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Soviet Strategy on Afghanistan After the Summit

Summary

General Secretary Gorbachev's stance on Afghanistan at the Washington summit--linking implementation of a 12-month troop withdrawal timetable to an end of US support for the resistance--appeared designed to shift the onus for concluding a settlement onto the United States. Gorbachev also seemed to insist that implementation would require establishment of a coalition government, but other Soviets at the summit and some Soviet media statements since have denied that Moscow requires this linkage. Soviet follow-through on this alleged delinking would probably indicate a decision to leave the Kabul regime to its fate.

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It is doubtful, however, that the Soviets have made a decision to sacrifice their Afghan clients. The withdrawal and coalition issues remain associated in most Soviet statements and media commentary, and Soviet officials say [redacted] that the Kabul regime is a "reality" with which the resistance will have to negotiate. Moreover, Moscow has continued to signal its commitment to Afghan leader Najibullah and his regime and to maintaining extensive ties with Afghanistan.

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Mixed Signals from Moscow

The Soviets have recently been engaged in a concerted campaign to shift the onus for failure to conclude an Afghan settlement onto the United States. At the Washington summit, General Secretary Gorbachev linked implementation of the 12-month troop withdrawal timetable announced last month by Afghan leader Najibullah to the end of US support for the resistance. He stated that from the time an agreement entered into effect Soviet troops would not conduct offensive operations. He also pressed the United States to lean on the resistance to be responsive to

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This memorandum was prepared in the Office of Soviet Analysis [redacted] Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Regional Policy Division [redacted]

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[redacted]

Kabul's efforts to open negotiations on a coalition government. Since the summit, numerous Soviet officials have [redacted] repeated these points. [redacted]

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In Washington Gorbachev seemed to maintain that withdrawal was also dependent on establishment of a coalition, although other Soviets at the summit and a Soviet media commentator soon denied that Moscow insists on this linkage. The two issues nonetheless remain associated in most Soviet statements and media commentary. Soviet delinking would be tantamount to abandoning the Kabul regime. It is unlikely that Moscow would give up efforts to secure the dominance of their clients in favor of a settlement that guaranteed them nothing before trying to negotiate at least a minority position for the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in a new Afghan government. Some Pakistani officials have argued that the Soviets might be prepared to sign a Geneva agreement without parallel provisions for a new government because Moscow means to renege on it once the weapons pipeline to the resistance has been shut down. Because international condemnation for such a move would probably fall on Moscow--whatever pretext the Soviets pleaded--and because dashed expectations might significantly intensify Soviet domestic dissatisfaction over the war, the Soviets are not, in our view, likely to pursue this strategy.

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[redacted]

We do not believe that the Soviets are ready to sacrifice their Afghan clients. They continue to insist [redacted] that the regime is a "reality" and that the resistance will have to negotiate with it. A major Soviet-Afghan offensive this month to relieve the siege of Khowst was portrayed in the Soviet media as the result of the insurgents' refusal to enter negotiations, in particular to agree to the regional ceasefires called for by Najibullah last month. Moreover, a Soviet party Central Committee conference addressed by "Second Secretary" Ligachev and attended by other Politburo members discussed stronger ties between Soviet republics and Afghan provinces, suggesting that Moscow remains committed to maintaining extensive links with Afghanistan and wants to reassure Kabul of this. Even if the conference's call represents a long-term Soviet effort to expand nonmilitary links in the hope of maintaining influence should Moscow eventually withdraw its troops, the Soviets almost certainly realize that, at this stage, such ties probably would not survive without the presence of Soviet troops to prop up a friendly regime.

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[redacted]

We believe that the statements of some Soviet officials that withdrawal is not linked to formation of a coalition reflect Moscow's effort to gain credibility for its claim that it has never sought to impose political arrangements on Afghanistan and to reinforce its efforts to draw the United States into the settlement process. This would be a further development of the longstanding Soviet effort to divide the resistance and its supporters. The Soviets may also be seeking to avoid formal, detailed discussion of a coalition. After accepting in principle a Pakistani invitation last spring for First Deputy Foreign Minister Vorontsov to visit Islamabad--a meeting at which the Pakistanis hope to pin down Soviet ideas on the question--Moscow has made a series of excuses to delay it. [redacted]

