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FILE

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

2 July 1987

IMPLICATIONS OF AN INTERNATIONAL  
CONFERENCE ON AFGHANISTAN [redacted]

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Summary

A Soviet proposal to convene an international conference to break the diplomatic deadlock on Afghanistan likely would reap propaganda benefits for Moscow and impair resistance unity and the insurgents' ties to Pakistan. We believe the Soviets might view such a conference as a means to delay negotiations on a withdrawal timetable, increase the legitimacy of the Afghan regime, and weaken the resistance or, conceivably, to arrive at a settlement. [redacted]

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Although Pakistan and the resistance almost certainly would agree to participate in an international conference, we foresee more risks for them than benefits. There would be disagreements between insurgent moderates and fundamentalists as well as between the insurgents and the Pakistanis during the negotiations, reflecting the different goals of the insurgent factions and Islamabad. US interests in strengthening resistance unity and Pakistan's commitment to the resistance would be hurt by public quarreling. [redacted]

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Rumors about a Soviet proposal for an international conference on Afghanistan with the Soviet Union, the Afghan communist regime, Pakistan, the Afghan resistance, and the United States listed as participants have circulated widely in the past month. The reports followed a series of articles written in May for the Times of India by Lawrence Lifschultz, an

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] South Asia Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis and [redacted] Third World Activities Division, Office of Soviet Analysis. Information as of 2 July 1987 was used in preparation of this memorandum. Comments and queries are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, South Asia Division [redacted]

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American journalist who reportedly spent two weeks in the Soviet Union researching the article. According to Lifschultz's account, which cites interviews with unnamed Soviet officials, Moscow is planning to propose a roundtable conference in order to break the current diplomatic deadlock on Afghanistan. [redacted]

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[redacted] the Soviets have not publicly confirmed these press stories [redacted]

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Would the Soviets Propose an International Conference?

We believe that Moscow's assessment of the results of its recent policy initiatives on Afghanistan, including the "national reconciliation" proposals, pressure on Pakistan, and overtures to former Afghan monarch Zahir Shah, will determine whether it will propose an international conference. The Soviets are particularly likely to do so if they judge that the risk of further deterioration in the Kabul regime could be contained. We see several reasons why Moscow might want to sponsor such a conference:

- The Soviets would hope that it would continue to focus attention on arrangements for a new Afghan government and away from the withdrawal timetable, the primary issue now at Geneva.
- Moscow would gain by having Islamabad and the resistance talk directly to Kabul for the first time.
- The Soviets may hope that the need to agree on a single negotiating position would lead to serious rifts among the opposing players.
- If the offer were refused, Moscow could claim that its flexibility had been frustrated again by the intransigence of the United States, Pakistan, and the insurgents.
- If Moscow is serious about devising a face-saving arrangement in Afghanistan as the prerequisite for agreement on a short withdrawal timetable, it may judge a conference would offer the best chance of a compromise that would preserve minimum Soviet interests. [redacted]

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The drawbacks for Moscow might not be great enough to keep it from making a conference proposal. Soviet proponents of a conference would argue that by agreeing to talk to the resistance for the first time, the Soviets would be giving up little more than they have already by having

[redacted]

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Kabul claim that a coalition with the resistance is possible. The Soviets have already shown they are willing to take the risk that talk of withdrawal and a compromise political arrangement in Afghanistan might demoralize and fracture the present regime and raise expectations of a settlement among the Soviet public. Moscow might be willing to see these risks intensified by a roundtable conference if it judged a settlement might result or if disruption within the alliance and among its supporters appeared highly likely. [redacted]

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### Kabul's Reaction

We believe the Kabul regime continues to have little stomach for the Soviet-mandated cease-fire and national reconciliation campaign and would be reluctant to see Moscow propose a five-party international conference. Najib and other Afghan communists--including both his supporters and opponents--have seen an increase in factionalism since the introduction of the January peace proposals. The peace initiative, with its implicit signal of a Soviet withdrawal, has also greatly undermined the confidence of party and government cadre in the reliability of Soviet protection. Najib almost certainly would expect a five-party conference--especially coming on the heels of several significant military setbacks for Afghan forces this spring--to further weaken the cohesion and governing effectiveness of the ruling party. He would also argue that sitting at a negotiating table with the resistance would undercut Kabul's claim to be the sole voice of the Afghan people. [redacted]

