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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

10 April 1987

USSR-Afghanistan: Reevaluation in Moscow?

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Summary

Over the past year, the Soviets have made numerous public statements of their interest in a political settlement that would enable them to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan. These have been accompanied by tactical negotiating concessions--most recently an 18-month withdrawal timetable at the UN-sponsored proximity talks in Geneva, Afghan leader Najib's proposal of a coalition that could include the resistance, and a six-month unilateral ceasefire that began on 15 January. There is also a growing body of evidence [Redacted]

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[Redacted] that suggests that some authorities in Moscow feel acutely the drawbacks of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan and are considering whether to settle for less than a Communist-dominated satellite in Kabul. [Redacted]

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This series of Soviet public and private moves is not inconsistent, of course, with a campaign to decrease the immediate political costs of involvement in Afghanistan while holding fast to the ultimate goal of securing a regime dominated by Soviet clients. Nevertheless, evidence suggesting that the Soviets may be considering whether to lower their sights has been persistent [Redacted]

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In addition, our best evidence is that the Soviets do not regard the war as winnable in the near term, and they apparently feel the various costs of their involvement in Afghanistan at least strongly enough to pursue increasingly risky diplomatic tactics. [Redacted]

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If these tactics produce no movement from the other side and if we have underestimated the various costs of Soviet involvement and the degree of flexibility under Gorbachev, the Soviets might in the near future initiate serious exploration of some of the [Redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared in the Office of Soviet Analysis [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Third World Activities Division [Redacted]

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"lesser" solutions that they have discussed informally. We believe that, at a minimum, they would require that the government be "friendly," nonaligned, neutral, include representatives of the Afghan communist party, guarantee the safety of members of the present regime, not permit foreign military bases or listening posts in Afghanistan, and not be dominated by Islamic fundamentalists. [redacted]

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Introduction

Soviet negotiating tactics and private signals of a keen interest in a political solution of the Afghan situation appear to represent increasingly sophisticated ploys for obtaining a settlement on Soviet terms. Najib's "national reconciliation" initiatives and Kabul's 18-month timetable proposal offer no evidence that Moscow has reduced its goal of leaving behind in Kabul a regime that is dominated by its clients. Moreover, the position taken by Soviet officials in formal, high-level discussions remains essentially hard-line. [redacted]

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Although the Soviets probably are increasingly conscious of the drawbacks of their involvement in Afghanistan, there is as yet no evidence that they have defined their dilemma as a choice between accepting the "demotion" of--or even abandoning--the present regime, or staying on indefinitely. Even the many Soviet signals of distress and willingness to settle for less could be meant merely to lure the opposing players, especially Pakistan, into the belief that now is the time to meet Moscow half way. [redacted]

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Serious exploration by the Soviets of solutions that did not guarantee the dominance of the Afghan party would represent a watershed in Soviet foreign policy: Moscow has never allowed, in practice or in theory, a country once embarked on the path to socialism under Soviet tutelage to reverse its course. There is presumably serious concern within the Soviet leadership that jettisoning the Kabul regime would undermine Moscow's standing in Eastern Europe as the guarantor of party supremacy and would also cause Third World client regimes to doubt Soviet constancy. There is also probably concern that Moscow's international position could suffer should other countries conclude that it was weak and susceptible to Western pressure. Any Soviet leader who agreed to a settlement that would leave him open to the charge that he had "lost" Afghanistan would thus do so in the knowledge [redacted]

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that this might sooner or later contribute to costing him his job. [redacted]

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For several reasons, however, we cannot simply dismiss as a sophisticated disinformation campaign the growing body of evidence that suggests that the Soviet leadership is casting about for ways to extricate the Soviet Union from Afghanistan and may even be divided on how far to go to achieve this. The evidence has persisted over several months and now is coming from a wider variety of Soviet and other sources. We believe, moreover, that the Soviets do not regard a military victory as attainable in the near term and assume from their recent diplomatic tactics that they feel the various costs of their involvement in Afghanistan at least strongly enough to take new risks:

-- Moscow would presumably recognize that signals of distress might encourage the other side to persist in its demands.

