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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Soviet Afghan Policy Since January 1987

Summary

Since the beginning of the year, Soviet actions have indicated that Moscow's Afghanistan policy may be moving in two different, but not ultimately inconsistent, directions. Soviet efforts to find a compromise which might enable them to withdraw their troops while leaving behind a Communist-dominated regime are coupled with Moscow's apparent intensification of coercive measures inside Afghanistan and against Pakistan. We believe these two thrusts indicate that the USSR is:

- Increasingly anxious to extricate itself militarily from Afghanistan, but not at the cost of the Kabul regime's collapse.
- Reluctant to tolerate the indefinite prolongation of the status quo, given the various domestic and foreign costs of Soviet involvement.
- No longer so sanguine that time is on its side. [redacted]

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Aside from the heightened pressure on Pakistan, there is no indication of a massive escalation of fighting so far this year that would suggest a Soviet expectation of prevailing by force in the near term. But there is also no sign that the Soviets are willing to allow the collapse of the regime in Kabul as the price of their getting out. Soviet actions since the beginning of the year suggest that Moscow is groping for a way to strengthen its Afghan client's position sufficiently that the latter could survive Soviet withdrawal. Moscow hopes to achieve this by improving the Afghan Army and regime cohesion while weakening the resistance and its external support through both military and political methods. [redacted]

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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, Third World Activities Division [redacted]

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However, the regime's continued fragility has apparently forced Moscow to consider the possibility of a coalition government, as long as the Communist party would have a dominant role. Therefore, it is pursuing a variegated policy that looks to a number of possibilities. [redacted]

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Neither of the two new aspects of Soviet policy this year--a proposal for a coalition with undefined resistance participation and the use of greater force against Pakistan--has led to a political breakthrough. Neither, however, is likely to be abandoned. [redacted]

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In Search of a Compromise?

[redacted]  
Moscow wants to bring Soviet troops home from Afghanistan because of various international and domestic costs and that, to achieve this, Moscow is prepared to be flexible:

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-- [redacted]  
Moscow's goal of a neutral, nonaligned Afghanistan did not necessarily include the continuation of Najib's regime or even Communist domination of a coalition.

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-- Also in January, a lecturer in Leningrad criticized those who were opposed to the government's efforts to negotiate with the resistance, saying that the Soviet Union was isolated because of the war and that compromise was imperative.

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The Soviets have taken several actions this year that seem to bear out the views expressed in such statements:

-- Moscow had Kabul announce a six month ceasefire beginning 15 January and, in a reversal of previous policy, voice "national reconciliation" proposals that could lead to a coalition government with resistance participation. The Soviets took this step despite the reluctance of Afghan leader Najib and despite the risk that these initiatives would undermine the morale and unity of the Afghan Communist party. The ceasefire was spurned by the resistance and never took effect, and no independent figures of importance joined in a "national reconciliation" government.

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-- At Geneva in March, the Soviets had the Afghans offer an 18-month timetable for Soviet troop withdrawal--down from three years at last summer's Geneva session. The Kabul regime would be unlikely to survive even an 18-month timeframe if it were agreed upon and adhered to, and Moscow has told [redacted] that a settlement on the composition of the Afghan government must precede further reductions in the withdrawal timetable.

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[redacted]

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-- The Soviets have told US officials that Kabul has been informed that the Soviet Army's mission has been completed.

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[redacted]

Coercion Instead of Compromise?

With the failure of the regime's ceasefire and national reconciliation initiatives, the Soviets and the insurgents are squaring off against one another this spring as they have in earlier years. Because of Soviet hints that they might intensify military pressure if the initiatives failed, one hypothesis has been that Soviet operations this year might be particularly intense. So far, however, there has been no observable buildup of Soviet troops, equipment, or supplies to suggest Moscow is planning an extraordinary offensive. The Soviets are continuing to improve their military infrastructure and show no sign of removing combat or support units. [redacted]

