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Current Soviet Strategy on Afghanistan

Summary

The Soviets have adopted new tactics on Afghanistan, including suggestions that they will accept some limited form of power-sharing with regime opponents, an international public relations campaign designed to portray their policy as reasonable, and intensified pressure on Pakistan. The proposals made by the Soviets and the Afghans so far, however, indicate that Moscow is not prepared to accept less than a government dominated by its clients, and the Soviets have deflected attempts to set up discussions on the composition of a new government.

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Moscow will probably have the Afghans offer a troop withdrawal timetable of about 12 months during the next Geneva round (7-9 September). The Soviets almost certainly calculate that this might seriously erode support for the resolution on Afghanistan scheduled for a vote in the UN General Assembly late next month. They presumably hope that such a result would induce Islamabad--at a time when it faces possible suspension of US aid over the nuclear proliferation issue and increasing domestic pressure for a settlement--to agree to Soviet terms for resolving the conflict. Moscow may also judge that this tactic will weaken arguments to the US Congress that the importance of the Pakistani conduit to the resistance should override nonproliferation concerns. Moreover, the Soviets probably hope that a short timetable proposal at Geneva will strengthen their position heading into talks with US officials this month and a possible summit this fall.

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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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The Soviets might even be prepared at Geneva to accept a date to start implementating a withdrawal. This would almost certainly be contingent on acceptance of its conditions for commencing withdrawal--agreement on a new government and the cessation of outside support for the resistance. Moscow has no reason to alter these conditions for a negotiated settlement fundamentally until its efforts to exploit current opportunities have played themselves out. [redacted]

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Soviet Moves Since the Last Geneva Session

Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Rogachev told a news conference in Moscow on 25 August that specific dates for the withdrawal of Soviet troops would be set at the next Geneva round. Soviet officials have said frequently this year that setting a withdrawal timetable requires not only the guaranteed cessation of "outside interference" but establishment of a coalition in Kabul to avoid a "bloodbath" after Soviet troops leave. UN negotiator Cordovez and the Pakistanis believed that high-level meetings were essential to pave the way for setting a short withdrawal timetable at Geneva. But, since the last Geneva session (25 February-9 March) the Soviets and their Afghan clients have deflected the efforts of other parties to arrange high-level, formal discussions about a future government--an issue not up for negotiation in the Geneva talks themselves:

- Kabul made excuses this summer when Cordovez tried to set up shuttle negotiations to discuss the question of a new government.
- The Soviets have frustrated Pakistan's attempts to hold bilateral talks focusing on the same issue, in particular stalling on a date for First Deputy Foreign Minister Vorontsov to visit Islamabad. [redacted]

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Meanwhile, the Soviets have adopted several measures designed to weaken Pakistani and international support for the Afghan resistance and to sow dissension within the resistance itself:

- Pressure against Pakistan has been intensified, including a rash of crossborder attacks earlier this year, a sharp increase in sabotage since last year and its expansion beyond the frontier provinces. [redacted]

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- Afghan leader Najib announced a six-month extension of Kabul's ceasefire, elaborated on the positions that

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opposition figures might hold in a government of national reconciliation, and addressed his proposals specifically to "moderate" resistance parties.

- The Soviets have attempted to lure former King Zahir Shah and other exiles into taking part in a coalition, overtures that continue despite Zahir's public rejection of them in June.

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- Soviet media have claimed that Kabul's proposals have been answered with an escalation of the war by the other side, notably through the provision of Stinger missiles to the insurgents. Moscow has increasingly labeled the war a US-run enterprise that serves only the interests of the United States.

- In an effort to follow up on this "peace campaign," both Moscow and Kabul have sent envoys to many UN member states to lobby against the annual UN General Assembly resolution on Afghanistan in October. [redacted]

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Soviet officials have continued to claim [redacted] Moscow is anxious to get its troops out of Afghanistan because of the international political costs, frustration at the inability of its Afghan client to develop an effective government or to shoulder a greater military burden, and popular dissatisfaction within the Soviet Union at mounting casualties. They have stressed [redacted] that they seek only a "face-saving" way out and are prepared to make concessions in return for cooperation from the other side in devising a neutral, nonaligned Afghanistan ruled by an acceptable coalition:

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- [redacted] Moscow might propose a conference on Afghanistan that would include the Kabul regime, the resistance, Pakistan, the Soviet Union, and the United States. The Soviets had floated this idea several weeks earlier in the Indian press.

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- A Soviet Embassy official told a State Department official last month that Najib's statement in Moscow in July that he "hoped" the PDPA would continue to lead Afghanistan after a coalition is set up meant this was not a requirement.