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The mixed Soviet signals in Washington, in the Soviet media, and elsewhere may, however, reflect a division among the Soviet leadership over what is an acceptable outcome in Afghanistan. Even if Gorbachev and his allies have concluded that an orderly withdrawal and a neutral, nonaligned Afghanistan with no guaranteed PDPA role sufficiently meet Soviet interests, they are unlikely to pursue a face-saving settlement in the absence of a leadership consensus. They have spent considerable political capital pushing Gorbachev's domestic program past conservative opponents and are unlikely to assume the political risks entailed in accepting an outcome that the conservatives would regard as a defeat. [redacted]

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### The Timing of Withdrawals

Gorbachev confirmed in Washington that a 12-month timetable for the withdrawal of Soviet troops would be proposed at the next round of UN-mediated talks in Geneva, which will probably convene in February. He suggested that in certain circumstances--which Najibullah had said in November were resistance observance of a ceasefire and the success of talks on constructing a coalition--the timetable might be further reduced. The Soviets have refused to be pinned down on a date for commencing the withdrawal but have hinted that it might be determined during or soon after the Geneva session. They have evaded discussion of the phasing of a pullout, in particular the withdrawal of the bulk of Soviet troops early in the timeframe, which the Soviets know Pakistan will require before agreeing to a timetable of more than a few months. They have also recently suggested that they will insist on a more elaborate monitoring mechanism than the present draft Geneva accords provide, potentially a time-consuming and divisive exercise. Both the resistance and Kabul have expressed reservations about a UN force, for instance. [redacted]

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[REDACTED]

### Soviet Views on an Interim Government

Whether or not Moscow will ultimately insist that an interim coalition be in place before Soviet troops begin to withdraw, Soviet officials have consistently stressed the centrality of such arrangements. Gorbachev stated in Washington that Moscow seeks only a neutral and nonaligned Afghanistan that would not threaten Soviet security. However, the Soviets have not so far shown much interest in working out the details and guarantees of Afghanistan's future status. Vorontsov told US officials in November that Kabul might be receptive to neutrality on the Austrian model, but he said that the question must be resolved by the interim government. [REDACTED]

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Some Soviets, including Vorontsov in his talks with US officials in November, have recently suggested that Moscow does not require that the PDPA dominate this government or any permanent set-up or that any particular positions be reserved for the PDPA. A few Soviets--mostly mid-level officials--have even implied that Moscow requires only a face-saving presence for the PDPA, whose leading figures might be evacuated to the USSR. In general, however, the Soviets have continued to insist that a coalition must reflect Afghan political realities and provide a role for the PDPA commensurate with its alleged influence and experience. In Washington, Gorbachev put in a plug for Najibullah's recent offer to give the opposition 50% of the ministerial portfolios and the premiership. The Soviets have also suggested that they will insist on an arrangement that minimizes the influence of fundamentalist resistance elements.

[REDACTED]

25X1 The Soviets have, since the promulgation of Kabul's national reconciliation initiative, made a concerted but unsuccessful effort to attract former king Zahir Shah and other Afghan exiles into joining a coalition with the PDPA. Vorontsov said in November that Zahir could take the lead in forming an interim coalition and that the United States should urge him to become active. The Soviets have been short on concrete ideas about a new government, however, and have generally avoided situations in which detailed discussion of the question might be expected of them. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]  
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[REDACTED]

### How Will Moscow Handle Kabul?

Vorontsov told US officials in November that the Kabul regime still had a "ruling party mentality" from which the Soviets were trying to wean it. Several Soviets have claimed that Moscow is urging the regime to deal with the opposition and that the United States should do the same with the resistance. Some Soviets and East Europeans have also suggested that Najibullah's assumption of the presidency and purges of party opponents last fall were not approved beforehand by Moscow. [REDACTED]

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Despite these suggestions that Moscow and Kabul do not see eye to eye on a settlement and Soviet withdrawal, there is no evidence of serious disagreement, of panic and desertion from regime ranks, or of regime efforts to sabotage Moscow's diplomacy. Moscow has continued to endorse Kabul's proposals for a coalition, which would leave the PDPA in control. Soviet media reported both Najibullah's assumption of the presidency and the adoption of the new Afghan constitution with approval, and Najibullah was given a prominent reception at the October Revolution celebrations in Moscow. Moreover, the regime was probably encouraged by the Soviet party Central Committee's call this month for building more extensive ties with Afghanistan. If the Soviets do intend to withdraw before their clients are secure, the PDPA does not seem to have gotten the message. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