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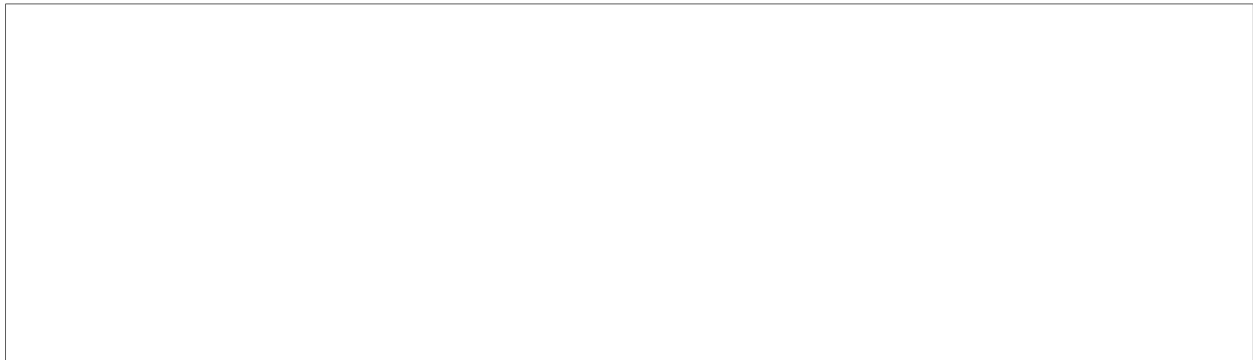
As is usual in the spring, Soviet and Afghan forces have conducted a number of medium-size operations. [redacted]

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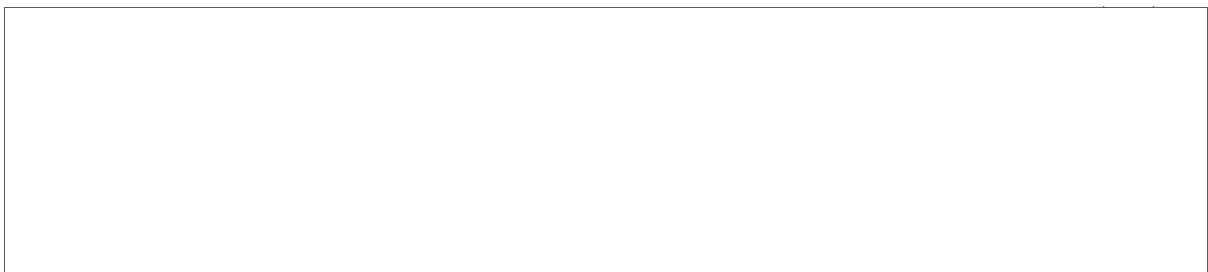
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There is some evidence the Afghan government--presumably at Soviet direction--is trying to move more forces to the Pakistani border to stop the flow of insurgent supplies. So far these measures have had no military effect. However, manpower shortages continue to plague the regime and the US Embassy in Kabul reports intense public opposition to renewed government conscription efforts--which were supposedly halted as part of national reconciliation--and opposition within the regime to attempts to move KHAD and militia troops from Kabul to the frontier. 

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Direct Pressure on Pakistan

The most visible shift in policy has been a decision to step up deliberate air attacks against insurgents and refugees across the border in Pakistan, resulting in greatly increased Pakistani casualties. While most earlier border violations occurred in support of ground operations near the border, these new attacks--probably by Afghan planes, but presumably under Soviet direction--were not associated with ongoing operations.



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- Afghan aircraft recently dropped leaflets along the border warning of further attacks unless the refugee camps were moved out of the area.
- In mid-March, the Soviet ambassador in Islamabad told Western diplomats that recent cross-border attacks were conducted in "hot pursuit" of insurgents, and hinted that Stinger training sites might be attacked as well,



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according to US diplomatic reporting. [redacted]

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Pakistan has reacted by increasing air patrols near the border, and may be adhering less closely to restrictive rules-of-engagement for intercepting intruding aircraft.

-- On March 31, Pakistani F-16s shot down an Afghan AN-26 military transport, which crashed in Afghan territory.

-- On April 16th an F-16 downed an Afghan SU-22 fighter-bomber, which also crashed just across the border in Afghanistan. [redacted]

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At the same time, incidents of sabotage and subversion inside Pakistan have increased in boldness and frequency.

-- On 19 February a bomb blast near a school in Peshawar led to widespread demonstrations against Afghan refugees. Coupled with other sabotage incidents in the area, it appears to have resulted in a permanent deterioration of relations between Afghan refugees and local Pakistanis, according to American consulate reporting. In March, however, the number of incidents in the Peshawar area declined.

