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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

29 February 1988

Soviet Options for Withdrawal of Forces from Afghanistan

This memorandum explores the mechanics of a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. It assumes the existence of a political settlement stipulating the removal of all Soviet forces over a period of 10 months. It does not assume any specific terms for frontloading, regional ceasefires, or accepted composition of the Afghan government, but considers these as issues that will affect Moscow's choice of the form of withdrawal.

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There are two general frameworks for the departure of Soviet troops. In the first, the Soviets could remove their forces regionally, reserving those units securing Kabul and the road to Termez for the last phase. In the second, they could opt to retain their military presence countrywide by thinning various types of units. There are advantages and risks in each scenario. Soviet forces would be least vulnerable during a regional or geographic withdrawal, for example, but this pattern would be difficult to reverse and could significantly undercut any image of continuing regime authority. Withdrawal by thinning units, on the other hand, would preserve the option of renegeing and maintain the fiction of Kabul's influence, but could place weakened Soviet units at considerable risk depending on the rate of retrenchment. As a result, we think that this option is the least likely of the two.

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This memorandum was prepared in the Office of Soviet Analysis by [redacted] with a contribution from [redacted] of the National Photographic Interpretation Center. This paper was prepared in response to a request from the Deputy Director for Intelligence. Comments and queries are welcome and should be directed to the Chief, Theater Forces Division, [redacted]

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It is possible that Moscow will develop some variation of one framework or a combination of the two, particularly if the Soviets wish to retain the option of reevaluating security along the withdrawal routes and the staying power of the Kabul regime at various stages of the withdrawal process. The Soviets could begin by eliminating their least critical personnel before moving into the first phases of a regional withdrawal, and then pause to take stock before completely clearing entire regions. Moreover, every phase of a regional withdrawal would probably begin by thinning support or non-combat units within the region before withdrawing essential combat units. [REDACTED]

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Some issues--such as the role of Soviet military advisors, the ability of the USSR to absorb returning troop contingents, and the role of air assets in Afghanistan and the USSR--cut across any framework for withdrawal. They may dictate variations within either scenario and affect the speed with which the withdrawal process can be accomplished. The Soviets demonstrated during the invasion that they can move a large number of troops in a matter of months, but these issues represent the type of complications that would affect a withdrawal. [REDACTED]

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There are a number of military indicators that may precede the removal of the bulk of Soviet forces, but these may not necessarily provide insight to a Soviet policy decision to begin a withdrawal. Some, such as redistribution of MAG personnel, could be ambiguous initially. Other, less ambiguous, activity need not begin until after an agreement is in place. [REDACTED]

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Soviet Options for Withdrawal of Forces from Afghanistan

Soviet Capability to Move Forces--The Invasion Scenario

We estimate that the Soviets introduced about 40,000 troops into Afghanistan between 23 and 31 December 1979. About 25,000 of these troops belonged to ground force units that had been training and mobilizing in the USSR for some time.

Although the Soviets have demonstrated that they could move about one half of the troops now in Afghanistan in two to three months, withdrawal would not simply reverse the invasion. Some circumstances that influenced the timing of the invasion have changed:

- Because withdrawal would lack the urgency of invasion, Moscow might be more conservative in its commitment of resources.

- A primary military concern during the invasion was potential resistance from the Afghan Army. During withdrawal, the Soviets would expect to have to secure their routes against an experienced guerrilla force, and possibly against some Afghan regime troops.

Frameworks for Withdrawal

Geographic Withdrawal or Regional Phasing. One option for withdrawal is to remove Soviet units by region. The Soviets could, for example, begin by consolidating the units in southern Afghanistan and moving them to the USSR along the highway through Herat. This western route might be chosen in preference to routing through Kabul because the distribution of Soviet force deployments indicates that the Soviets perceive the insurgent threat in western Afghanistan to be less than in the northeast. In addition, the western route is shorter, the terrain is better, and the logistic burden would be eased. Once

the forces from southern Afghanistan had departed, the next most exposed group--units in Ghazni and Gardez--would likely depart via Kabul. A similar pattern in western Afghanistan would roll up the Tapa units with those from Shindand and Herat to exit through Towraghundi. Concurrently, the forces in the extreme northeast down as far as the Konar and the KGB units along the northern border would withdraw. By the beginning of the final stage, the forces remaining to be withdrawn would be those securing Kabul, Jalalabad, and the route to Termez. [REDACTED]

