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THE SOVIET INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN

INTRODUCTION

On December 27, 1979, under cover of an ongoing Soviet military buildup, heavily-armed elements of a Soviet airborne brigade were airlifted into Kabul, Afghanistan, to violently overthrow the regime of President Hafizollah Amin. Within hours after the beginning of this Trojan Horse-type operation, Soviet troops had overwhelmed the elite presidential guard, captured Amin, executed him along with several members of his family for "crimes against the people" and seized control of the capital. Within days Soviet armor columns were fanning out across Afghanistan to occupy major population centers, airbases and strategic lines of communication. It now appears that the Soviets are waging a full-fledged counter-insurgency campaign against the rebellious Moslem tribesmen who were on the verge of winning a 20-month guerrilla war against the Taraki-Amin communist regime. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the nature of the Soviet military intervention, evaluate its regional geopolitical implications and assess the Soviet Union's¹ motivation for engaging in such a blatant show of naked force.

THE SOVIET INTERVENTION

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan sets an extremely unsettling precedent since it represents the first time that the Kremlin has committed combat troops outside the confines of the Soviet bloc. The operation itself was well prepared and efficiently executed. While the Soviets claim that they are responding to a

1. For an earlier analysis see James Phillips, "Afghanistan: The Soviet Quagmire," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder #101.

request for aid by the new Karmal regime under the terms of the Soviet-Afghan friendship treaty signed in December 1978, it is clear that preparations for the intervention were being made at least a month in advance and that Soviet troops carried out all aspects of the coup.

The Soviet invasion was a long-planned operation whose groundwork was prepared well in advance. What was surprising was not the intervention itself, but the speed of the military buildup within Afghanistan and the ruthless elimination of the Amin regime. Until the coup on December 27, Western observers (and probably Amin as well) had assumed that the massive Soviet airlift operation was aimed at bolstering the faltering Amin regime against insurgent Moslem tribesmen who had successfully been waging a guerrilla war since mid-1978. Only after the Soviets announced that the unmanageable President Amin had been replaced by Babruk Karmal, a pliable pro-Soviet communist, did it become apparent that the invasion was a double-edged weapon aimed at the incumbent Afghan regime as well as the rebel tribesmen.

By all indications, the Afghan operation seems to have been carefully staged, with Soviet troops being mobilized and deployed at least a month in advance. In November, Warsaw Pact forces in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria were placed on alert and there was a limited call-up of Soviet and East German reservists. So much notice was taken of the alert that East German Prime Minister Willi Stoph felt compelled to deny publicly that there was an alert because of the Iranian situation. A gradual buildup in the Central Asian Military District on the Afghan border brought Soviet strength up to 8 divisions, three of which were classified to be in Category I (fully manned with all weapons and equipment).²

By mid-December, the Soviets had introduced brigade-strength units at each of three key locations: Kabul, the Bagram airbase 40 miles north of Kabul and the airbase at Shendan to the west. On December 24, the pace of the Soviet buildup suddenly accelerated as more than 200 giant AN-22 and AN-12 transports disgorged an estimated four to five thousand combat troops in two days, complete with artillery and armored vehicles. Several Soviet units were airlifted from as far away as Hungary and East Germany, striking evidence of the improved strategic mobility and flexibility of Soviet land forces brought about by the deployment of advanced transport planes.

Under cover of the massive influx of Soviet troops, a strike force of two to three battalions of crack Soviet airborne troops spearheaded by light tanks overwhelmed the Presidential guard at Durulaman Palace in a fierce firefight which resulted in heavy

2. Drew Middleton, "Soviet Display of Flexibility," New York Times, December 28, 1979, p. A 13.

casualties on both sides and the total destruction of the palace. President Amin, who was later dubbed a "bloodthirsty spy of American imperialism," was summarily shot along with his brother and nephew. By nightfall, Soviet troops had gained undisputed control of key government buildings, military installations and communications facilities in the capital, although sporadic clashes with dissident troops continued for several more days.

The second phase of the invasion began on December 28 as two Soviet motorized infantry divisions crossed the frontier in three places in support of troops which had already been airlifted into Afghanistan. Then, when the Soviets had consolidated their control of the capital, armored columns were dispatched to the east and northeast to seize major population centers and airfields and to protect important lines of communication between the Soviet border and the interior, possibly in preparation for the future move of additional reinforcements across the frontier.

By January 1, 1980, the Soviets had injected at least 50,000 men and 200 aircraft into Afghanistan along with a wide variety of armored vehicles, heavy artillery, and sophisticated anti-aircraft guns (indicating they may have expected resistance from the Afghan air force in addition to the Afghan Army).³ Another four Soviet motorized infantry divisions (approximately 50,000 men) were concentrated north of the border and constitute a reserve force which could be transported quickly to the south to augment Soviet occupation forces if the necessity should arise. Ironically, these units may be transported to the Afghan front in trucks produced at the huge Kama River truck plant, the world's largest heavy-duty automotive works, built largely with U.S. technology. Such trucks have already been identified with Soviet forces in Afghanistan by the CIA, a particularly galling outgrowth of the U.S.-Soviet detente in the 1970s.⁴

Since Western reporters and diplomats have been confined to Kabul, it is extremely difficult to measure the degree of armed resistance that the Russians have met in the provinces. While resistance seems to have been light in many parts of the country (Soviet tanks entering Herat were reportedly attacked with sticks and stones) it is known that the Soviets have encountered stiff resistance in rebel strongholds. In rugged Bamian province, one hundred miles northwest of Kabul, a Soviet column was apparently ambushed by fierce Hazarah tribesmen and forced to withdraw with numerous casualties. It took the Soviets two days to clear the city of Kandahar of Afghan army deserters and rebel sympathizers, but when they finally overcame armed resistance they were reportedly draped with garlands of flowers by Afghans sympathetic to the new Karmal regime.

