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RECENT MILITARY TRENDS AND SOVIET PERCEPTIONS OF THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

Summary

Improved insurgent weapons, logistics, and tactics probably have led the Soviets to conclude that maintaining the current level of stalemate will be an increasingly difficult but not unmanageable task. The Soviets almost certainly are concerned about insurgent successes, particularly the resistance's ability to withstand two recent offensives, but probably feel it is premature to view these operations as a turning point. Moscow is likely to react by adjusting its tactics to counter new insurgent weaponry. Moreover, as the military situation continues to be stalemated, the Soviets will continue to focus on other approaches, trying to break Pakistani resolve. The bombing and sabotage campaigns inside Pakistan, which have focused attention on the government's Afghan policy, are likely to continue. At the same time, Moscow may offer at the Geneva talks a withdrawal timetable of a year or slightly less to capitalize on Islamabad's uncertainties about continued US backing. We believe, however, that the survival of the Communist regime in Kabul and cessation of aid to the resistance before withdrawal begins will remain the bottom line of Soviet policy for the foreseeable future.

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Mixed Military Results for Moscow

Increased combat activity by Soviet ground forces demonstrates that Moscow recognizes the Afghan Army's inadequacies and is willing to commit its own troops more widely when necessary. Afghan units showed little or no improvement in their performance this year. They continue to be hampered by widespread desertions, poor morale, inadequate training, and high casualties.

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Command and Operations Branch, Theater Forces Division, Office of Soviet Analysis and [redacted] Afghanistan Branch, South Asia Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, Theater Forces Division, Office of Soviet Analysis [redacted] or Chief, South Asia Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis [redacted]

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--Soviet and Afghan air operations have been less effective this year.

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--The Soviets have relied extensively on the artillery systems introduced last year. In cases such as the recent fighting near Kabul, the substantial firepower advantage of Soviet and Afghan regime forces undercuts the insurgents' ability to defend less well-prepared positions. Elsewhere, heavy artillery limits the scale of offensive actions the resistance can initiate. Soviet reliance on artillery fire support may increase to compensate for the diminished effectiveness of Soviet airstrikes.

--The Soviets expanded dramatically their use of Spetsnaz forces for reconnaissance and supply interdiction,

[Redacted]

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The threat of interdiction may contribute to continued high transportation costs and rerouting of supplies. [Redacted]

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The Soviets and Afghan regime also continue to apply pressure to Pakistan. The well-publicized air and artillery strikes against insurgents and refugees across the border in Pakistan that took place earlier this year have diminished. Incidents of sabotage and subversion inside Pakistan and efforts to play on unrest in the frontier provinces, however, have increased in frequency and boldness. [Redacted]

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Improved Insurgent Performance

In several large battles this spring and summer, the resistance demonstrated increasingly effective employment of new weapons systems, a sharp increase in tactical cooperation among some groups inside Afghanistan, and improved training and logistics. Guerrilla morale remains high.

--Insurgent acquisition of advanced surface-to-air missiles has increased Soviet and Afghan air losses and degraded air operations. The insurgents' ability to absorb and deploy the Stinger surface-to-air

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missile quickly and effectively also reflects the significant improvements in training that have taken place over the past year.

--Battlefield cooperation among insurgent groups has grown significantly. Political squabbling among insurgent leaders in Peshawar remains a problem but does not appear to have affected combat performance.

--The insurgents' ability to sustain combat for relatively long periods of time in several areas is, in our view, an indication that their supply levels are adequate. The opening of new routes through Iran has improved the situation in western Afghanistan. High transportation costs persist, but most major groups are able to secure needed transportation assets.

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Soviet Perceptions and Options

Although we have little direct evidence about Soviet assessments of the military situation in Afghanistan, we doubt that the Soviets would judge that the war has taken a decisive turn for the worse. Moscow undoubtedly has identified some negative developments this year and is openly distressed about the impact of the Stinger. The Soviets probably believe they need to adjust their tactics to cope with these developments. They are not likely to alter the overall direction of their policy unless their tactical adaptations fail to restore the status quo. In that case, additional measures, such as modest troop increases, might be employed.

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The continued poor performance of the Afghan Army probably reinforces Moscow's recognition that Soviet forces cannot be withdrawn soon if the PDPA is to survive. The Soviets' inability to turn the Afghan Army into a capable fighting force most likely is a major frustration.

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Moscow almost certainly is concerned about the insurgents' ability to withstand two recent offensives but probably feels it is premature to view these operations as a turning point.

--Moscow's evaluation of the insurgents' ability to defend their base camps successfully at 'Ali Kheyl this summer, for example, is likely to take into account the unique advantages the guerrillas had

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--Moreover, Moscow probably calculates that the insurgents' ability to survive attacks on well-fortified positions this year does not demonstrate a comparable improvement in their capability to initiate offensive actions.

--Nonetheless, the Soviets may judge that they will have to plan more carefully, commit additional resources, and employ more effective tactics in future offensives. [redacted]

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Although the Soviet media provide no direct evidence about Soviet military assessments, they recently have become more graphic about the human and material costs of the war, indicating heightened leadership awareness of public concerns. Continuing themes in the Soviet media--the necessity of the Soviet commitment, the 'success' of national reconciliation, and imperialist interference in Afghanistan--serve both to stiffen the Soviet public for long-term involvement and to lay the groundwork for a possible political settlement. [redacted]

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As the military situation continues to be stalemated, the Soviets are focusing more on factors beyond the battlefield. Their current diplomatic campaign to build international support for the Kabul regime is part of a broad effort to erode support for the resistance. The key to Soviet disengagement efforts, however, is breaking Pakistani resolve. Cross-border air raids and subversive activities have had some effect. The bombing and sabotage campaigns raise doubts about the ability of Islamabad to protect its citizens, heighten tensions with the refugee community, and could ultimately endanger Pakistan's political stability. At the same time, Moscow must view positively the potential impact of the nuclear issue on Pakistan-US relations. A Soviet offer at Geneva to reduce the troop withdrawal timetable to a year or slightly less, while holding firm on a prominent role for the PDPA, could be calculated to take advantage of any uncertainties in Islamabad about Pakistan's relations with the US. [redacted]

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Any Soviet concerns about trends on the ground since early this year apparently have not been reflected in significant shifts on the basic issues of a political settlement--the survival of the PDPA and the cessation of aid to the resistance before withdrawal begins. We believe that these will remain the bottom line of Soviet policy for the foreseeable future, despite offers to share power and continued signals of Moscow's interest in removing its troops. Indeed, the Kabul regime's failure this year to improve its ability to defend itself may limit Moscow's willingness to go beyond propaganda gestures in refining further the terms of withdrawal or of a coalition government. [redacted]

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**SUBJECT: Recent Military Trends and Soviet Perceptions of the War in
Afghanistan** [redacted]

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