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One variation of regional withdrawal might have the more distant units converge on strongpoints in the east and west, permitting the Soviets to shuffle units. The airborne battalions of the independent brigades, for example, might replace existing units at Kabul or Bagram that would then in turn depart for the USSR. Similarly, detachments in the Panjsher or Konar could rejoin their home units in Afghanistan before returning to the USSR, or their parent units might reabsorb them while sending other subordinate elements to Termez. Withdrawal by consolidating units at strongpoints would be complex for the Soviets to administer and difficult to monitor. [REDACTED]

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Geographic withdrawal might have several military advantages for the Soviets:

- Because Soviet units would be falling back along internal and controlled lines of communications and contributing to the protection of these lines, this method would probably be the most secure military option. As units moved north, garrisons now covering the highway would be absorbed, providing additional mobile self-defense. Units slated for later departure--now freed of other offensive responsibilities if insurgent pressure does not materialize--would be available for defensive road clearing operations.
- As their forces moved north, the Soviets would be able to concentrate an expanding amount of combat resources on a continually diminishing amount of territory. Depending on the degree of frontloading, Soviet strongpoints could be reinforced to enhance the security of units remaining in Afghanistan.
- Logistic requirements would decrease as the need to support distant garrisons was eliminated. Units previously assigned to convoy protection would be available to supplement the security of withdrawing forces. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets might conclude that other advantages would develop during a geographic withdrawal:

- They might assume that in the absence of Soviet forces as targets, internicine fighting among insurgent groups jockeying for position would increase. The Soviets probably are aware that rivalry among insurgent groups extends to seizure of one another's supplies, skirmishes, and assassination. Moscow might judge that any increase in infighting would undercut the level or effectiveness of guerrilla attacks on Afghan Army facilities. Moscow apparently already believes that only a small portion of the insurgents are active combatants.
- Moscow may believe that the return of refugees to areas evacuated by Soviet forces could also work to Soviet advantage by increasing the demands for civilian support on insurgent organizations. Withdrawing Soviet units and Afghan garrisons might face less insurgent pressure if the resistance was occupied with administering, feeding, and housing a large refugee population.

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The disadvantages associated with a geographic withdrawal would reduce Soviet options and flexibility and make it difficult to reverse the withdrawal process:

- Geographic withdrawal might sharply undercut the ability of the Kabul regime to maintain order. By closing down garrisons, the Soviets would abandon large areas of the country to the resistance. If the Afghan forces garrisoned in regions cleared early fell rapidly under insurgents attacks, the Soviets would be hard pressed to preserve an image of orderly departure or of leaving the regime in power.
- Once Soviet forces had departed with their equipment and support units, normal logistic support to the now-empty garrisons would end. If the Soviets decided for whatever reason to return troops to the area, there would be no security or logistics infrastructure in place to receive them. Afghan units might be encouraged to take over garrisons or move into the better equipped Soviet areas of joint garrisons once Soviet units departed. Soviet aerial resupply to these units could preserve some logistic

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infrastructure in the short term. Aerial resupply--as the Soviets recently found in Paktia--is precarious in a hostile air defense environment, however. Moscow probably would be unwilling to commit combat resources to protect aerial resupply of Afghan-occupied garrisons during, or after, a withdrawal.

- In this scenario, insurgent forces could increase pressure on regime forces and lines of communication in cleared areas.
- It would be politically difficult to justify returning Soviet forces to an evacuated region as an internal redistribution.

Withdrawal by Thinning of Units. An alternative to geographic withdrawal would involve designating specific numbers of troops or elements of units for removal at agreed intervals. The Soviets would determine which elements of larger formations would depart, and in what order, to meet that requirement. They might begin by removing units--probably in battalion-size--that are normally used for offensive operations. This would include the Army-level artillery, the air assault brigade, the independent parachute regiment, one of the independent motorized rifle regiments, the Spetsnaz brigades, the airborne battalions of the independent motorized rifle brigades, and the more active regiments of the motorized rifle divisions.

