

17 February 1988

MEMORANDUM: Squeeze Play on Afghanistan--An Alternative View of  
Soviet Intentions

1. Contrary to widespread assumptions in the West, the Soviets are not seeking a face-saving way to withdraw their forces from Afghanistan. Their aim is rather to set up the US and Pakistan for political warfare denunciations of their responsibility for the failure of negotiations next month under UN mediator Diego Cordovez. In this way, the Soviets will seek to stimulate growing opposition in the US, Pakistan, and internationally to further military and political assistance to Afghan resistance forces. Moscow's longer-term objective is to gradually isolate the resistance fighters from their foreign supporters and, by this means, to reduce the costs of ongoing Soviet military and political commitments, gain time to overcome the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the Kabul client regime, and eventually make possible phased unilateral reductions of the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan.

2. The Gorbachev leadership's strategy has been based on the assumption that Pakistan's growing frustration with the presence of some 3 million Afghan refugees and armed mujaheddine fighters on its territory constitutes the weakest and most exploitable link in the foreign front supporting the Afghan resistance. Since Gorbachev's accession to power three years ago, Moscow has relied on the calculation that adroit Soviet diplomacy eventually would be able to pressure and cajole President Zia into breaking with Washington and striking a deal with Kabul that would allow him to expel the Afghan refugees, thereby removing a serious threat to Pakistan's political stability and territorial integrity.

3. A complete withdrawal of Soviet forces has never been acceptable to the Soviet leadership. They have long recognized that their weak and ineffective client regime in Kabul could not hold off the mujaheddine for more than a few months. Soviet military efforts to stop the flow of weapons to the resistance have largely failed in the last few years. Gorbachev therefore recognized early on that the Soviet predicament in Afghanistan could be eased only through political maneuvers to undermine domestic and international support for US and Pakistani assistance to resistance forces. He never entertained the option of withdrawing Soviet forces and cutting his losses; nor was he willing to accept the risks and costs of a major expansion of the Soviet military commitment.

4. Gorbachev's principal objective has been to reduce the liabilities of what he accepted as an essentially open-ended commitment required by the imperatives of Soviet security and global geopolitical interests. In contrast to the stolid, slogging approach

of his three predecessors, Gorbachev has evolved a strategy of indirection which places much higher priority on political-diplomatic maneuver to isolate and divide his adversaries and attack their political capacity to sustain a long-term challenge to Soviet predominance in Afghanistan. Gorbachev's most forthright expression of his resolve to "stay the course" was contained in his Vladivostok speech in July 1986. He warned that if foreign intervention in Afghanistan continues, "the Soviet Union will not leave its neighbor in the lurch. Our internationalist solidarity with the Afghan people as well as the security interests of the Soviet Union rule this out absolutely."

5. In view of this unambiguous assertion of Soviet political and security interests in Afghanistan, it strains credulity to suggest that Gorbachev may have advocated liquidating the commitment and cutting Soviet losses. It is highly unlikely, moreover, that he has attempted to carry out a major retrenchment only to have this course blocked by opposition from senior military and party leaders. Claims by Soviet officials to Westerners that the Soviet military is unwilling to concede defeat and that party hardliners are concerned about the ideological and security implications of a Soviet withdrawal almost certainly represent the familiar Soviet tactic of "good cop, bad cops." Gorbachev himself invoked this hoary ploy in his meeting with nine senior members of Congress during the Washington summit when he declared, "We have our conservatives, too." Gorbachev and Shevardnadze, however, have encountered stubborn resistance to their scenario from factions within the Afghan communist party, particularly the Khalqis, who are more doctrinaire and nationalistic than Najibullah's Parcham faction and strenuously oppose the "national reconciliation" policy.

#### The Squeeze Play in Action

6. Gorbachev's 8 February statement which for the first time established a specific date for beginning a Soviet troop withdrawal was the final move in a two-year scenario designed to set the stage for a squeeze play. He declared that this action has fulfilled all the "necessary conditions for signing the settlement agreement in the very near future." In a transparently unctuous tone, Gorbachev said "we would not like to think that some states or political figures might want to be held accountable by the Afghan nation and other nations for scuttling a settlement." Pravda declared on 12 February that "Never before has the situation in and around Afghanistan been as open for a settlement as it is now."

7. The Soviets have thus carefully prepared the ground for charging that Washington has reneged on its putative pledge to terminate military assistance to Afghan resistance forces simultaneously with the beginning of the pullout of Soviet troops. They are eagerly anticipating the political dividends of calling what they view as an American bluff. Pravda observed that the US and Pakistan have long portrayed Moscow's failure to establish a withdrawal timetable as the main stumbling block and have exploited

this for years to "block Soviet peace initiatives." The Soviets are operating on the assumption that Washington will either support Pakistan's refusal to sign an agreement with the Kabul regime or contrive other ways to evade a commitment to end assistance to the mujaheddine. Red Star recently called attention to President Reagan's State of the Union message which spoke "bluntly about the administration's resolve to continue supporting the 'freedom fighters'" in Afghanistan, as well as in Nicaragua, Angola, and Cambodia. Pravda pointed out that the White House comment on Gorbachev's statement "dodged the question" about the timing of a cutoff of US aid to the resistance.