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3. Drew Middleton, "Soviet Phase 2: Consolidating Hold on Afghanistan," New York Times, January 1, 1980, p. 3.
 4. Clyde Farnsworth, "Soviet is Using Trucks U.S. Technology Built in Afghan Operation," New York Times, January 4, 1980, p. A8.

The two main centers of resistance have proven to be the northeastern province of Badakhshan, separated from Kabul by mountains and a glacier, and the eastern province of Paktia, where rebels enjoy a constant flow of arms smuggled across the nearby Pakistani border. The Soviets currently seem to be concentrating on consolidating control along the northeast frontier. Western analysts attribute this to the double threat which a rebel-controlled Badakhshan would pose to Russian interests in the area. Not only are the Tajiks of Badakhshan closely related to the Tajik tribes in Soviet Tajikistan but Badakhshan itself is relatively close to the Peoples' Republic of China and might conceivably become a focal point for Chinese aid to the rebels. By moving fast to overrun Badakhshan, the Soviets could quell the Tajik Islamic insurgence before it penetrates into Soviet Central Asia and deprive Afghan rebels of a direct land link to China.

Since Badakhshan province is also one of the foremost rebel strongholds, a decisive victory there would undermine the morale of the insurgents everywhere. For this reason, the struggle for Badakhshan is likely to be a litmus test of the ability of the insurgent tribesmen to withstand the Soviet onslaught.

THE U.S. RESPONSE

On December 28, President Carter termed the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan a "grave threat to peace" and a "blatant violation of international rules of behavior." That same day he used the "hotline" to demand that the Kremlin withdraw its troops and warned that the future of Russo-American relations would depend on Moscow's response. In his reply the next day, Premier Brezhnev contended that the Soviet move had been made in response to a request for aid by the Afghan government and maintained that troops would be withdrawn after the crisis had been resolved. This response was publicly criticized by President Carter as being "completely inadequate and completely misleading." On December 30, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski pointedly reaffirmed the 1959 defense agreement with Pakistan and warned that the U.S. would be prepared to react with military force if the Soviet Union extended its incursion into Pakistan. On December 31, President Carter proclaimed in a televised interview that "my opinion of the Russians has changed more drastically in the last week than even the previous two and a half years," and urged other world leaders to "make it clear to the Soviets that they cannot take such action as to violate world peace without severe political consequences."

On January 2, 1980, President Carter recalled Ambassador Thomas J. Watson, Jr. from the Soviet Union to dramatize American concern over the Soviet invasion. The next day the President asked the Senate to postpone indefinitely consideration of the controversial SALT II agreement. He also promised to accelerate delivery of arms already "in the pipeline" to Pakistan when these sales were abruptly curtailed to protest Islamabad's nuclear policies.

When it became apparent that American warnings were being ignored by the Russians, President Carter made a televised speech on January 4 in which the following sanctions were imposed:

- GRAIN - Seventeen million tons of grain ordered by the Soviet Union will not be delivered. The Soviets will receive only 8 of the 25 million tons of grain promised for the year ending September 30. In addition, 30 to 40 million bushels of soybeans and soybean products will not be delivered.
- TRADE - High technology and strategic items such as oilfield equipment, computers and sophisticated machine tools will not be licensed for sale to the Soviet Union until further notice.
- FISHING - Fishing privileges for the Soviet Union will be severely curtailed, depriving the Soviets of 350,000 tons of fish worth about \$50 million.
- CULTURAL - The United States will delay opening any new American or Soviet consular facilities and most cultural and economic exchanges under consideration will be deferred.
- OLYMPIC GAMES - If the Soviets continue their "aggressive actions" the U.S. may withdraw from the 1980 Olympic Games to be held in Moscow.

While these sanctions cut across a broad spectrum of Soviet-American interaction it should be noted that for the most part they are limited in scope, symbolic in nature and will have virtually no immediate impact on the Soviet economy given the large quantities of grain, fish and high technology items already in the Soviet pipeline. Essentially, these sanctions are a series of pin pricks meant to raise the long-run economic costs of the Soviet Afghan venture in order to deter similar future interventions. However, in the short-run they will have little effect, least of all on the political/military situation in Afghanistan. Significantly, although the Carter Administration has pledged to resume military aid to Pakistan, there has been no discussion of any form of aid for the Afghan resistance movements. It would seem that Afghanistan has already been written off in spite of the fact that more than a few experts suspect that the Kremlin's reach may in fact have exceeded its grasp.

AFGHANISTAN'S STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

Although Afghanistan is a remote, obscure country which ranks among the poorest nations in the world, its strategic location endows it with a high degree of geopolitical importance. Afghanistan has long been a major crossroads of Asia astride

major north-south and east-west land routes; its control of the Khyber and Bolan passes has historically made it the gateway which links Russia with the Indian sub-continent and the Middle East with the Orient. Because of its pivotal geostrategic position, this landlocked nation repeatedly has become the focus of conflict between rival empires, a tendency which has earned it the sobriquet of the "cockpit of Asia." Afghanistan has performed the function in central Asia which Korea and Laos-Cambodia have performed in East and Southeast Asia: a regional flashpoint of colliding Great Power interests. In the 19th and early 20th centuries Afghanistan's very survival as an independent state was linked to its role as a buffer state between Czarist Russia in central Asia and Great Britain in India. As a buffer state which was itself a manifestation of the general equilibrium of regional power, it has served as a barometer of the balance of power in the central Asian area. For this reason, more than a few observers were disturbed when it became a Soviet satellite in 1978.