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If Moscow proposes a conference, Kabul will have no choice but to participate. The Afghan regime would much prefer in any case to be sitting at the conference table than worrying about what the Soviets might be arranging behind its back. We believe Najib and his supporters would insist that Najib himself head Kabul's delegation. He probably would argue that his participation in a conference would help to negate recent rumors that Moscow is prepared to conclude a settlement giving him at best a subsidiary role. He would also contend that such a role would increase international perceptions of him as a legitimate national leader. Najib probably also would claim--with justification, in our opinion--that his presence would ease the Soviets' negotiating task by creating tension between the Pakistanis and insurgent chiefs who have made the PDPA General Secretary's removal a requisite for a peace settlement. [redacted]

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### Insurgent Reaction

The insurgents almost certainly would feel required to accept an invitation to a five-party conference. Because the seven party chiefs of the resistance alliance have long claimed to be ready to deal directly with the Soviets, they probably believe that an alliance failure to accept an invitation would not only alienate their principal external

backers--Pakistan, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and China--but also weaken support for the resistance in the Third World. Although the alliance leaders would tacitly recognize the legitimacy of the Kabul government by attending, they probably would estimate that this negative factor would be more than counterbalanced by the international prestige they would derive from having "forced" a superpower to the negotiating table. [redacted]

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In our opinion, the resistance alliance eventually would be able to form a conference delegation. Such a group, however, almost certainly would have a strong Islamist cast--the Islamists most oppose direct contact with Kabul and most distrust the Pakistanis and the United States--in order to persuade Sayyaf, Khalis, Gulbuddin, and perhaps Rabbani to participate. In the course of the conference's proceedings, we believe there would be little flexibility in the alliance's negotiating position. Moreover, US or Pakistani pressure on the insurgents to accommodate Soviet-Afghan demands probably would destroy the alliance's negotiating consensus, thereby either splitting the delegation into its Islamist and moderate components or prompting the group to walk out in order to maintain its unity. [redacted]

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#### The Pakistani Reaction

US diplomats in Islamabad say that the Pakistanis are intrigued by the press articles suggesting the Soviets will propose a conference. Foreign Ministry officials in Islamabad have stated that the reported Soviet offer is similar to proposals made since 1979 by the British, the Organization of Islamic Conferences, and Iran (see annex). Some of these officials implied to US diplomats that the Pakistani Government probably would be receptive to a Soviet call for an international conference. Pakistani Foreign Minister Yaqub Khan, however, expressed doubt about the reports to US officials, saying that if the Soviets wanted to raise the subject of an international conference, they could do so directly with the Pakistanis. [redacted]

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We believe Pakistan would have little choice but to accept a Soviet invitation to attend an international conference on Afghanistan. To reject such an invitation, in Islamabad's eyes, would be to invite domestic discontent over Pakistan's unwillingness to explore every avenue for a settlement in Afghanistan and hand a major international propaganda victory to Moscow and Kabul. [redacted]

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Nonetheless, we believe Islamabad would find itself caught in a dilemma if Moscow were to make a formal proposal. If the Afghan regime were made a conference participant, Pakistan would have to decide whether or not to sit at the same table, thus implicitly recognizing the communist regime after seven years of nonrecognition. Even if Islamabad simply declared that its participation did not imply diplomatic recognition, such a development

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would hurt Pakistan's efforts to prevent other governments from recognizing Kabul. [redacted]

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More serious, however, would be Pakistan's fear that the conference would expose and enlarge rifts between the insurgents and Pakistan that could be exploited by Moscow. The fundamentalist resistance leaders, such as Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and Yunus Khalis, disagree with Pakistan over issues such as composition of an interim Afghan government. This problem would become acute if the Soviets tabled an offer that would be acceptable to Pakistan--such as acceptance of former King Zahir Shah as head of a neutral interim government--but rejected by some or all of the resistance delegation. Islamabad would then be faced with the unpalatable choice of pressuring the resistance leaders to be accommodating--and thereby risking a breakup of the resistance alliance--or having all or part of the resistance walk out of the conference. Either option would, in Pakistan's view, provide Moscow with a propaganda victory by giving credence to Soviet charges that the insurgents cannot be taken seriously as a party to negotiations. [redacted]

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#### Implications for the Afghan Regime