Initially, parent units probably would retain those elements that currently provide perimeter security for their own or other Soviet garrisons. For example, although Spetsnaz battalions would be removed from garrisons along the main highway, route security would still be necessary--both to protect withdrawing units and to permit resupply of forces that remained in place. The security units of the Spetsnaz garrisons could be retained to perform that role. As a result, several battalions of the 103rd Guards Airborne Division (GAD) could not leave with the rest of the division.

In the first phase, the Soviets might choose to augment the complement available for initial removal by including the KGB maneuver groups, garrison forces such as those in the Panjsher and Konar Valleys, the units recently removed from Bamian Chaghcharan, and some engineer and headquarters elements. The Soviets probably believe that, if western aid were cut off, garrison forces along major supply routes would be less essential. By juggling these units, the Soviets would combine the early withdrawal of a large number of troops with preserving

their presence countrywide. [redacted]

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The primary advantage of this framework would be to keep Soviet options open:

- Withdrawal by selected troops would permit the Soviets to rapidly reinsert forces if they determined after the first phase that withdrawal was not proceeding as hoped. Airborne forces could be reintroduced most quickly if the Kabul regime and its armed forces began to disintegrate. Moreover, if the Soviets ultimately decided to restore and increase their force levels, facilities to support and secure them would already be in place. The Soviets would maintain control of the major airfields that could be used initially to expand logistic support for incoming units.
- Although we believe the political cost of reneging on a withdrawal agreement would be high, the Soviets might still opt for this framework to give themselves the chance of reassessing the withdrawal process. By not evacuating whole regions, Moscow would avoid the appearance of weakening regime authority and would be better able to portray a reinvasion as assistance to the legitimate government. [redacted]

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From the purely military perspective, this option could have serious drawbacks that would place remaining Soviet forces at considerable risk:

- In order to trim units, the Soviets would have to cease offensive actions in areas where Soviet forces are thinly spread and probably reduce the number of combat units on route and garrison security duty. Remaining Soviet units would concentrate on route security for departing troops and protection of facilities. The Soviets already have a large portion of their combat units assigned to security duties. In this scenario, security responsibilities would not decrease in the short term, but the resources available would be cut sharply.
- A frontloaded withdrawal by thinning units would increase the risks to remaining forces. Isolated Soviet forces, such as the independent units in Qandahar or Feyzabad, would be at greatest peril and most difficult to supply. These exposed units would be less vulnerable if the agreed rate of removing Soviet forces was neither

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frontloaded nor constant throughout the withdrawal period, however. Under such circumstances, the Soviets could retain a large portion of their forces until the last stage of withdrawal and be better able to secure and resupply isolated garrisons.

- It would be difficult to maintain unit integrity in this type of withdrawal. The Soviets traditionally prefer to move combat forces as administrative units, both for administrative efficiency and enhanced security.

Likely Pattern of Withdrawal. We believe it likely that the Soviets will ultimately adopt a withdrawal pattern that combines some elements of both frameworks. The specifics of that pattern will depend largely on the terms they negotiate at Geneva. If they agree to a heavily frontloaded withdrawal, they will probably remove all of their least essential personnel countrywide--logistic support units, field hospitals, construction teams--at the same time that large regions are being cleared. Combining the regional pattern with thinning of units also would be most likely if the Geneva Accords include some reliable guarantees of security for the departing forces. Whatever pattern the Soviets choose initially, the removal of the final contingent of Soviet forces will entail departure of service support forces before the last combat units leave Kabul.

Withdrawal Frameworks and the Geneva Accords

A geographic withdrawal would be more easily monitored than the withdrawal of selected troops. The capability of national technical means to observe and record the movement of whole units is better than our ability to determine, from any sources, changes in the disposition of personnel. By selecting this option, the Soviets would be best able to demonstrate their good faith or compliance and be least able to cheat on either the timing or force levels specified in an agreement.