The Soviet Union has exhibited a long-standing interest in its southern neighbors, as evidenced by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Protocol to the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact, which asserted that Soviet territorial aspirations lay in the direction of the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. In recent years, the Kremlin's incentives for expanding its influence to the south have been significantly enhanced by the growing importance of Middle Eastern, especially Persian Gulf, oil in the Western economic system. Seen from the vantage point of the Persian Gulf, the single most important energy-surplus region in the world, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan constitutes one part of a giant pincer movement designed to encircle Gulf oil reserves. The Kremlin already has established a military presence in Ethiopia and South Yemen; now that the Iranians are no longer willing or able to underwrite Oman's security, Sultan Qabus faces the growing danger that the Dhofar insurgency will flare up once more, this time with greater material support from the Soviets' stalking horse on the Arabian Peninsula - South Yemen.

At the other end of the pincer, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan constitutes a flanking movement which opens up the flat, permeable eastern border of Iran to potential Soviet military pressures. More importantly, it extends Soviet influence to within 350 miles of the Arabian Sea, blocked only by a disputed territory - Baluchistan - which itself faces the potential threat of a separatist insurgency. The Soviets have occupied most important Afghan air bases, fortified them with surface-to-air missile batteries and are equipping them with modern command and control facilities. The Soviet intervention has in effect moved Soviet aircraft 500 miles closer to the vital sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) which function as the oil lifeline of the industrial West. In fact, Soviet planes based in southwest Afghanistan are now situated closer to the strategic Straits of Hormuz (through which pass 40 percent of western oil imports) than if they were based in Tehran. Using these bases Soviet aircraft could reach the chokepoint at the mouth of the Persian Gulf and remain on

station there for at least 30 minutes.⁵ Clearly, Soviet access to Afghan airbases significantly upgrades the Kremlin's ability to block, or even sever, the petroleum jugular vein of the West and greatly enhances the Soviet ability to neutralize American naval power in the Arabian Sea.

SECURITY THREATS TO IRAN AND PAKISTAN

In addition to providing a platform from which Soviet air power could be brought to bear on the crucial Persian Gulf SLOCs, a pro-Soviet Afghanistan provides an excellent fulcrum which amplifies Russian diplomatic leverage over both Iran and Pakistan. Both states have had troubles in the past with ethnic separatist movements and are likely to run into more such problems in the future. Kabul would be in an excellent position to incite and support such movements given its close proximity to strongholds of ethnic separatism along the peripheries of both states and the presence within Afghanistan of Pushtun and Baluchi tribesmen who remain in close contact with their kin across the permeable, often unguarded, border.

Afghanistan has historically-based claims on most of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province derived from the controversial British imposition of the 1893 Durand Line which established the frontier between British India and Afghanistan. The Afghans consider the present boundary to be an anachronistic vestige of British colonialism and since 1947 they have sporadically revived demands that Pushtuns within Pakistan be allowed to exercise self-determination and become part of a "Greater Pushtunistan." While it is unclear whether Kabul would allow its own Pushtuns to become part of such an entity, the Pushtunistan issue has been an effective device that simultaneously weakens Pakistan and strengthens the Afghan government's popularity among the Pushtun tribes which comprise almost half of the population of Afghanistan.

Kabul has also supported an independent Baluchistan in order to obtain access to the sea. Afghan trade is currently dependent on the Soviet overland transportation network since access to the Pakistani port of Karachi has frequently been constrained by tensions with Islamabad. However, support for an independent Baluchistan has been muted, at least in part because the potential domestic benefits of stimulating internal cohesiveness via a popular foreign policy vis-a-vis Baluchistan are not as great as those inherent in a strong pro-Pushtun policy, given the smaller number of Baluchis living in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the Saur Revolution has visibly strengthened the ranks of militant Baluchi nationalists, who are building a skeleton guerrilla organization, confident that the Karmal regime will eventually come to support a full scale insurgency once it has consolidated its internal power

5. Strategic Mid-East and Africa, September 12, 1979, p. 6.

base within Afghanistan.⁶ In addition, there have been unconfirmed reports that the Soviets have been shipping arms to Iranian Baluchis through Afghan intermediaries.⁷

If an independent Baluchistan should ever be carved out of Iran and Pakistan, it would almost certainly be dependent upon Soviet support to withstand hostile pressure from Tehran and Islamabad, even if it did not need Soviet support to be established in the first place. In return for their services the Russians could hope to gain the use of the excellent port facilities at Gwadar, a quid pro quo which would partially fulfill their long-standing quest for warmwater ports. Moreover, Baluchistan's 750 miles of Arabian Sea coast would also offer the Russians a superb springboard for interdicting the vulnerable Persian Gulf SLOCs and mounting subversive or proxy operations against pro-Western states along the rim of the gulf.

The precarious domestic political position of the Kabul regime has thus far precluded the Afghans from actively promoting in an overt fashion the territorial dismemberment of Pakistan. However, should the Karmal regime consolidate its control over Afghanistan the potential threat of Soviet-encouraged, Afghan-supported insurgencies would be boosted significantly. In spite of its own domestic pre-occupations, Kabul has already found time to forge links with leftist groups in both Pakistan and Iran. Two Soviet-supervised training camps providing marxist indoctrination and guerrilla training to Pakistan and Iranian radicals have been established in Mazar-i-Sharif, close to the border with the Soviet Union. Many Afghans were arrested within Iran in several of the anti-Shah demonstrations of 1978, circumstantial evidence which has been interpreted by at least one expert to suggest the involvement of the KGB-controlled Afghan secret service (Estekbarat) in the effort to oust the Shah. In January 1979 almost 200 armed men were caught crossing the border into Iran from Afghanistan, according to Shahpour Bakhtiar, the deposed prime minister of the Shah's last cabinet.¹⁰ The recent history of Afghan meddling in Iranian affairs, the large number of Afghan expatriates already living in Iran (500,000) and the historically close working relationship which has existed between Afghanistan's Khalq Party and the pro-Soviet Iranian Tudeh Party, have caused more than a few observers to fear that the Afghans may well become Soviet surrogates in the increasingly likely event that Iran is plunged into a civil war. If the Karmal regime can