-- Talk of Soviet withdrawal and resistance participation in a coalition threatens to undermine the morale of the present regime to the extent that it could unravel [redacted]

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-- Increased Soviet domestic coverage of the war's hardships and of the efforts of the Soviet government to end the conflict could raise unrealistic expectations among the Soviet population that a solution is in the offing. [redacted]

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Furthermore, there are gaps in our information on important aspects of the Afghan equation from the Soviet perspective that preclude our total confidence in the judgment that the Soviets still aim at a Communist-dominated Afghanistan and are unlikely to revise this goal. We do not know enough about how much the Soviets feel the various costs of the war and the relative importance that they assign them. Nor do we know the extent to which Afghanistan plays into other issues that are apparently dividing the Soviet leadership. If Gorbachev and his supporters are convinced that Afghanistan stands in the way of their domestic and international goals, if they are more ideologically flexible than some of their predecessors, and, finally, if they are able to prevail over more conservative forces in the Soviet leadership, Soviet policy on Afghanistan could change more quickly and more fundamentally than we expect. We have therefore undertaken to review the evidence that such a shift might occur and to speculate on the key issues and alternatives for the Soviets in considering what they might live with in Afghanistan. [redacted]

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Second Thoughts in Moscow?The Evidence

Over the past year, General Secretary Gorbachev has referred to the situation in Afghanistan as a "bleeding wound," stated that Afghan political forces outside the country might be included in the government, and claimed that Moscow seeks only a neutral, nonaligned Afghanistan free from outside interference. Soviet commentary has stressed that the Afghan revolution, while "irreversible," was not "socialist" but "national democratic," a distinction that is probably intended to make the regime more palatable internationally and within Afghanistan and to lend credibility to Soviet claims of flexibility. Conceivably, however, it could be meant to prepare the ground at home and abroad for a settlement that fell short of Moscow's original goal of a client regime. At the same time, Soviet domestic coverage of the war has focussed increasingly on problems that Soviet troops face in Afghanistan and the progress of reconciliation efforts--a move that could also be aimed to prepare the domestic audience for such a development. [redacted]

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These public pronouncements have been accompanied by a series of gestures associated with the indirect negotiations between Afghanistan and Pakistan in Geneva:

- The Soviets had Kabul give up its insistence that Islamabad accept direct talks as a condition for continuing negotiations.
- Reversing previous statements that withdrawal was a bilateral matter between Moscow and Kabul, the Soviets have allowed the issue to become part of the Geneva negotiations; an initial offer of a four year withdrawal timetable has been reduced to 18 months.
- The Soviets conducted a withdrawal of six regiments--albeit largely a sham--and claimed that it was a gesture of good will.
- The Soviets had Kabul accept in principle UN monitoring of a settlement.
- Moscow had Najib announce a six month ceasefire beginning 15 January and, in a reversal of previous policy, "national reconciliation" proposals that could lead to a coalition government with resistance participation. [redacted]

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At the same time, Soviet officials at home and abroad have claimed [redacted] that settlement of the Afghan problem is a high priority for Gorbachev because Soviet involvement is an impediment to both his domestic and international goals. Some of these officials have added that Gorbachev and other members of the Soviet leadership regard the original decision to invade as a blunder. [redacted]

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Debates in the Leadership?

There are also indications that these efforts to find ways to end or alleviate the costs of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan are generating some opposition at home

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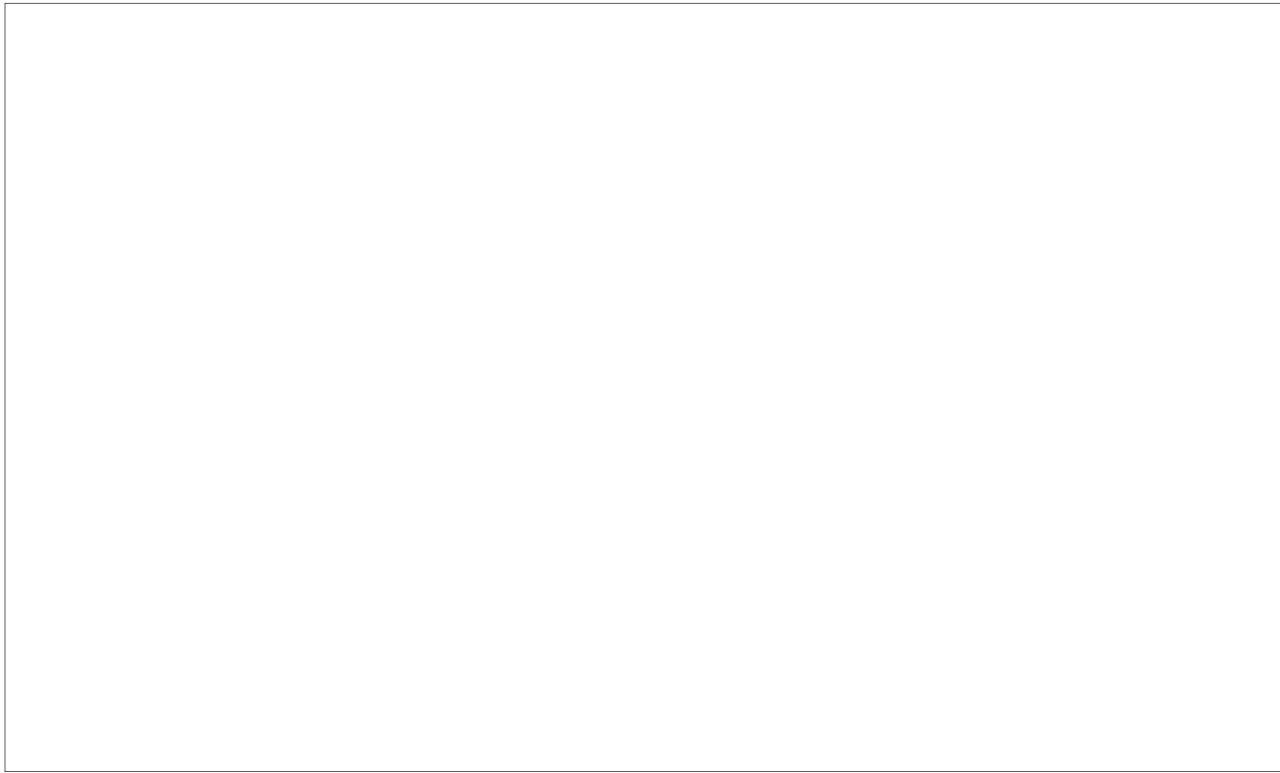