-- On 9 April a car-bombing in Rawalpindi--the first major act of sabotage attributed by Pakistan to Afghan agents outside the frontier area--killed 16 people and wounded some 40 others. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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Publicity for Mujahideen Raids on Soviet Territory

The recent Soviet publicizing of raiding by insurgents

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across the Amu River into Soviet Central Asia may also point toward a Soviet decision to intensify coercive tactics. A low level of insurgent activity into the Tajik SSR has been reported by Western media [redacted] for several years, but until 2 April Moscow media had not reported any incidents. Then an insurgent rocket attack across the river in early March was reported on 2 April, and on 18 April TASS stated that two border guards had been killed in another attack into Tajikistan. [redacted]

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We believe that the decision to focus public attention on these raids was made for political purposes. The publicity serves the purpose of justifying the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan as necessary for a forward defense of the USSR's frontier against alleged hostile intentions by the US, which Soviet media repeatedly accuse of arming the mujahideen. The publicity might also have been intended to offset criticisms of the USSR for the bombings in Pakistan. [redacted]

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The publicity also played to Soviet concerns about nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism in the Muslim republics of Central Asia. Moscow has shown increased concern about the percolation of fundamentalist Islamic sentiments across the frontier from Afghanistan.

- Last November in a speech in Tashkent Gorbachev called for a "merciless struggle" against covert religious believers in the party. Following the speech, several Uzbeki party members--including the party first secretary in Samarkand--were purged for being practicing Muslims.
- Party Secretary Yakovlev's speech to the Tajik party organization this month, with its remark about "intertwining nationalist and religious views," reflects views we have seen expressed by other leaders about the stimulus of fundamentalist Islam on local anti-Russian nationalism.
- The campaigns against Islamic observances in the local parties and against unregistered Muslim clerics are continuing, especially in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, further reflecting regime concern about the threat of radical Islam in the southern republics. [redacted]

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### Equivocal Actions

Many other Soviet moves this year are compatible either with efforts to end Soviet military involvement by probing for a political compromise or with efforts to force the other side to accept a settlement on Moscow's terms. Among these are continuing attempts to strengthen the regime:

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- The Soviets have continued to implement slow improvements in the Afghan military. Over the last several months they have provided the Afghans with more advanced artillery and infantry fighting vehicles. There has been no significant improvement in Afghan Army performance, however. Rumors that the Soviets might withdraw and intense infighting between Parcham and Khalq factions have further lowered military morale.
- With the growth of party factionalism in the wake of the "national reconciliation" initiatives, Moscow has probably forced Najib, a Parchami, to make concessions to the Pushtun-dominated, more unified Khalqis. This pressure has led to speculation that the Soviets are considering turning to the Khalqis in the interest of effectiveness, regardless of what the regime might lose in ethnic "representativeness."
- Moscow has intensified its effort to enhance the international legitimacy of the regime, achieving diplomatic recognition by Zimbabwe and Cyprus, and pressing the resumption of air routes between Kabul and Kuwait. It has also secured visits by the Afghan Foreign Minister to India in February

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These moves are consistent with preparations by the Soviets to take a harder military and diplomatic line on Afghanistan, but at the same time could be intended to put the regime in as strong a position as possible for negotiations on the composition of a coalition.

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The Soviets' and Afghans' refusal to set a definite date for the resumption of the Geneva negotiations until Pakistan has made a "reciprocal" response to their 18-month timetable proposal is similarly ambiguous. Moscow could be preparing its justification--the alleged intransigence of the other side--for abandoning the path of "reasonableness." However, it could also intend to explore through other channels, including direct contacts with Pakistan, the issue of a new Afghan government. The Soviets have said that a government will have to be agreed upon before withdrawal can be finally negotiated.

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Recent Soviet commentary is also equivocal. It can be read as an effort to justify to international audiences an intensified war effort and pressure against Pakistan:

- The Soviet media have claimed that all elements in

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Pakistan want a settlement but that the United States is prolonging the conflict to "bleed" the Soviets. The failure of the ceasefire has been blamed at least partially on outside influences.