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6. Selig Harrison, "Nightmare in Baluchistan," Foreign Policy, Fall 1978, p. 148.
 7. Strategic Middle Eastern Affairs, November 8, 1978, p. 1.
 8. Robert Moss, "Who is meddling in Iran?" New Republic, December 2, 1978.
 9. Robert Moss, "The Campaign to Destablize Iran," Conflict Studies, No. 101, November 1978, p. 4.
 10. Hannah Negaran, "The Afghan Coup," Orbis Spring 1979, p. 105.

establish unshakeable control over Afghanistan, the Afghans may be destined to become, on a much reduced scale, the "Cubans of Asia."

In any event, even if Karmal never establishes complete control over his own country the potential threat of Afghan support for ethnic insurgents and pro-Soviet leftists in Iran and Pakistan has made both countries vulnerable to Soviet pressures and sensitive to Soviet cajoling. According to Soviet ideology, changes in the "correlation of forces" precipitate political changes and opportunities. The Afghan coup and Iranian revolution have definitely altered the "correlation of forces" in the region and it is only a matter of time before Moscow exploits these pivotal events to the utmost. As the shadow of Soviet power lengthens over the Indian subcontinent and Persian Gulf without any concrete U.S. response, individual states will become increasingly tempted to reach their own accommodations with Moscow. In this connection, it is particularly significant to note the transfer last winter of Pakistan's most able diplomat from Washington to Moscow, and the disintegration last spring of the symbolic, albeit defunct, CENTO alliance.

A sense of declining American willingness to react to far-flung Soviet gambits and proxy operations (as evidenced by the events in Angola and the Horn of Africa), combined with America's demonstrated ability to turn its back on regional allies for a wide variety of reasons (as evidenced by the arms embargo against Pakistan in 1965, the arms embargo against Turkey in 1976, the not so benign neglect of the Kurds in 1975 and the fall of the Shah in 1979) and the widespread perception of burgeoning Soviet influence in strategically located states of Ethiopia, South Yemen and Afghanistan have undermined the "Northern Tier." Having witnessed the dissolution of the protective barrier to the north and having become increasingly exposed to Soviet proxy pressures on the periphery of the Arabian peninsula, the elites of the pro-Western Persian Gulf states may re-orient their foreign policies (and even more ominously, their energy policies) in order to ensure internal security, unless the United States manifests a strong and ironclad commitment to protect them from Soviet political, subversive, proxy and military pressures.

THE TARAKI REGIME

When Nur Mohammad Taraki's Khalq Party seized power in April 1978 it numbered no more than 5,000 members in an estimated population estimated at 15 million. Not only did the regime rest on an extremely narrow power base, but its cadres (termed Khalqis) were drawn from a thin stratum of urban intellectuals, teachers and advanced-level students who had little in common with the rural Moslem tribesmen who make up the bulk of the population. A series of purges against the Parcham faction, nationalists in the armed forces, security forces, the intelligentsia and the civil services narrowed the regime's base of support even further and

drained it of the trained manpower needed to administer the country. Vacant government positions were filled by party loyalists and Soviet citizens, mostly Tajiks who spoke a Persian dialect most Afghans can understand.

In addition to importing Soviet manpower, Taraki imported Soviet ideological doctrine, although he was careful to camouflage it with semantic figleaves in order to avoid needlessly antagonizing the entrenched power of the Moslem clergy. Unfortunately for Taraki, the doctrinaire Khalqis who arrogantly strode into the countryside were rigidly imposing a Soviet model for development which had not been designed to accommodate the sociopolitical realities of Afghanistan's tribal, semi-feudal, strongly religious 17th century atmosphere. The Khalqis tried to do too much too fast. Because they had little sensitivity to the traditional values prevalent in rural areas they misjudged the depth and resilience of Islamic roots among the rural population.

This insensitivity, in combination with the purging of virtually all competent Afghan technocrats from the government, severely crippled the Taraki regime's reforms and hindered the cultivation of rural political allies among the peasantry, which otherwise might have been expected to support the regime in order to preserve newly-acquired benefits. The centerpiece of the regime's modernization campaign was the ill-fated land reform program under which the government expropriated 3 million acres of land and tried to redistribute it among 285,000 families in the first year. Due to widespread confusion concerning the legitimacy and permanence of the land redistribution scheme, much of the land went uncultivated. Some peasants refused to accept land because under Islamic law a recipient is required to provide compensation for land received; others accepted small plots only to find that they could not afford to buy seed or fertilizer due to an anti-usury campaign which outlawed the traditional credit facilities which large landowners had previously extended to smaller farmers to finance their planting expenses. As a result, the Afghans, who had been self-sufficient in grain in 1973, are facing a projected deficit of 500,000 tons of wheat this year, a large proportion of which is expected to be imported from the Soviet Union, although much of it may have grown in the U.S.

