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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

30 November 1987

Likely Soviet Posture on Afghanistan at the Washington Summit

Summary

A recent spate of hints from the Soviets that they are prepared to discuss the issue of a future Afghan government and to offer in the near future a troop withdrawal timetable of a year or less appears timed to suggest flexibility on the eve of the Washington summit. Afghan leader Najibullah confirmed this week that Kabul would table a 12-month withdrawal timeframe at the next round of UN-mediated negotiations in Geneva. General Secretary Gorbachev will probably give general assurances of Soviet desire to get out of Afghanistan quickly, citing Najibullah's statement, but Soviet First Deputy Foreign Minister Vorontsov suggested to US officials in mid-November that Gorbachev would not amplify this offer by naming a date for its commencement. Gorbachev will press the United States to facilitate Soviet withdrawal by suggesting possible "face-saving" compromises, using its influence to get the Afghan resistance, former Afghan king Zahir, and Pakistan to talk to Kabul about a coalition, and reducing aid to the insurgents. The Soviets may hope that a forthcoming posture in these discussions will lure Washington into a taking a more active role in working toward a settlement--a development they may calculate could precipitate a rift with Islamabad. If Gorbachev wants to make a move that might deflect international pressure on Moscow to get out of Afghanistan, he may announce a limited withdrawal of Soviet troops, which could be either unilateral or scaled to reciprocal gestures from Pakistan and the United States. [redacted]

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Whatever Gorbachev offers, we do not believe that Moscow has abandoned its goal of keeping a Marxist-dominated government in power in Afghanistan. For Gorbachev, who is now apparently in a period of political retrenchment in Moscow, accepting anything less could leave him open to charges of having "lost" Afghanistan. Moreover, fundamental changes in Soviet strategy are particularly unlikely at a time when Moscow probably is waiting to assess Afghan leader Najibullah's latest efforts to eliminate party factionalism, Soviet bilateral discussions with Pakistan and the United States, and whether Islamabad's continuing nuclear controversy with

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

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Washington might yet work to Soviet advantage. [redacted]

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### The Impact of Recent Soviet Political Setbacks

For most of this year, Moscow has pursued a strategy that concentrated on breaking the links between the resistance and its supporters through initiatives designed to demonstrate Kabul's flexibility and increased coercive pressure against Pakistan. Although the Soviets have had to expend greater effort to maintain the military stalemate this year in the face of improved resistance anti-aircraft capabilities and overall combat effectiveness, they undoubtedly hoped that their other measures would sow dissension among the opposing players, erode Pakistani domestic support for Islamabad's Afghan policy, and soften international disapproval of the Kabul regime. The Soviet "national reconciliation" strategy has not worked, however, and may have further weakened the position of its client, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). [redacted]

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The failure of the Soviets to offer a 12-month withdrawal timetable at Geneva in September--after they had built up international expectation that the proposal would be made--suggested they had become concerned that the regime was too weak to survive it. Pravda, for instance, carried Najibullah's statement at the Afghan party conference in October that the Afghan forces remained unable to defend the country without Soviet assistance, implying that the Soviets agreed with his assessment. Najibullah's moves soon after Geneva--his assumption of the presidency and engineering of the adoption of a new constitution, his purge of some party opponents, and his affirmation of the PDPA's determination to remain the "leading force" in Afghanistan--further indicated that the Soviets had decided that the need to shore up the regime outweighed the risk that their conciliatory diplomacy would be undermined. [redacted]

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Together with the failure to deliver at Geneva, Najibullah's consolidation of power in Kabul may have influenced the outcome of the UN General Assembly's vote on Pakistan's Afghan resolution in mid-November. Intense Soviet lobbying to reduce support for the resolution or to water it down with amendments failed, as the resolution passed by a slightly greater margin. [redacted]

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### What Gorbachev Will Bring to Washington

Moscow has recently stepped up hints that it is ready to discuss the composition of a future Afghan government and that a

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withdrawal timetable of a year or less will be offered either at next month's US-Soviet summit or at the next Geneva session. Najibullah confirmed this week that a 12-month offer would be tabled at Geneva, though its implementation remained contingent on the end of "outside interference" and the beginning of talks with the resistance on joining the Afghan Government.

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The latest spate of conciliatory signals appears timed to suggest Soviet flexibility on the eve of the Washington summit.

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Statements made by Vorontsov to Under Secretary Armacost in mid-November, however, suggest that at the Washington summit Gorbachev will not go beyond Najibullah's announcement by proposing a date for the withdrawal to begin. Vorontsov said that a new offer would be made at the Geneva session planned for early 1988, that before the Soviets finalized it, he would have to try it out on Pakistan--which he could not visit before mid-December--and that Gorbachev should not be pressed on the matter in Washington. Vorontsov's comments could have reflected indecision or debate in Moscow and been designed to guard against a letdown at the summit.

