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The Captured MI-24s

President Reagan's intercession to end the U.S. ban on new anti-aircraft weapons for Pakistan has placed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan high on the list of possible summit topics when he meets Mikhail Gorbachev.

That is not according to the gospel of Secretary of State George Shultz. Even some Pentagon officials have shown unseemly caution about closer collaboration with Pakistan's courageous President Zia ul Haq, despite his secret agreement giving the United States full access to the glamorous Soviet weapon of "liberation wars"—the MI-24 Hind helicopter gunship. Zia invited U.S. inspection as soon as two gunships were flown across the border by defecting Afghan pilots several weeks ago.

Reagan's recent decision to arm Zia with land-based Stinger missiles and the airborne AIM-9L (Sidewinder) suggests that he is listening to advisers who insist that the summit on Nov. 19 deal frontally with Afghanistan. In opposition to that, Shultz's aides were satisfied with a ban on new weapons for Zia on grounds that "diplomacy" could handle the bloody Afghan war. In keeping with this, Shultz's summit framework is said by some administration officials to be more concerned with arms control and trade than with such troubling regional issues as Afghanistan.

Thus the sudden tightening of Soviet problems in Afghanistan, epitomized by the defection of Afghan MI-24 pilots and Zia's acquiescence to U.S. inspection, has far-reaching implications for U.S.-Soviet relations.

What makes the MI-24 gunship such a symbolic conquest for the West is its utility worldwide as the weapon of Soviet "wars of liberation." The first MI-24s reached Nicaragua earlier this year; they are a major weapon in the anti-Cambodian arsenal of Moscow's major Asian ally, Vietnam, and they have been the staple of Soviet depredations and brutal liquidation of hamlets and villages in Afghanistan.

At about the same time those two Soviet-trained Afghan Air Force defectors delivered their valuables to the Pakistan government, nearly one-fourth of Afghanistan's entire complement of about 100 Soviet MiG fighters was eliminated in a solo sabotage attack at Shindand, near the Iranian border. That was Moscow's worst single disaster in the ruthless effort to subjugate Afghanistan.

For strategists in Moscow in charge of the nearly six-year war these twin events—MI-24s falling into U.S. hands and MiG fighters blowing up—are punishment in the extreme. Yet they are only the most dramatic of Soviet setbacks now becoming known and which Reagan administration realists insist make Afghanistan a must for full treatment at the summit.

The most surprising of these setbacks is the steady military escalation along the Afghan border with Iran. Soviet forces there are now finding themselves squeezed by Afghan freedom-fighters backed more and more openly by the fanatical leader of Islamic fundamentalism, the Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini was described by one official to us as "up to his eyeballs" in what he, even more than Zia, regards as a Soviet war against Islam. That explains why a large portion of the newly deployed Soviet "Spetsnaz" units—named for their elite training as special units—have been placed along the Afghan-Iranian border.

In the far Northeast, surreptitious foreign aid for the Afghan freedom fighters is now centered in nearly 200 small, separate training camps operated by the Chinese communists. Thus the Soviet effort to pacify Afghanistan confronts three centers of opposition beyond the Afghan borders, all of which are showing indications of growth.

Certainly that is the conclusion to be drawn from Reagan's personal involvement in the decision authorizing new types of anti-aircraft weapons to give Pakistan more protection against cross-border raids: 100 in 1984, 60 so far this year.

With risks to world peace rising from this Soviet-sponsored raiding beyond Afganistan's borders, coupled with the nonstop killings of civilians on a mass scale inside, realistic Reagan aides cannot believe that in his first summit talk with the Soviet leader the president could fail to give Afghanistan a prominent, perhaps even preeminent spot on the agenda.

These advisers are convinced that, however important arms control may be, it is dwarfed in the U.S.-Soviet relationship by Afghanistan. Reagan's decision to assert his own style of diplomacy suggests that he is beginning to sing the same tune.