In order to overcome popular resistance to its draconian social engineering projects the Taraki regime increasingly resorted to Stalinist methods of repression, reportedly due to the influence of the number-two man, Hafizollah Amin. Since April 1978 at least three thousand political prisoners have been executed, the prison population is estimated to have grown as high as 70,000 (often including the wives and children of political prisoners) and an estimated 100,000 civilians have been killed in the fighting.¹¹ The regime's coercive apparatus seems to have

11. MacNeil/Lehrer Report, August 14, 1979.

paid special attention to educated elites, military officers, teachers, civil servants and businessmen. Amnesty International has charged the Taraki regime with using torture and mass executions on a large-scale basis. According to one foreign observer: "The level of executions here makes what is happening in Iran look like child's play. The problem here is that they don't bother with show trials, so its hard to keep score."¹²

THE ISLAMIC BACKLASH

Afghan mullahs, many of whom owned land, were antagonized not only by the the breakup of their estates, but by the establishment of a new legal system administered by the civil government rather than the Islamic clergy. Their righteous indignation was further amplified by the growing Soviet presence in Afghanistan. Successive waves of religious exiles had fled Soviet Central Asia years before with dire reports of the Soviet campaign to enervate and constrain the strength of the Islamic religion; the Islamic establishment was therefore prepared for the worst. The arrest of scores of mullahs for political activity and the pointed removal of the color green (which symbolized Islam) from the new Afghan flag gave credence to concerns that Afghanistan would suffer a similar fate. It soon became apparent that the Taraki regime, while paying lip service to Islam, was bent on breaking the back of Islamic clergy by purging its ranks of "false moslems," conveniently defined to be any mullah opposed to government policies. In retaliation, the mullahs and peers (spiritual mentors) declared a Jihad (holy war) against the Kafir (infidel) regime in Kabul.

Islamic resistance in Afghanistan has been strengthened by the triumphant resurgence of Islamic influence in Iran. The Ayatollah Khomeini has bitterly denounced Kabul for the anti-Islamic tone of its policies and has repeatedly called upon the Afghan armed forces, police and civil service to turn against the "corrupt atheists" who have attempted to subvert Afghanistan's traditional culture. Ironically, the fundamentalist Islamic backlash which threatens the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan is similar to the movement which drove the Shah out of Iran. In both cases the regime in power was perceived by rebels as being an agent of the corruption of the national culture by imported alien influences. In Iran these influences were western capitalism and permissiveness, while in Afghanistan it was atheistic Marxism. In both cases the fundamentalist Islamic movement became a potent political force because its appeal transcended ethnic, tribal and class lines. In Afghanistan, where Moslem tribesmen had virtually no institutionalized political input into Kabul's decision-making,

12. Tyler Marshall, "Marxist Afghan Regime in Trouble," Los Angeles Times, June 25, 1979, p. 11.

but more particularly in Iran, where meaningful political opposition was precluded by a one-party constitution, the long-entrenched Islamic religious network provided an effective means of arousing and mobilizing the population.

In Afghanistan, where more than 90 percent of the population belongs to the Sunni sect, the Islamic establishment was not so capable of providing strong direction to the rebel cause as had been the case in predominantly Shi'ite Iran. This was due to the fact that Sunni religious doctrines do not have as great a potential for revolt against secular authority as does the Shia faith. While the Shi'ite clergy have traditionally defended the interests of the Moslem masses against unjust governments, the Sunni clergy have historically tended to operate in closer association with ruling authorities. The Afghans not only had no comparable religious figure with Khomeini's following or stature but their primitive communications system and heterogeneous population made the formation of a unified movement extremely difficult. Nevertheless, in a land where cross-country buses stop at sunset to allow passengers to pray, the strength of Islam should not be underestimated.

THE PROGRESS OF THE WAR

It is difficult to obtain a clear picture of the war in Afghanistan because the government has severely constrained press coverage of the struggle and the insurgents assert inconsistent, wildly exaggerated and often contradictory claims from their distant political headquarters in Pakistan. Apparently, armed resistance first arose in the spring of 1978 among zealous, recently converted Moslem tribesmen in Nuristan in the northeast and spontaneously spread to twenty-four of Afghanistan's twenty-eight provinces. Opposition did not become pronounced until the fall of 1978, when the government began to lose control of the countryside to fierce guerrillas organized along tribal lines who set ambushes and cut country roads at will.

The guerrillas, armed primarily with ancient bolt-action copies of Royal Enfield rifles made by village gunsmiths, have periodically laid siege to government-controlled urban centers, forcing the Kabul regime to mount costly relief operations which further dispersed government strength. The regime, for its part, launched a scorched earth policy in rebel strongholds along the Pakistani border, bombing villages and burning crops in an effort to intimidate villagers and force the rebels to spend their scarce resources on food and shelter. It is believed that over 400,000 Pushtuns have fled across the border into Pakistan, where they have established support bases and a makeshift political coalition to provide some semblance of direction and unity to the diverse opposition groups which wage separate and uncoordinated campaigns against the Taraki-Amin regime.

When the Soviets intervened in late December the Amin regime controlled all the major urban centers but was in full control of only one quarter of the country and less than half the population. The Afghan Army was stretched thin in defense of scattered cities and worn down by a savage brushfire war against an elusive enemy which took refuge in some of the most rugged terrain on earth. The heavy rate of attrition, repeated purges of the officer corps and the frustrations of a protracted anti-guerrilla campaign had seriously undermined the morale of the Afghan armed forces and resulted in a high rate of desertion, with entire units occasionally killing their officers and defecting to the rebels en masse. Chronic mutinies, several of which had to be put down with Soviet help, threw into question the long-term reliability and staying power of the army itself. Although Soviet-supplied airpower gave it the capability to decisively neutralize and defeat rebel offensives, it was clear that the Afghan Army was incapable of defeating the insurgency without a significant escalation in the Soviet presence.