8. Moscow is ready to aim a similar indictment at Pakistan for repudiating its commitment to join Kabul in signing the Geneva accords. According to TASS, First Deputy Foreign Minister Vorontsov told Pakistani leaders last week that a refusal to sign the accords "would be tantamount to frustrating the entire Afghan settlement," the consequences of which would be "a fresh flareup of the armed conflict and bloodshed." On 16 February, Gennadiy Gerasimov accused the Zia government of "executing further elusive maneuvers in a stubborn attempt to obstruct the signature of the Geneva documents" by insisting on a new "transition government" in Kabul.

9. The timing of Gorbachev's 8 February statement announcing a long-withheld timetable for withdrawal was decisively influenced by an assessment that statements by Secretary Shultz and President Zia in January had played into Soviet hands and created the most favorable conditions in three years for a squeeze play. In a news conference on 7 January, Secretary Shultz seemed to imply that the Administration will contend that it is not obligated by the Geneva accords to end US military assistance to the mujaheddine 60 days after the agreements are signed and a Soviet withdrawal is to begin. The Secretary indicated that Washington intends to wait in order to ensure that there is "a certain inevitability" and "no turning back" in the Soviet withdrawal before US assistance ends. He asserted that if the Administration is satisfied that the Soviet withdrawal is proceeding on schedule, "Under those circumstances, we will certainly meet the things that we have agreed to in the Geneva process."

10. If Secretary Shultz's remarks were ambiguous and open to different interpretations, President Zia used interviews with American journalists in the first half of January to lay out his position in clear and inflexible terms. He bluntly stated that he would not sign an agreement with the Najibullah regime because he did not consider it to be "legitimate." Zia also called for the creation of an "interim government," saying "all factions of Afghans must get together." Pakistan's official response to Gorbachev's statement hardened Zia's stance by demanding that the Kabul regime be replaced by a "legitimate, responsible, broad-based government" and by contending that this is an "indispensable aspect" of any settlement.

11. The Soviets, of course, are fully aware that Zia is trapped by the adamant refusal of Afghan resistance leaders to accept any settlement that does not depose the Kabul regime. This uncompromising stance forced Zia to declare last month that he will not sign the Geneva accords until a "neutral government" replaces the Najibullah regime. Zia's dilemma is that if he fails to win the cooperation of the resistance leaders, Pakistan will be left with 3 million refugees and armed resistance fighters on its territory. Gorbachev's strategy is to exploit this dilemma in order to blame Zia and US support for him for the collapse of negotiations. This design explains Gorbachev's blunt statement that "We are convinced" that Soviet withdrawal is not "linked with the completion of efforts to set up a new, coalition government in Afghanistan, i.e., with bringing the policy of national reconciliation to fruition." On departing Islamabad on 11 February, Vorontsov drove the point home by declaring that "Any delays in the signing of the Geneva accords will mean only one thing, and that will be a delay in the withdrawal of Soviet forces." He smugly added, "we don't know who will be willing to take that responsibility."

12. In sum, the Soviets are confident that they have succeeded in maneuvering Washington and Islamabad into a no-win corner. They believe they have manipulated the Geneva negotiations in a way that places Afghan resistance leaders in the position of exercising a veto over US and Pakistani policies. The Soviet scenario, of course, assumes that the mujaheddine will adhere to the stand they took in immediately rejecting Najibullah's January 1987 national reconciliation plan that called for the inclusion of resistance leaders in a coalition government. These leaders played their assigned role in the squeeze play scenario when they declared that they "will continue to fight until Najibullah is thrown out and a complete Islamic government is established in Moslem Afghanistan."

13. If this assumption about mujaheddine behavior proves to be incorrect and the Pakistanis manage to secure the resistance leaders' cooperation in a joint US-Pakistani policy, the Soviets could shift to tactics of forcing an impasse over the timing of the termination of US military assistance to the resistance. Shevardnadze made the most explicit statement of the Soviet position on this issue during his visit to Kabul early last month. He clearly implied that US assistance must end before Soviet forces begin to withdraw. He argued that the "obligation on the cessation of external interference will come into force" 60 days after the Geneva accords are signed. And he insisted that the US has agreed to "cease aid to the armed groups waging combat operations in Afghanistan against the people's authorities." Shevardnadze then contended that "It is with the coming into force of this obligation that the withdrawal of Soviet troops will begin."

14. Finally, if the US finesses the timing issue in a way that disarms the Soviet scenario, the Soviets will anticipate that the announcement of a US cutoff of assistance 60 days after the accords are signed will demoralize the resistance fighters and aggravate rivalry and open conflict among the seven major resistance groups. They will also hope that a US cutoff will push the Pakistanis into curtailing their support for the resistance and striking a deal with the Kabul regime in order to clear the way for the return of Afghan refugees and fighters. The Soviets at that point may inject a further and highly disruptive issue by adopting Najibullah's two "conditions" for a withdrawal of Soviet forces: (a) The mujaheddine's training camps in Pakistan must be dismantled before a withdrawal begins; (b) The Mujaheddine should extend to the Afghan army the ceasefire that he claimed one key resistance leader has already offered to Soviet troops once they begin to withdraw. Najibullah told an American journalist last month that "We are actually looking for this objective."