- Soviet commentary has specifically charged that the United States instigated resistance attacks on Soviet territory and Pakistani and Iranian efforts to block the return of refugees persuaded by Kabul's latest reconciliation proposals.
- The Soviets have also claimed that the "national reconciliation" program has been favorably received by the Afghans, with many insurgents going over to Kabul's side or laying down their arms and many refugees returning home. With so many "true patriots" now allegedly in the regime fold, Moscow may hope that attacks on the remaining resistance "renegades" and their "imperialist" supporters will produce only a reduced international outcry and be more enthusiastically supported at home. [redacted]

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It is possible, however, that Moscow intends this commentary primarily to persuade Islamabad to cut a deal, both by encouraging those elements in Pakistan that favor making concessions to Soviet interests in order to end the country's refugee problem and by reducing international support for a "fanatical" and uncompromising resistance. [redacted]

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The commentary is also clearly addressed to the domestic audience in the USSR. Soviet media continue to stress the necessity of Soviet involvement while they have become increasingly frank about the hardships of the war in recent years, and glasnost has accentuated this. Such realism about the conflict may reflect the leadership's attempt to deal with an increasingly polarized public opinion. It could also be intended to prepare the public for a continued Soviet presence in Afghanistan.

- A poll taken in 1986 among 1700 Soviets travelling abroad found that one-third supported the war, one-third opposed it, and one-third was indifferent. The survey showed that opposition had grown among party members and most of the non-Russian minorities. Only in Siberia was there substantial support for Moscow's policy.
- A Soviet diplomat told an American colleague that an underground antiwar movement had recently been organized in Moscow to speak out against the war. There have been reports of other ad hoc antiwar movements in other cities of the RSFSR, Azerbaizhan, and the Baltic republics.

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-- Antiwar sentiments have been reported in letters to the editor of Komsomol papers, at public lectures, and in recent articles, books, and films. In a popular film made in the Latvian republic, a young veteran calls the war a "dirty business," noting "war doesn't make you mature, it makes you old." [redacted]

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There is virtually no possibility that a national antiwar movement will emerge, though a significant number of Soviets--including segments of the elite that Gorbachev is depending on to implement his agenda of reform--now oppose the war. While there is little evidence to suggest that the domestic cost of the war will--by itself--force the Gorbachev regime to reconsider its commitment to the Najib regime, it may have a catalytic effect in changing the nature of the policy debate, forcing a more open discussion of possible political and diplomatic solutions. [redacted]

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In this context, Moscow's coverage of the war serves the purpose of steeling the Soviet public for a long, difficult struggle of attrition from which there is no easy way out--which we believe is its prime motive. But it also serves the function of preparing the ground for an acceptable political settlement--if such is to be had--that does not include the complete defeat of the insurgents. [redacted]

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### Outlook

Moscow probably does not have a clear picture of how it ought to proceed or where the situation is forcing it to go. The Gorbachev leadership almost certainly would like to be rid of the war, but it has not been able to find a way to end the struggle on politically acceptable terms. Therefore, it is still casting around for new ideas--with an air of growing impatience. This intensified search for a solution necessarily forces the Kremlin to act in ways that on the surface appear incompatible, while waiting to see what might work out best--or what turns up. The divergence between signs of compromise and greater coercion could also reflect disagreement within the Soviet leadership over how to proceed. [redacted]

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The two main new thrusts of Soviet policy since the beginning of 1987 have been an apparent willingness to share an undefined amount of power with insurgent leaders in a government of national reconciliation and the use of greater force against Pakistan. Though neither has brought a political breakthrough, both have served to intensify political maneuvering and exacerbate differences within and between the major actors--not always to Moscow's advantage. Neither tactic has been abandoned, and

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pressure on Pakistan might be just beginning to build up, with more terrorism incidents in the heartland of the Punjab supplementing sporadic aerial bombings along the Northwest Frontier. [redacted]

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On the ground, we foresee a continuation of policies initiated over the last two years. The Soviets will try to improve the Afghan Army and turn over to it more of the ground combat, while emphasizing Soviet aerial and artillery firepower support. As in 1985 and 1986, emphasis will be put on interdicting insurgent supplies entering Afghanistan by the use of special purpose forces (spetsnaz) and other combat elements. [redacted]

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While pursuing these efforts, the Soviets are unlikely to push the idea of compromise so far as to withdraw while--as we judge to be true for the foreseeable future--the Kabul regime cannot fend for itself. As long as a politically acceptable compromise remains a goal that cannot be attained, the Soviet army seems certain to remain in Afghanistan. Despite the discomfort and burden of the war there, the Soviet leadership is not so pressed yet that it must accept defeat. Nor is Gorbachev compelled to run the major political risks attendant on labelling defeat "victory" and handing Afghanistan over to American-backed guerrillas. [redacted]

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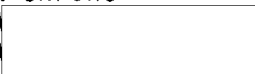
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