THE SOVIET STAKE IN AFGHANISTAN

In the wake of the April 1978 pro-Soviet coup, Moscow brushed up against an Afghan tarbaby and found itself entangled in the internal politics of one of the most ungovernable countries on earth. In Afghanistan the Kremlin was confronted with a dilemma of empire. President Amin was incapable of militarily winning the war, but was unwilling to accept a political solution, aware that such a solution would expose him to the wrath of his own people. According to Robert Neumann, former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, the Soviets "literally had no choice except to take over the country or let go of it. There was no middle way."¹³ If it escalated its military involvement it ran the risk of being bogged down in a protracted guerrilla war which would cost it dearly in terms of men, materiel, diplomatic capital, world opinion, and relations with Islamic nations as well as the United States. If it cut its losses and abandoned the intractable Amin regime, it ran the risk of undermining the credibility of its commitments elsewhere and acknowledging the incompatibility of Marxism and Islam, a dangerous acknowledgement given the rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East. In the end Moscow fell back on its strong suit - military power - because the perceived risks of non-intervention were greater than the perceived risks of intervention and the potential benefits were greater.

Afghanistan is both a stepping stone for Soviet strategic penetration of the Northern Tier and a stepping stone for Islamic religious penetration of Soviet Central Asia. The Soviets desire a pro-Soviet Afghanistan in order to gain leverage over Iran and

Pakistan; they desire a non-Islamic Afghanistan in order to halt the Islamic revival at the Hindu Kush and insulate their growing Moslem population from dangerously explosive politico-religious doctrines. Moscow can not countenance an Islamic victory in Afghanistan because it would reinforce the lessons of Iran in the eyes of Soviet Moslem subjects and hasten the creation of a belt of Islamic states around the southern periphery of the Soviet Union which could hope to deter Soviet interference in their internal affairs by threatening to retaliate by fomenting religious turmoil in the Central Asian republics which have similar ethnic compositions. While the magnitude of the "green menace" has not yet been made manifest and will certainly be severely circumscribed, if not circumvented, by the omnipresent Soviet internal security forces, the Kremlin cannot afford to underestimate the strength of the Islamic threat.

The Soviets also had an interest in preserving the credibility of their commitments to client regimes, especially those in eastern Europe. In December 1978, the Afghans signed a 20 year treaty of "friendship, good neighborliness and cooperation" which was remarkably similar to those signed by some East European nations in the 1940s. If Moscow abandoned its Afghan clients in the face of Islamic religious opposition, it ran the risk of encouraging East European opposition movements which might wishfully conclude that the Soviets would back down in a similar fashion if confronted with religious/nationalist uprisings in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland. (While Pope John Paul II is by no means a Polish Khomeini and the Catholic Church is by no means comparable to the fundamentalist Islamic faith, the Pope may inadvertently unleash a pent-up anti-Soviet backlash in attempting to pry concessions out of East European regimes.) If the Soviets permitted Kabul to fall into the hands of religious/nationalist forces they would be setting a dangerous precedent for eastern Europe.

The Kremlin therefore did not wish to be perceived to be letting down an ally - particularly one on its own doorstep. Soviet officials in Kabul had long been telling foreign diplomats that: "This is a socialist revolution which is our duty to defend."¹⁴ Premier Brezhnev further underlined the Soviet commitment in a conversation with the former Indian Prime Minister Moraji Desai by putting himself on record as saying "We shall not leave our friend in need."¹⁵ Such expressions of Soviet commitment signalled Moscow's readiness to go to great lengths to preserve their Afghan clients.

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14. "A Leftist Afghanistan Worries the West," Wall Street Journal, January 16, 1979, p. 22.
 15. David K. Willis, "Afghanistan: Time Bomb Ticks for Soviets," Christian Science Monitor, June 15, 1979, p. 11.

THE TIMING OF THE INTERVENTION

After coming to power in the coup d'etat of September 14, 1979, President Hafizollah Amin entered into a strained relationship with his Soviet mentors. The Soviets resented Amin for ousting their appointed Afghan leadership, Nur Mohammad Taraki, while Amin suspected (probably correctly) that Moscow was behind Taraki's apparent move to purge him from the ruling regime. Because Amin proceeded to place loyal friends and relatives in key positions in his regime and purge all potential challengers to his rule, the Soviets could entertain no hopes that he would eventually be overthrown by a Khalq leader more amenable to Moscow's control. It appeared that only the rebels or the Soviets themselves could loosen his grip on power. The failure of a full-scale government offensive in November made it clear that unless Moscow acted fast, the rebels would sweep Amin and his regime from power during their traditional spring offensive.

Since Amin was aware of the precarious position of his regime vis-a-vis the rebels, he naturally desired Soviet military assistance, and this fitted into Soviet plans because a military buildup would admirably camouflage the Soviet putsch. Winter snow would impede the pace of the Soviet buildup and subsequent deployments, but it would also hamper the mobility of rebel forces and prevent them from opportunistically seizing the initiative when the Soviets turned on their Afghan clients. In any event, the Soviet Army could be expected to perform more than adequately in winter conditions while the rebels fell into their customary mid-winter hibernation.

The November 4 seizure of the U.S. embassy and the drawn-out crisis over the American hostages could be expected to occupy Washington's attention in much the same way that the Suez crisis had distracted it from the 1956 intervention in Hungary and the Vietnam war had muffled its reaction to the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. The questionable performance of the Carter Administration in the September 1979 crisis over Soviet troops in Cuba would hardly make the Soviets think twice about moving into Afghanistan. Based on that experience, the Kremlin may have been tempted to believe that even if the Carter Administration found the invasion of Afghanistan to be anathema, it would learn to live with it after a few weeks and redefine the crisis out of existence.