Despite the near certainty that a conference would increase party factionalism, we believe that Kabul's attendance could yield a diplomatic gain for the Soviet-Afghan side. Kabul has scored several important diplomatic successes since its peace offensive began--including recognition by Zimbabwe and Cyprus and its outmaneuvering of Pakistan at a recent ministerial meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement. Participation in a conference with Washington and Islamabad would clearly enhance the regime's stature, even if resistance leaders were present. Kabul and Moscow almost certainly believe that the regime's participation in a five-party conference would pave the way for additional diplomatic gains in the Third World and lead to a reduction of anti-Kabul sentiment in the United Nations, the Islamic Conference, and the Non-Aligned Movement. Indeed, even if the conference failed, Moscow and Kabul almost certainly would win international plaudits for having tried to orchestrate a political settlement of the war. [redacted]

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#### Implications for Pakistan and the Resistance

We see little to be gained and much that can be lost by Pakistan in attending an international conference on Afghanistan, especially if the conference is a new Soviet effort to sow discord between the resistance and the Pakistanis. Despite declarations to the contrary, Pakistan would be seen to have given de facto diplomatic recognition to the Kabul regime. Islamabad would probably be further handicapped by having the Afghan alliance participate in the conference because the resistance could potentially exercise a veto over negotiations, something that the Pakistanis have wanted to avoid. [redacted]

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In our view, the insurgents also stand to lose more than they gain by attending a five-party conference. Internal alliance disagreements about Islam and dealing directly with Najib's regime, when added to the guerrilla chiefs' intense personal rivalries and lack of diplomatic sophistication, are likely to make the insurgents relatively inflexible negotiators. We believe, for example, that the insurgent delegation probably would walk out of a conference which decided to discuss a Soviet-Afghan proposal for a coalition government formed around Najib. Such a proposal probably would appear conciliatory and "reasonable" to an international audience, thereby making alliance intransigence appear to be a major impediment to a political settlement. [redacted]

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Nonetheless, we do not foresee an international conference leading to a complete split between Islamabad and the Afghan resistance. Even if the conference was unsuccessful, the basic relationship between the two sides would remain. The insurgents and refugees would still depend on Pakistan for aid and support, and Pakistani leaders--particularly President Zia--would still feel morally and religiously compelled to support the refugees and resistance. Moreover, Islamabad would still be faced with Soviet troops on its Western border. The Pakistanis would retain the option of returning to the UN-brokered negotiations in Geneva. [redacted]

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#### Implications for the United States

The United States' interests in furthering Afghan insurgent unity and strengthening Pakistan's commitment to the insurgents probably would not be served by an international conference, especially if the United States actually participated. Washington might be dragged into infighting among the resistance groups, thereby tarnishing its image among the insurgents. Potential disagreements between Washington and Islamabad on the content of an Afghan settlement could become public during the conference and damage bilateral ties. Moreover, Soviet propagandists would blame a failure of the conference to arrive at a settlement of the Afghan conflict on US pressure on Pakistan and the resistance. [redacted]

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If Washington did not participate in an international roundtable, the risk to US interests would be somewhat less because differences between the United States and Pakistan would be more easily muted. Islamabad likes to take the lead on diplomatic initiatives toward Afghanistan and would probably prefer that Washington not be a party to negotiations. Moscow, however, has often said that the United States is the key to any Afghan settlement and might insist on US participation. [redacted]

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ANNEX

Past Proposals for International Conferences on Afghanistan

There have been several unsuccessful initiatives to hold an international roundtable conference on Afghanistan since 1979, according to US diplomatic reporting:

- The European Economic Community, led by Great Britain, proposed in February 1980 that an international conference be convened to work for Afghanistan's neutrality under international guarantees in return for the withdrawal of Soviet troops. This meeting would have included the Afghan regime, the Soviet Union, Iran, Pakistan, and the United States.
- Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev offered to hold a conference on Afghanistan in 1980, including the Afghan regime and neighboring countries.
- The Organization of Islamic Conferences tried to sponsor a conference in Switzerland in August 1980 by inviting the Afghan regime, resistance representatives, Iran, and Pakistan. According to Pakistani officials, all the parties showed up except for the Kabul delegation.
- Iran proposed a roundtable meeting on Afghanistan this year with the Soviet Union, the Afghan regime, the resistance, Pakistan, and Iran as participants.

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