The removal of troops and small elements of Soviet forces would be difficult to verify. The most accurate monitoring would require impartial observers at virtually all Soviet garrisons, as well as at border crossing points. The Soviets could well refuse such close observation rather than permit outsiders into their facilities. If, however, Moscow believed that an observation force would take some responsibility for the security of Afghan and Soviet garrisons, they might acquiesce.

There would be little flexibility in the degree of frontloading that Moscow could produce in a geographic withdrawal

beginning in the south. To cut its combat forces in half in the first three months, for example, would require clearing all Soviet forces except those in Kabul and northern Afghanistan. This form of withdrawal would put the Kabul regime to the test more quickly than a scenario that retained a large Soviet troop contingent until the last stages of withdrawal.

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Considerations Affecting Moscow's Choices

Several issues cut across any withdrawal framework and may dictate the framework the Soviets select, variations within each scenario, and the timing of withdrawal phases. These issues also highlight the kinds of military indicators we should see prior to the actual withdrawal.

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Pereparations in the USSR. The ground force units now stationed in Afghanistan--with the exception of some of the Special Purpose Forces and a regiment of the 5th Guards Motorized Rifle Division (GMRD)--are those that originally entered the country in 1979-80. They were drawn primarily from the military districts in central Asia. During the past eight years, the personnel rotated into these units have come from other military districts as well. At the same time, most of the home garrisons of the invasion force have been occupied by new units. As a result, the Soviets will have to prepare reception centers for returning personnel and space to house the returning units.

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We have some precedent for the speed with which this process can be accomplished:

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If the Soviets agree to move all their troops initially to the Turkestan Military District (TKMD) in order to enhance verification, their processing centers would probably be similar to those used during mobilization, including prepositioning of stocks, administrative areas for onward processing or demobilization, and preparations for vehicle maintenance. Such centers could be colocated with existing units in Central Asia to speed the process, but several weeks would be required to get equipment and staff in place. Several more weeks would probably be allotted for post-transit activities before units relocated inside the USSR and personnel were either demobilized or reassigned.

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The absence of facilities will not prevent the Soviets from removing units in toto through a geographic withdrawal. Large temporary or semi-permanent barracks and parking areas could be created near existing installations. Moreover, many Soviet divisions are normally broken down among a number of installations in close proximity. The Soviets could most easily accommodate or disperse returning forces if they were withdrawn in relatively moderate increments.

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Methods of Transport. The Soviets are likely to move their troops by a combination of air and road transport. Airborne, air assault, and Spetsnaz units, which account for about 16,500 troops, could be moved by air. Other ground forces, whose equipment is not air-transportable, likely would road march to the border. Because there is no rail transport available, wheeled vehicles would probably be driven, while tracked vehicles and towed equipment would be moved on truck trailers. The lift capability required for the ground forces units during the invasion--less than one half the current troop strength in Afghanistan--was roughly 8000 metric tons.

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We estimate that it would take about 15 days to move an airborne division using Afghan airfields. Since the Soviets are unlikely to view withdrawal from Afghanistan as an emergency situation warranting significant air mobilization, we doubt that the bulk of Soviet troops would be withdrawn by air. Moreover, much of the equipment of ground force divisions is not transportable by air.

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Preparations in Afghanistan. Any Soviet units slated to return to the USSR will require time to consolidate and prepare for departure. Activities conducted during this period will include vehicle maintenance, return to garrison of outlying units, training for the march, and possibly withdrawal ceremonies. Examples from the invasion, the sham withdrawal, and normal combat deployments suggest the preparation period could range from several days to some weeks:

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None of these situations parallels what a total withdrawal involve. All three precedents illustrate, however, that a logistically-based withdrawal is not simply a matter of travel time. Our own military forces allot several months lead time to move major units for standard exercises such as the well-rehearsed Reforger. [redacted]