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-- The Soviet media in early April reported insurgent rocket attacks into Soviet territory, alleging US prompting and citing a US official's statement about the vulnerability of the Soviet-Afghan border. This public acknowledgement of the incident could reflect the efforts of hardliners to drive home the continued validity of the security concerns that prompted the 1979 invasion. 

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Terms of the Debate

A careful reading of the evidence suggests that the leadership's discussions and debates focus on the following questions:

-- Is the war a no win proposition? If it can be won, will it take years or even decades? Does this play into the hands of the US?



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- [redacted]
- Does Soviet security require a Communist satellite in Kabul? If not, is a genuine coalition possible? Could a government led by present members of the resistance be tolerated? Could such a government's neutrality be guaranteed or would the US fill the vacuum left by the Soviet departure? Would it be irrevocably hostile to the Soviet Union? How much of a threat would an Islamic fundamentalist regime pose? Can at least the safety of regime members be guaranteed? Can even a bloodbath and prolonged instability be tolerated?
 - Would the domestic and international advantages to be gained by withdrawing before the regime is stabilized outweigh the blow to Soviet prestige and the defeat for socialism that this would constitute? What would be the effect in Eastern Europe? Among Soviet clients in the Third World? How much advantage would be gained in dealings with the West? With Islamic nations? With China? [redacted]

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What Next?

It is possible that the Soviets devised Najib's present reconciliation policy in the expectation that Pakistan's domestic difficulties, war-weariness in Afghanistan, and the homesickness of the refugees gave it a chance of success in the near term. In this, they may have been misled by their Afghan allies.

[redacted]

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Once the Soviets have concluded that the current "national reconciliation" initiative has failed, we expect them to try again with new proposals. At this point, they could become convinced that their original aims in Afghanistan were unrealistic. The nature and extent of such a shift might be difficult to gauge, as some Soviet behavior could be common to opposing strategies. For example, a public reiteration of their commitment to the present regime and to the gains of the Afghan

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revolution could mean no change in their position, but the Soviets might feel obligated to make such statements even if they were seeking a compromise solution, since the fragile Kabul regime might otherwise come unglued in the interim. On the other hand, more forthcoming Soviet discussion of such questions as Afghan neutrality and the composition of possible coalition governments would not necessarily mean that Moscow had decided to settle for less than a Communist-dominated regime. The Soviets benefit too much from the public relations value of negotiations not to offer the prospect of concessions that will keep alive the interest of the other side. [redacted]

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Against this background and recognizing the pitfalls, we are nevertheless persuaded that there is, in fact, discussion--and perhaps even debate--in Moscow over whether Soviet security and prestige require a client regime in Kabul and whether, even if it is attainable in the long term, the price is worth paying. The following examines the various options likely to be raised in such internal Soviet discussions. [redacted]

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Lowered Sights

We believe, on the basis of most of our information, that if the Soviets were to conclude that they must aim for less, at a minimum Moscow would require a government in Kabul that has some Communist participation and that was "friendly," nonaligned and neutral. Soviet officials have consistently indicated that their understanding of nonalignment and neutrality for Afghanistan would prohibit foreign--especially US--bases and listening posts there and Afghan participation in military alliances. The Soviets could well probe for such an arrangement if they had made the calculation that it would at least, because of the expected disunity of the other side, leave the Afghan party in a position to regain power eventually. [redacted]

