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Insurgencies: Two of a Kind

The U.S.-backed rebels in Afghanistan are having almost as much trouble as the woebegone contras

For the guerrillas, the war is an uphill struggle. Despite the support they receive from the United States, the anticommunist insurgents can never hope to defeat their better-equipped adversaries. The rebels are hounded relentlessly, their camps and supply lines in constant danger of attack. As guerrilla leaders squabble among themselves, discussions are under way for a political settlement of the war. But any foreseeable agreement is likely to leave a pro-Soviet government firmly in charge of the country. Meantime, word is beginning to get out in Washington that millions of dollars worth of aid intended for the freedom fighters cannot be accounted for.

What sounds like an indictment of the Nicaraguan contras actually applies to the mujahedin, the anticommunist rebels in Afghanistan. In Washington the conventional wisdom has it that the Afghan guerrillas are a splendid success, despite the 118,000 Soviet troops arrayed against them. Moscow seems to want out of Afghanistan, and proponents of the Reagan Doctrine—the program of support for anticommunist insurgencies around the world—only wish that the contras could fight half as effectively as the mujahedin. But there is growing evidence that the conventional wisdom is wrong, that the mujahedin are having almost as much trouble as the contras.

Even though the rebels, inflamed by religious zeal, have a broad base of popular support, the Soviets and their protégés in the Afghan government are slowly grinding the insurgency down. During the past seven years nearly 1 million Afghans have been killed in this war of attrition, and perhaps another 7 million—nearly half the entire population—have been driven from their homes, many to refugee camps in Pakistan. Countless villages are deserted, and three-quarters of the cultivated land has been abandoned. Peace talks sponsored by the United Nations have made some progress, but there is no reason to believe that the Soviet Union is ready to withdraw from Afghanistan without first guaranteeing the survival of a government acceptable to the Kremlin. So far, the stalemate in Afghanistan has soaked up \$1.35 billion in covert U.S. aid since 1980. Now it seems that much of the money has been wasted. Congressional sources charge that 30 percent or more of the aid has been skimmed off, apparently by middlemen in Pakistan.

With the Iran-contra scandal simmering

along, Washington isn't eager to acknowledge that its surrogate war in Afghanistan may not be going much better than the one in Nicaragua. The State Department denies that the mujahedin are losing ground or that large amounts of money are missing. But a reappraisal of U.S. support for the rebels is getting under way. Frank Carlucci, President Reagan's new national-security adviser, has ordered a review of the administration's Afghan program. And last week an investigator from the General Accounting Office, the auditing arm of Congress, began to look into the allegations that aid meant for the mujahedin had been diverted on a scale that could make Ollie North look like a piker.

Unlike the contras, the mujahedin are a genuinely indigenous movement. Their fundamentalist Islamic faith has made a holy war out of the resistance to Soviet invasion. Despite the overwhelming odds against them, they have managed to avoid defeat, an accomplishment in itself. In some respects they have even made headway. Last fall the Central Intelligence Agency began to supply the rebels with shoulder-fired Stinger antiaircraft missiles, and in recent months the mujahedin have been shooting down Soviet aircraft at an average rate of more than one a day.

But some American conservatives complain that the Afghan resistance fighters haven't been as successful as their press clippings suggest. Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah, who visited the refugee camps in Pakistan in 1985 and 1986, accuses the rebels of "strategic ineffectiveness," including a failure to attack major Soviet military bases and headquarters. "They are courageous fighters," he says of the mujahedin, "but they will have to raise the cost to Moscow a lot before the Soviets will withdraw and give them back their country."

The government of Pakistan, which provides the rebels with sanctuary, exercises more control over them than their American benefactors do. Pakistani President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq will not allow U.S. government personnel to operate in the mujahedin camps along the Afghan border. Pakistan manages to keep the mujahedin on a tight leash. A large portion of the arms purchased for the rebels with American money are actually ordered by a committee of Pakistani generals, according to Andrew Eiva, a private Washington analyst. Pakistani officials acknowledge that they do not allow the guerrillas enough firepower to significantly harm the Soviets, for fear that Moscow will carry the war into Pakistan. "Certainly we control the tap, and we turn it on and off," admits one Pakistani diplomat.

Most of the rebels' weapons come from China, but last year the leaders of four of the seven main Afghan resistance groups went to Washington to plead for additional arms. When Washington authorized deliv-

ery of the Stingers, the Pakistanis gave the missiles to the other three guerrilla groups.

"The message the Pakistanis have sent to the mujahedin is clear: 'Don't try to go over our heads,'" says a U.S. official.

Because the Pakistanis control most of the supply operation, the CIA has never been able to conduct a proper audit of the arms and ammunition reaching the mujahedin, according to a former administration official. But sources say that some of the money seems to have been diverted in Pakistan. "It looks as if the CIA is willing to accept a leakage of perhaps 30 percent as the price of doing business there," says one well-informed congressman. Staffers on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who also have access to classified information on the leakage, put the diversion at perhaps 50 percent. As a result, Congress may decide to make cuts in the \$670 million aid package for Pakistan requested by the administration for fiscal 1988. The GAO investigation also will try to find out whether any U.S. money was diverted from the mujahedin to the contras. The CIA has admitted that, early last year, some of the profits from the arms sales to Iran were lodged in a Swiss bank account that handled CIA funds for Afghanistan. It says the mingling of funds was a mistake and was quickly rectified.

Closing a gap: The prospect of a negotiated settlement may make it even easier for Congress to cut U.S. aid. Last week the U.N.-sponsored talks between Pakistan and the pro-Soviet Afghan regime adjourned after both sides offered concessions on a key issue: how long Soviet troops would remain in the country after a peace agreement. The Soviets, who earlier proposed to stay on for three years, cut the period to 22 months and then allowed their Afghan allies to reduce it to 18 months. The Pakistanis extended their proposed deadline from four months to seven, giving rise to fears among conservatives in Washington that Pakistan might sell out the mujahedin.

There was no agreement yet, however, on exactly what sort of government would exist once the Soviets leave. That subject will be discussed directly between the United States and the Soviet Union when Under Secretary of State Michael Armacost visits Moscow this week. The Soviets have softened their rhetoric; they say they want a government of "national reconciliation," and they do not insist that Afghanistan is part of the "socialist camp." But there is no assurance yet that Moscow is prepared to allow the mujahedin a significant role in the government—or a chance to overthrow Najib, the Kremlin's man in Kabul. The Soviets will have to bleed a lot more before they allow the rebels to win at the negotiating table a victory that is far beyond their reach on the battlefield.

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