By late November it was apparent that the SALT agreement was not likely to be accepted without drastic modifications in the U.S. Senate so there was little loss there. In addition, lengthy talks with the Chinese Communists had clearly revealed that the post-Mao leadership was not ready to reach accommodation with Moscow on Soviet terms so the Soviets had no reason to concern themselves with the possibility of antagonizing the Chinese in Afghanistan. Since the pro-Soviet Indira Gandhi was the front-runner in the Indian elections, the Kremlin could expect minimal protest from that quarter. The Western Europeans could be expected

to wring their hands but do little more, as Afghanistan was a distant non-Western state and they had acquired a significant vested interest in the East-West detente.

From the Soviet vantage point, the most damaging potential reaction to the intervention might be expected to originate in the Islamic world. However, the Soviets could try to blunt the rage of the Islamic world by trying to build a hybrid Islamic-Socialist state. Moreover, anti-Soviet reaction in the staunchest Moslem countries would be partially offset by residual anti-American sentiment engendered by the Camp David Accords and the Iran crisis. The Soviets may have expected that the U.S. would eventually be drawn into a military confrontation with the Khomeini regime thereby limiting the negative fallout of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Indeed this may yet happen.

In any event, the Soviets appear to have calculated and to have accepted in advance the substantial losses of diplomatic capital involved in the invasion. Once again, they have sacrificed short-term marginal influence in a number of countries in order to extract long-term total control of another country.

THE SOVIET STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN

The Soviet intervention was aimed at stabilizing the political situation in Afghanistan by preventing the insurgents from decisively defeating the pro-Soviet regime and giving them incentive to terminate their twenty-month guerrilla war, possibly by reaching some kind of political accommodation with the newly installed Karmal regime. Such an accommodation would have been impossible with the bloody Amin regime given the highly developed Afghan sense of vengeance. But the Karmal regime, although it suffers from its close relationship with the hated Russians, is starting with a relatively clean slate. Karmal himself has pointedly made an attempt to mollify the Islamic opposition movement through a public relations campaign which stresses the regime's adherence to Islamic precepts.

While Karmal is almost certainly just paying lip service to Islam in order to cultivate an image of moderation, there is a real possibility that his attempt to siphon off some of the support for the rebellion may meet limited success. The Afghans have been fighting a savage civil war for almost two years and may become demoralized by the massive infusion of Soviet strength. A small core of the insurgent movement is fighting for national liberation, but most rebels are fighting for tribal rights, loot, weapons and against the centralized control of Kabul. Since the insurgency is organized along tribal lines, it can be dismantled by a selective policy of making separate peaces with amenable tribes, and exploiting tribal rivalries. There have been reports that the Soviets have been buying the loyalty of several tribes

in the Khyber Pass area and have turned them against the rebels.¹⁶ If Karmal can entice some groups into a national front-type government, and the Soviets can buy off some of the less committed insurgents, the sense of isolation and impotence of the remaining guerrillas may eventually enervate the strength of Afghan resistance over the long haul, especially if no aid from external sources is forthcoming.

In the military sphere, the Russians can be expected to move ruthlessly against rebel strongholds, making full use of their airpower, heavy artillery and helicopter transports. Widespread use of napalm and phosphorous incendiary power can be expected to be used to neutralize rebel hilltop redoubts, and chemical or biological weaponry cannot be ruled out. While the Moslem tribesmen are fierce warriors, the Soviets are likely to use their air mobility to keep them off balance and their firepower to keep them at bay. Due to the absence of an effective rebel anti-aircraft capability, Soviet airpower will be unopposed in providing tactical fire support, reconnaissance, and constraining rebel movement during daylight hours, and the rebels may find it necessary to wage a primarily nocturnal war in order to avoid Soviet retaliation from the air.

On the other hand, the Soviets will probably face serious logistical difficulties in keeping their forward units supplied with the immense quantities of materiel necessary to support a modern army in the field. Afghanistan has no railroads and its roads are often no more than dirt paths. The rugged terrain will tend to confine vehicles to the roads where they will be subject to frequent ambushes.

The Soviets are also likely to be hampered by a lack of experience in guerrilla warfare. Their organization and doctrines have been tailored to the needs of a conventional war. Their command and control system is likely to prove to be awkward and inflexible. In order to engage and defeat their elusive foe, they will need to make quick decisions at the battalion and company level. However, the Soviet military, like their civilian counterparts, have never encouraged individual initiative at the lower levels of the command chain, preferring to rely on centralized control at higher command levels. This could markedly reduce their effectiveness in a guerrilla conflict.

Because the Soviets have had little experience in fighting guerrillas, they may refer to their own studies of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. These are known to be critical of the "slowness of the American buildup and the limited scope of many offensive operations."¹⁷ If they take these criticisms to heart,

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16. Drew Middleton, "Soviet Display of Flexibility," New York Times, December 28, 1979, p. A 13.
17. Drew Middleton, "Options and Problems for Russian Forces in Afghanistan," New York Times, December 29, 1979, p. 7.

they can be expected to build up their forces swiftly to exert relentless pressure on the insurgents to keep them from regrouping and seizing the initiative. Also, there is a real danger that the Soviets may be tempted to strike at rebel sanctuaries in Pakistan, an action which could provoke direct U.S. involvement under the 1959 defense agreement signed with Pakistan.

However, the conflict in Afghanistan will not resemble the Vietnam conflict for many reasons. While the United States was fighting a war thousands of miles across the Pacific in a country with a totally different set of cultural traditions, the Soviets are engaged in a war in their own backyard in a country which is inhabited by ethnic groups with close ties to its own Moslem population in Central Asia. While the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies shared a strong central leadership and a common sense of purpose, the Afghan resistance movement is composed of an ad hoc coalition of 62 separate groups fighting for divergent political, religious, tribal and nationalist goals. Those that profess to see a close parallel between the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan and U.S. involvement in Vietnam would do well to remember that the North Vietnamese were able to withstand U.S. military pressures for as long as they did because there were deluged with military aid from both Moscow and Peking. The Afghan rebels enjoy no such luxury. They are fighting the Soviets on their own without any significant external support. Without such support, they have little chance of driving out the Soviets through military means. Perhaps the closest similarity between the two conflicts is likely to be the duration of the struggle. Given the strength of anti-Communist feeling in Afghanistan and the scope of the Soviet military commitment, the war in Afghanistan promises to be a long drawn-out ordeal.

