabian peninsula. They are behind an effort to destabilize and subvert North Yemen, and they are using South Yemen as a base for slipping agitators into Saudi Arabia, the country that supplies most of the overseas oil to the United States.

Soviet advisers and Cuban mercenaries are also helping Ethiopia prepare a major offensive against rebels in Eritrea. This would give the Soviets access to Ethiopia's entire Red Sea coastline and make it possible for them to harass tankers in that area.

And there is evidence that the Soviets are trying to install a Marxist government in Guatemala. This would give them a base next to Mexico's fabulous new oil fields.

Finally, intelligence reports warn that the Soviets are quietly encouraging North Korea to attack South Korea. The

Chinese are allies of the North and the United States is allied with the South, so this probably would disrupt the Chinese-American relationship.

Meanwhile, the Soviet invaders are finding Afghanistan hard to digest. The land is harsh, and the people are hardy. They are fierce fighters, many of them descendants of Genghis Khan's warriors.

They are probably the world's most ferocious horsemen. Their national sport, for example, is called "goat drag." The players disembowel a goat, fill it with sand and soak it in water, making the carcass almost too heavy to lift.

The object of the game is to hoist the carcass on horseback, gallop around a pole and deposit it inside a circle. The fun begins when a dozen hard-riding horsemen, armed with whips, slash one another in a frenzied scramble for the carcass.

It takes all of a player's strength, leaning from his saddle and hanging from the stirrups by his boots, to pick up the goat carcass. Then he has to ward off the whips of the other players who try to steal it from him.

It's a brutal, bloody game and a fair indication that the Afghans are not going to be subdued easily by the Soviets.

But they are disorganized, divided among dozens of independent guerrilla bands. The United States is looking for a leader, a hero figure who can unite the Afghan resistance. If one can be found, say our sources, the United States might attempt to form a free Afghan movement around him.

Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) has written a private letter to Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, urging diplomatic recognition for an exile government. The

idea is being debated in the policy councils.

Footnote: According to reports we've received from Moslem insurgents in Afghanistan, the Soviet invaders also are losing badly in the Afghan bazaars. One Red Army officer spent 150 rubles — \$225 — for a well-worn Playboy magazine. Another soldier was outsmarted by one wily merchant when he traded a gold wristwatch for a brightly colored piece of glass. The soldier was told that the glass fragment was a priceless gem.