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Transfers to the Afghan Armed Forces. Leaving behind equipment for the Afghan Army and Air Force would simplify Soviet withdrawal tasks by minimizing route security requirements. A larger portion of troops could be moved by air if their vehicles were to remain behind. Moscow has sharply increased its deliveries to Afghan units in the past year, and the Afghan Army would be hard-pressed to absorb a significant portion of vehicles and weapons from the Soviets. We have some evidence that the Soviets intend to leave materiel for the Afghans and have ordered inventories of some units to determine what equipment could be transferred. The Soviets would be unlikely to give the Afghans advanced systems, such as the new self-propelled artillery that has been introduced to Soviet forces since 1985. Some equipment not normally found with specialized units--vehicles with Spetsnaz forces, for example--could be left behind. To speed their departure, the Soviets might also abandon the equipment belonging to elements such as field kitchens, supply depots, bakeries and the like. Only in an emergency would they discard normal combat equipment. [redacted]

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Evacuation of Non-Combat Personnel. The Military Advisory Group (MAG) and pro-Soviet Afghans may be removed with Soviet combat personnel. They likely would be evacuated by air, but the

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timing of their departure will depend on the terms of the political settlement.

- If the settlement does not permit the Soviets to keep advisors in Afghanistan, the MAG might move at any time during the withdrawal process. Soviet advisors could be used to help Afghan units provide security for departing Soviet forces and to enhance the survivability of Afghan garrisons once Soviet troops had left. The US kept its advisors in Vietnam and expanded their presence even as combat forces were withdrawing. On the other hand, some Soviet advisors could be at risk from mutinous Afghan units.
- An agreement that results in the degradation of the Kabul regime's authority would likely lead to rapid disintegration of the Afghan Armed Forces. If Moscow believed that the safety of Soviet advisors could no longer be guaranteed, the MAG could be removed early and counted as a small portion of a frontloaded withdrawal.
- We estimate that the Soviets might remove as many as 2500 members of the PDPA cadre to prevent their being killed. Another 15,500--including military officers, Sarandoi, and Khad personnel--probably would also need relocation outside Afghanistan. The Soviets might be willing to accept these individuals and could phase them out gradually--leaving the PDPA cadre to the last so that some vestige of authority remained throughout the withdrawal period.

Regional Ceasefires. Ceasefires with local tribes would be useful whatever withdrawal format the Soviets choose.

In the absence of ceasefire arrangements, clearing operations along each segment of the route would be required during each phase of withdrawal, slowing or delaying movement and increasing the requirements for security units to accompany columns.

The Role of Combat Aircraft. Soviet aircraft based in the USSR might play a major role in providing tactical air cover for departing forces and fire support for those that remain until the later stages of withdrawal. In withdrawal by thinning of units,

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the need for additional air cover would probably be greater than in a geographic withdrawal to compensate for the absence of other fire support. In a regional withdrawal, air assets would probably be held in place until near the end of each withdrawal phase, but would be unsupportable once airfield security units departed.

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Likely Indicators of Withdrawal

Based on the above considerations, there are a number of indicators that should be evident prior to withdrawal. These-- and other indicators--could begin to appear as early as six months before any movement of forces takes place. The majority would take place in the last month or two before departure. Any single indicator--such as the consolidation of a single regiment--could be ambiguous in the absence of others.

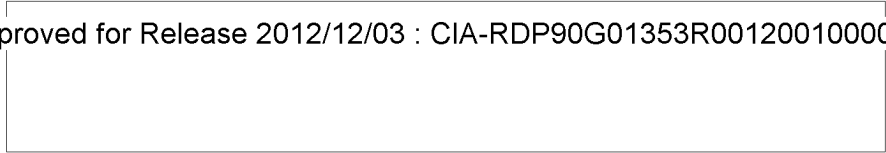
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Several of these indicators might not appear at all. For example, the Soviets might continue to develop their infrastructure right up to the end of withdrawal. We also might miss some indicators in Soviet communications, as we did during



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the invasion. The absence of indicators would not be firm evidence that withdrawal was not about to take place. [REDACTED]

We have already seen some of these signs. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