CONCLUSION

Afghanistan is a remote Texas-sized country which is perhaps the most difficult nation in the world to govern, given the complex mosaic of staunchly independent ethnic groups which inhabit its isolated valleys. When the urban-based pro-Soviet Khalq Party led by Nur Mohammad Taraki came to power through a coup in April 1978, it attempted to accomplish too much too fast and thereby precipitated a fundamentalist Islamic backlash in rural areas which spontaneously spread to engulf the entire country. The Taraki regime undermined its own narrow base of power through intermittent purges to such an extent that it was forced to depend on imported Soviet advisors to administer the country, a dependence which only served to exacerbate the virulent xenophobia of Moslem tribesmen.

On September 14, 1979, Prime Minister Hafizollah Amin overthrew President Taraki in a bloody coup which blocked Soviet efforts to broaden the base of the communist government and take the steam out of the rebellion. It soon became apparent that the Amin regime was doomed without a massive influx of Soviet military

aid. On December 27, the Soviets overthrew President Amin under cover of their military buildup and replaced him with Babruk Karmal, a more pliable pro-Soviet communist. The Soviet intervention was a well-prepared, efficiently executed operation designed to transform Afghanistan into a garrison-type state similar to Mongolia in order to achieve both defensive and offensive aims.

Afghanistan is a stepping stone for the Soviet strategic penetration of the South Asian/Persian Gulf area as well as a stepping stone for Islamic religious penetration of Soviet Central Asia. Soviet aircraft based in Afghanistan constitute a threat to the strategic Straits of Hormuz as well as U.S. naval units in the Arabian Sea. Because Afghanistan is a potential staging area for subversive and separatist activities in Pakistan and Iran, a pro-Soviet Afghanistan enhances Soviet leverage over both states and increases the risks that one or both will be dismembered in the future, possibly paving the way for a pro-Soviet Baluchistan. Moscow could not afford to permit a communist government to be overthrown in Kabul because such a defeat would undermine the credibility of its commitments elsewhere and acknowledge the incompatibility of Marxism and Islam, a dangerous acknowledgement given the rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East.

While Afghan rebels have exhibited a fierce determination to resist the Soviet onslaught, it is unclear how long they can hold out against modern Soviet weaponry. Comparisons with Vietnam are misleading because the Afghans do not have the unity, experience, leadership, weapons, or external sources of supply which the North Vietnamese enjoyed. In order to have a fighting chance of driving the Soviets out of their country, they must acquire modern anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons. This would greatly complicate the Soviet effort to suppress the insurgency and would raise the military costs of eliminating the rebels to the point where the Soviets might eventually be tempted to settle for a political solution, especially if powerful and persistent multilateral diplomatic pressures are brought to bear on their aggressive activities within Afghanistan.

The United States would be a logical choice to provide military assistance to the insurgents and should not rule out doing so under appropriate circumstances. The attitude of the Pakistani government would be crucial to such an endeavor, but it is by no means clear that Islamabad can withstand Soviet pressures to maintain strict neutrality vis-a-vis the conflict in Afghanistan given the perceived unreliability of its American connection in the past, its potentially explosive internal problems and the prospective return of the pro-Soviet Gandhi government in India. Extending support to the Afghan rebels through Iran would go far toward convincing the Iranians that the United States shares many of its concerns and interests in the area, but such a course is impossible as long as American hostages are held in Tehran. Joint Sino-American action holds some promise, but once Badakhshan province is sealed off by the Soviets, such action will be subject to Pakistani approval.

In the final analysis, the Afghan affair represents more of a collision between Soviet and Islamic interests than between Soviet and American interests. The Afghan rebels are neither pro-Western, nor pro-American; they have been defending their tribal interests against the threat of non-Islamic centralized authority, whether that threat emanates from an indigenous communist dictatorship in Kabul or an insecure imperialist regime in Moscow. Even if they win their war of national liberation, they will be forced to seek some sort of accommodation with Moscow, simply because Soviet power looms so large in Central Asia. In this sense, the United States cannot "win" in Afghanistan. It is only a question of how much it loses.

Consolidated Soviet control of Afghanistan threatens American interests insofar as it constitutes a potential strategic threat to the Persian Gulf oil routes and pro-Western states in the area. The United States can contain the damage done to some extent by strongly reaffirming commitments to its friends in the region and by developing its own bases in the Indian Ocean basin to offset the new Soviet forward outpost in Afghanistan. Even if the best-case assumption is made that the Soviets intervened in Afghanistan for exclusively defensive purposes, the United States cannot afford not to react similarly in a defensive manner given the critical importance of Persian Gulf oil to the long-term strength of the Western alliance.

Now that the Soviets have seized Afghanistan, they are extremely unlikely to permit Afghanistan to slip away. If the Islamic powers wish to contest Soviet control, the United States should by all means help pull their chestnuts from the fire, but Washington should do so on its own terms.

In any event, the invasion of Afghanistan has reinforced the lessons of the Soviet bloc buildup in the Horn of Africa and the South of the Arabian peninsula: in the long-run, the Islamic and Western worlds will find it in their mutual interest jointly to oppose the expansion of the Soviet bloc.

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