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If Gorbachev wants to avoid specific revelations on the timetable but still is determined to make an attention-getting move on Afghanistan, he might--as rumored in Kabul--announce a unilateral limited withdrawal of Soviet troops. In view of Moscow's cheating on last year's claimed pullout of six regiments, this would presumably be intended more for public relations effect than to have an immediate influence on US policymakers, who the Soviets probably would expect to remain skeptical unless and until such a withdrawal proved to be genuine. Gorbachev might say that the size of the withdrawal would be scaled to reciprocal reduction of US and Pakistani aid to the resistance

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Either move would be in line with previous Soviet efforts to shift the onus of producing concessions to Pakistan and the United States.

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Gorbachev is likely in any case to insist that he is serious about getting Soviet troops home as soon as possible, citing Najibullah's statement, and to press for US assistance in facilitating a face-saving solution. He will probably solicit US ideas on possible compromises, ask for US influence to be used to

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get the resistance, former king Zahir and other exiles, and Pakistan to talk to Kabul about the composition of a coalition, and urge a reduction in military aid to the resistance. Moscow may hope that a forthcoming posture in discussions with the United States will lure Washington into a more active role in working toward a settlement. The Soviets may calculate that this could precipitate a rift with Pakistan, which might resent the superpowers going over its head, provoke resistance accusations of betrayal, and prompt world public opinion to view Afghanistan as an East-West issue. [redacted]

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### Beyond the Summit

There have been hints that over the longer term Moscow may be considering entering into talks on solutions that do not provide for the dominance of the PDPA and that the Soviets are preparing the ground internationally and domestically for such an eventuality:

- o UN negotiator Cordovez's plan for setting up talks on a new government, in which the Soviets have expressed interest, calls for resistance participation and for Kabul's representatives to attend in their party rather than their government capacities.
- o Soviet domestic media have recently featured discussion of the presocialist stage of Afghanistan's development and the necessity for compromise.
- o Soviet officials have implied [redacted] that as long as Soviet troops leave behind a neutral government, they have "won," regardless of the role of their Marxist clients in that government. [redacted]

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If the Soviets persist in probing for discussion of a coalition government, stating clearly and consistently that the PDPA need not be the senior partner, if they seek to talk directly to the resistance alliance, or if they offer a short withdrawal timetable less hedged with conditions than we expect, this would indicate that they have decided to settle for less in Afghanistan. The Soviets might in particular explore devising a neutral interim government made up of exiles and technocrats, while securing the right of PDPA members to vote and run for office in any post-interim arrangement. [redacted]

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Such moves, which would indicate substantially more flexibility than Moscow has shown thus far, could still represent

just bolder variations on its present policy rather than a decision to accept de facto defeat. Moscow would retain the option of renegeing and might be gambling that it would never be called upon to carry out its commitment because Pakistan and the United States would be unable to persuade the resistance to accept even a limited Communist role in a coalition government. Because of the increasing risk that PDPA members will panic and cut their own deals, however, this interpretation would become less plausible the more specific and less conditional Soviet discussion of withdrawal and a genuine coalition became. [redacted]

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In the months following the summit, the Soviets will probably follow through on at least some of their hints. They may:

- o Have the Afghans formally propose a 12-month or shorter withdrawal timetable at Geneva. They will, however, probably continue to insist that its implementation is contingent on further elaboration of the timing and guarantees for ending "outside interference" and on settling interim arrangements for a transitional government in Kabul.
- o Agree to a forum under UN auspices for discussion of a coalition government. Moscow might propose a plan--such as an international conference--that would give the Afghan regime greater standing than the proposals made so far by UN negotiator Cordovez and the Pakistanis.
- o Have Kabul resume national reconciliation offers to the resistance, increasing the number of posts open to insurgents and exiles.
- o Conduct a limited withdrawal on the order of last year's--about 3,000 men. The large-scale withdrawals of up to 45,000 men rumored in Kabul are unlikely because the Soviets probably know that the regime could not manage the increased security responsibilities that would devolve upon it. [redacted]

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All of these developments would be in line with other Soviet attempts to unravel the international coalition supporting the resistance. Such efforts have reflected increased Soviet willingness to take some risks in the interest of obtaining a settlement without reflecting a fundamental revision of Moscow's goals. [redacted]

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We judge that the Soviets have not decided to settle for less than a Marxist-dominated regime. They continue to keep their

options open by building up their military and political infrastructure in Afghanistan. Despite Moscow's recent embarrassment over the UN vote, the international costs of Soviet involvement have become less acute over the years and are unlikely to prompt the Kremlin to revise fundamentally its goals in Afghanistan. [REDACTED]

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A Soviet decision to settle for less is particularly unlikely at this time. Moscow probably wants time to assess several developments, including Najibullah's latest moves to eliminate factionalism in Kabul, its own bilateral discussions with the United States and Pakistan, and whether Islamabad's nuclear controversy with Washington might yet work to Soviet advantage. Moreover, the "loss" of Afghanistan would be a major risk to General Secretary Gorbachev, who has already spent considerable political capital attempting to push his domestic program past conservative opponents and who is now apparently in a period of political retrenchment in Moscow. [REDACTED]

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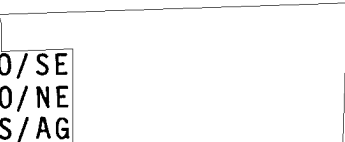
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