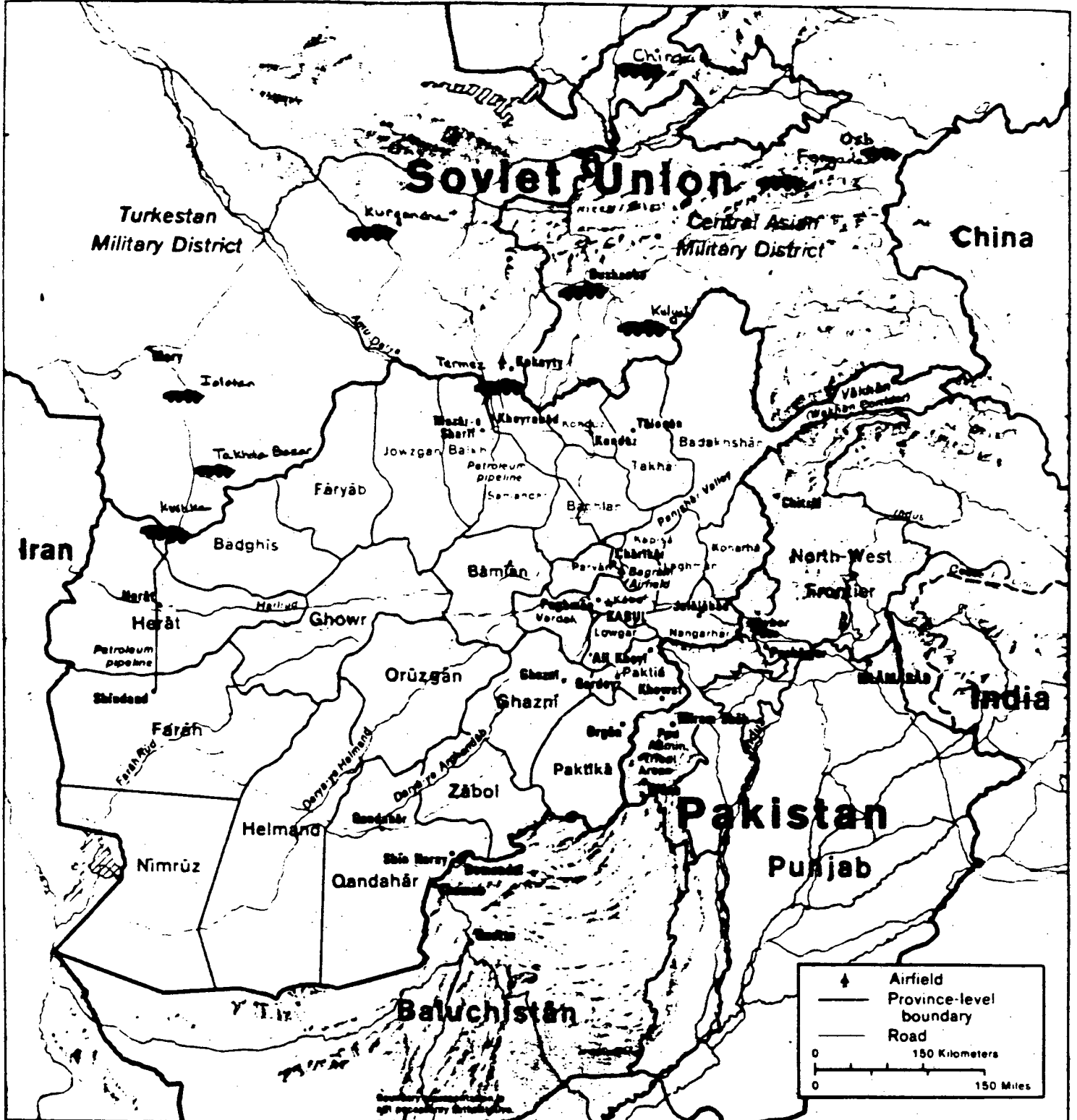
The climate of speculation leading to the March session of the Geneva peace talks and Gorbachev's recent announcement may have sparked contingency planning for withdrawal by prudent military commanders concerned about having the maximum lead time possible for an orderly departure. Given that some preparations for withdrawal might be completed within a matter of months--during the interim period of sixty days outlined in Gorbachev's speech, for example--it is possible, however, that we would not have sufficient unambiguous indicators prior to the signing of a political settlement to make a call. [REDACTED]

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Afghanistan



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Map 2. Garrisons in the USSR that Might Be Involved in Withdrawal

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