### How Will Moscow Handle Islamabad?

The Soviet strategy for dealing with Pakistan has recently been much the same as its strategy for dealing with the United States. The Soviets have cited Kabul's 12-month timetable proposal, pressed the Pakistanis to cut off aid to the insurgents so that it can be implemented, and urged them to lean on the resistance to discuss a coalition with the PDPA. In the case of Pakistan, however, Moscow probably calculates that its diplomacy will create not only international but domestic pressure for Islamabad to be cooperative. Moreover, Soviet efforts have been reinforced by the Afghan regime's continuing campaign of sabotage inside Pakistan. [REDACTED]

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25X1 The Soviets may also be using Vorontsov's promised visit as a tease to prod the Pakistanis into making proposals beforehand or offering some earnest of their good faith, such as pressure on the resistance to deal with Kabul. [REDACTED]

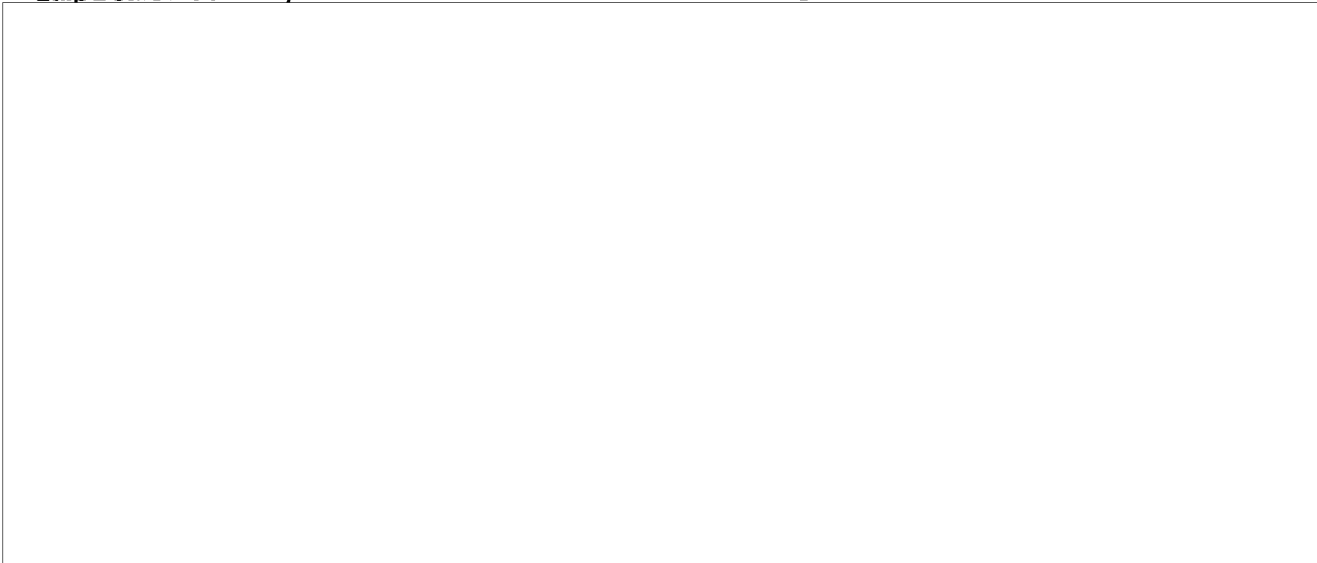
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How Will Moscow Handle Cordovez?

The Soviets have encouraged UN negotiator Cordovez to pursue his plan for setting up talks on a new government among representatives of the resistance, the exiles, and the PDPA. In these negotiations, no positions would be set aside beforehand for any party. Vorontsov told US officials in November, however, that Cordovez's ideas were worth developing but should not be implemented by him because this issue lay outside the UN mandate.



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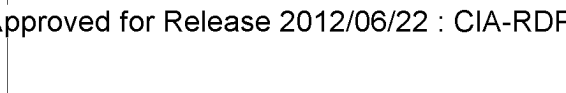
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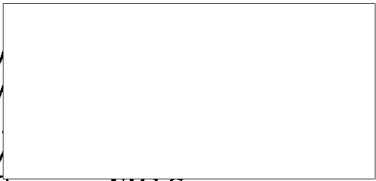
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