[redacted]

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The specific offers made by Kabul so far, however, would leave the PDPA firmly in control, and Najib has insisted elsewhere that the party would remain "the chief mobilizing and directing force in a government of national unity, even after it becomes a coalition." His contention has been repeated in the Soviet media. [REDACTED]

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Soviet domestic media have focused increasingly in recent months on the difficulties in the way of national reconciliation as well as the justification for the Soviet presence in Afghanistan--the defense of Afghanistan's revolution and national integrity and the defense of the Soviet Union's own southern border. Much was made this spring of insurgent incursions into Soviet territory, and these are still occasionally cited. Nevertheless, the media also continue to claim that national reconciliation is making progress and to stress the necessity of pursuing a "realistic" political settlement. Much of this commentary, however, seems aimed at domestic critics of the concessions entailed in this policy and could reflect an effort to prepare for justifying a resolution of the conflict that hardliners will find distasteful. Media discussion of these issues is presented as a response to readers' and listeners' concerns, and we have no solid evidence that it reflects divisions in the Kremlin. [REDACTED]

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25X1 Events on the ground this year--including successful insurgent use of improved weaponry, the lackluster results of several Soviet-Afghan offensives, and the continued poor performance of the Afghan Army--have caused Moscow concern, [REDACTED] but do not substantially alter either side's military position. The Soviets probably realize that to maintain a stalemate they will have to carry an even greater burden of the fighting. They will need to devise tactics to counter insurgent air defenses and increase their efforts to interdict insurgent logistics. We doubt, however, that the Soviets have concluded that the war has taken a decisive turn for the worse requiring fundamental revision of their goals. [REDACTED]

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What Are the Soviets Up To?

Moscow's political moves have been aimed this year primarily at breaking Pakistan's resolve and reducing international support

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for the Afghan resistance. Kabul's proposal to resume the Geneva negotiations is almost certainly part of this campaign. We believe that it is calculated to influence the UN voters on the Afghan resolution in October by suggesting that Moscow and Kabul are prepared for breakthroughs in the Geneva talks and to exploit Pakistan's vulnerabilities at a time when Islamabad faces the possibility of a suspension of US aid and domestic pressure for a settlement that has been intensified by this year's increase in Kabul-sponsored terrorist bombings. Islamabad had publicly insisted on the necessity for careful preparations to ensure a successful outcome at Geneva--preparations that Kabul and Moscow consistently declined to undertake. Yet had Islamabad refused this short-notice proposal or sought a substantial delay, it would have fueled Soviet charges that it is placing obstacles in the way of peace and faced increased dissatisfaction from its own public. [redacted]

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Kabul will probably offer a withdrawal timetable of 12 months or so during this session, down from 18 months at the last round. Not only does it face widespread expectation that such a timeframe will be proposed, but the offer would gain international approbation and make it difficult for Pakistan to continue to insist on a schedule determined solely by the time necessary to march Soviet troops home in reasonable order. [redacted]

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It is unclear from Rogachev's statement whether Kabul will move beyond offering a significantly shorter timeframe to negotiating the date on which it will be implemented. The former would suffice to score international public relations points and put Pakistan on the spot, but the naming of a specific date is also possible. It would, however, almost certainly be contingent on meeting Moscow's standing conditions for implementation. The Soviets might calculate that this move would so raise international and Pakistani domestic expectations that Islamabad would be forced to make concessions on halting aid to the resistance and to pressure the resistance to take part in a coalition with the Afghan Communists. [redacted]

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Moscow may hope that any appearance of Soviet "reasonableness" will undermine those arguing that the US Congress's threatened suspension of aid to Pakistan over the nuclear proliferation issue should be overridden in the interest of sustaining Pakistan's vital role as a conduit for military aid to the the Afghan resistance. Moreover, the Soviets may also expect that a short timetable at Geneva will improve their position heading into the US-Soviet experts talks on Afghanistan and the meeting between Secretary Shultz and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze this month, as well as a possible summit this fall. The Soviets will probably press US officials to reduce aid

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to the resistance in response to Kabul's offers at Geneva.

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Outlook

We do not believe that Moscow is prepared to accept less than a government dominated by its clients. Most of its political and diplomatic moves this year have, however, risked demoralizing and further fragmenting the regime. Najib's visit to Moscow in July, during which he was almost certainly directed to seek a Geneva resumption, led to rumors in Kabul of impending regime changes and the imminent withdrawal of Soviet troops. The Soviets probably believe that, in any case, their chances of inducing the present regime to become more effective and capable of defending itself are negligible over the short run and that the risks to its cohesion entailed in seeking to secure Soviet goals through alternate tactics can be contained.

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Moscow conceivably might agree to have the issue of the future government of Afghanistan placed on the agenda at Geneva, seeking to exploit tensions within the resistance and between the resistance and Pakistan on this subject. Such dissension could serve to place the onus for inconclusive and prolonged negotiations on Islamabad and the resistance, either because disunity within the resistance or its disagreements with Pakistan became public or because this inability to agree on a position was widely taken as intransigence. By raising the issue at such a forum, however, Moscow and Kabul would also come under pressure to deliver something that went beyond their current offers and the cohesion of the regime would be further undermined. It is probably for this reason that the Soviets have so far refused to schedule formal, specific discussions on the composition of a new government.

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Moscow is unlikely to alter its bottom line on a settlement until it has been able to assess the results of its current initiatives, including the next Geneva session. Even if their reasons for wanting to extricate themselves from the Afghan conflict are as compelling as some Soviet officials have suggested, the Soviets probably judge that gains in the UN General Assembly, Pakistani domestic problems, and the outcome of the present US-Pakistani nuclear proliferation dispute might make fundamental adjustment of their negotiating position unnecessary.

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