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There is some evidence that Moscow could tolerate even a government with no Communist participation, as long as it was not dominated by Islamic fundamentalists and was willing to guarantee the safety of former regime members. (Moscow probably believes that Islamic fundamentalists would be the most likely to conduct a bloody purge of the present regime and to seek to foment Islamic discontent in the neighboring Soviet Moslem republics.) Soviet acceptance of such an outcome would probably mean that Moscow had discounted its oft-stated fear that the US would ride into Kabul on the coattails of the resistance. It would also indicate that Moscow had determined, as the Indians believe, that a solution that avoids a bloodbath is sufficient to save face and that, ultimately, no Afghan government can afford to be hostile to the Soviet Union. [redacted]

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If Moscow were serious about exploring these questions, we would expect the Soviets to raise and discuss them at length not just in private, "off-the-record" sessions, but in high-level formal meetings with Pakistani officials and in discussions of regional issues with US officials. Moscow would want assurances that the US would cease military aid to the resistance, use its influence to secure resistance observance of a settlement, and strictly observe Afghan neutrality. In the Geneva talks, we would expect the Soviets to suggest a withdrawal timetable of less than a year, to be implemented simultaneously with other provisions of an agreement. [redacted]

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If a reassessment of this sort is being considered, Moscow apparently is not yet persuaded that such a reduced goal is attainable. Some of the Soviets who have discussed such arrangements with foreign interlocutors have indicated pessimism over the possibility of compromises of this sort, saying that while Moscow could live with them in theory, in practice Afghanistan's social, political, and cultural traditions and the rancor built up during the prolonged conflict make them impossible. [redacted]

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Cut and Run

It is highly unlikely that the Soviets have decided that within the near future they will withdraw their troops and accept whatever situation develops in Afghanistan--including the almost certain collapse of the regime. Reports that the Soviets do not care about post-withdrawal instability and are ready to live with a bloodbath of their clients do not strike us as credible, especially in the absence of evidence that the costs of the Afghan war are far greater for the Soviets than we have been able to discern or that they perceive the advantages of unilateral withdrawal to be more clearcut and compelling even in the face of obvious drawbacks than is apparent to us. [redacted]

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Up the Military Ante

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Soviet resort to an all-out or even a

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substantially larger military effort would probably have to be preceded by a series of events on the ground that convinced the Soviets that a military victory was possible, by a leadership struggle that ended with putative Kremlin hardliners on top, or by a decision by the leadership that compromise is unreachable and a continuation of the status quo is intolerable. Our best evidence, however, is that the Soviets do not regard the war as winnable in the near term, even if more troops are introduced, and that they are not, in any case, willing to sustain the greater costs of a substantially increased military presence in Afghanistan.

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Old Model, New Clothes

If the current initiatives are nothing more than an attempt to deflect international criticism and to wear down the unity and resolve of the opposition, Moscow will probably devise a follow-on combination of carrots and sticks in an attempt to pressure and entice Islamabad into a cosmetic settlement that leaves the present regime in control. Increased pressure would probably take the form of stepped-up military activity within Afghanistan and on the Pakistani border and increased covert operations, perhaps soliciting India's participation.

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The bulk of our evidence so far indicates that the Soviets remain convinced that their original goal is realistic. Moscow is particularly likely to continue this strategy if it sees the need to reduce or counteract the political costs of its involvement but judges that longterm trends are sufficiently in its favor to justify maintaining its present military and political commitment. Among the trends that would affect Soviet thinking in this regard would be their assessment of the long-term prospects for cadre development in Afghanistan, the limited ability so far of the resistance to organize politically, Pakistan's internal problems, the prospect that the US-Pakistani relationship might unravel over the nuclear issue or with a new administration in Washington, donor fatigue, and the simple dissipation of international interest over time. Continuation of the current strategy could also, however, result from the inability of the Soviet leadership to reach a consensus on how it

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should be changed, or from a calculation that the status quo is preferable to any of the alternatives. [Redacted]

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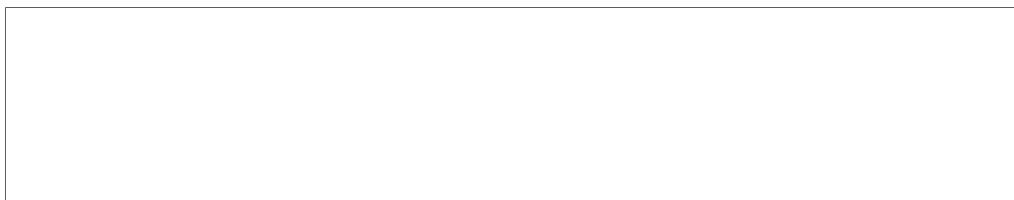
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