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Intelligence

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Afghanistan: The War in Perspective

National Intelligence Estimate

*This Special National Intelligence Estimate represents
the views of the Director of Central Intelligence
with the advice and assistance of the
US Intelligence Community.*

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in the preparation of this Estimate:*

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Key Judgments

The Kabul regime is weak, unpopular, and factionalized, but it will probably remain in power over the next 12 months. The war will remain at a near impasse. The regime will continue to resist Mujahedin pressure so long as the Soviet Union remains willing and able to continue its massive military supply program and the regime's internal problems remain manageable:

- The Mujahedin hold the military initiative *to the extent that* they move unhindered by the regime in most of the countryside and they choose when and where to fight. The resistance, however, will be unable to prevent the supply of Soviet materiel to regime forces. The resistance will remain a guerrilla force and will find it difficult to seize major regime garrisons.
- This conflict is best understood as an insurgency. Political/military elements, such as regime fragility, Mujahedin disunity, and local tribal factors will be at least as important to the final outcome as strictly military considerations.
- Despite extensive popular support, the highly factionalized resistance is unlikely to form a political entity capable of uniting the Mujahedin.
- The Afghan Interim Government and most major commanders will refuse to negotiate directly with Kabul, barring the departure of Najibullah and top regime officials, but we cannot rule out the possibility of indirect talks.

Pakistan will continue to support the resistance, whether Benazir Bhutto or her political opposition is in power.

The Soviets will continue to search for a political settlement while providing massive support to Kabul over the next year. Soviet moves could include a dramatic new initiative, especially if Gorbachev saw it as a way to remove the Afghan issue from the US-Soviet agenda before the summit next year.

One way to break the impasse would be to alter the pattern of foreign support:

- A unilateral US cutoff of support to the resistance would alter the military balance in favor of the regime and give it the upper hand in dictating the terms of political arrangements.

[redacted]

- A unilateral Soviet cutoff of support to the regime would be devastating to Kabul's prospects.
- Mutual cuts by the United States and Soviet Union (negative symmetry) would be unpopular with the resistance but ultimately more damaging to the regime.
- Even with aid cuts, conflict would probably continue indefinitely, though at a lower level of intensity. [redacted]

To reduce its vulnerability to determined efforts by the resistance to bring it down, the regime is likely to continue to seek separate deals with local resistance commanders. [redacted]

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Discussion¹

Current Military Situation and Future Developments

No Quick Victory

The striking feature of the Afghan war since the Soviet departure has been the inability of their resistance to achieve a quick military victory. When widespread military defections and prearranged surrenders failed to occur at Jalalabad and elsewhere, the war settled down to a relative impasse. The war is best understood as an insurgency that will likely be protracted and determined on traditional Afghan terms, involving localism, resistance to Kabul, and the presence of warlords. []

Regime Strengths and Weaknesses

The performance of the regime's armed forces, helped by massive Soviet aid, has been considerably better than expected. The regime has the advantage of defending from well-prepared positions protected by extensive minefields and other obstacles and supported by rockets, artillery, and air. The regime's air force has proved to be an effective tactical and psychological weapon. The regime's greatest vulnerability is its near complete dependence on Soviet supply. Other weaknesses include lack of popular support, a limited manpower pool, party factionalism, ethnic tensions in the armed forces, and extended lines of communication. The regime's forces probably could not fend off more than a few serious insurgent attacks at the same time. Certainly, if the regime were forced to defend against several widely dispersed attacks at once, it could not also keep open all lines of communication. The Mujahedin, however, have not managed to apply the sort of concerted pressure that would exploit these weaknesses. []

¹ The March 1988 SNIE 11/37-88, *USSR: Withdrawal From Afghanistan*, incorrectly forecast that the Najibullah government would not long survive the completion of the Soviet withdrawal and that the regime might even fall before the withdrawal was complete. The current Estimate assesses the military and political prospects for the regime over the next year. []

The overall strength of the regime's forces has reportedly declined, though desertions appear to be down since February. The ability of the regime's forces to hold their own has probably improved their morale. But the regime remains very much on the defensive. Bitter political feuds in Kabul, reported coup attempts, rising casualties among officers, and weak tactical leadership are hurting the armed forces. []

Resistance Strengths and Weaknesses

Following a spring of little military activity—aside from the battle of Jalalabad—the Mujahedin became more aggressive. They intermittently shut down the Salang highway and the road to Jalalabad; they forced the Qandahar convoy to take a difficult detour. They have mounted an impressive siege of Khowst, a city near the Pakistani border. Nevertheless, so far the resistance has failed to seize any significant regime installations or to prevent the continuing flow of materiel from the USSR to Kabul and its subsequent redistribution to the outlying garrisons. []

The Mujahedin continue to hold the military initiative to the extent that they move unhindered by the regime in most of the countryside, and they choose when and where to fight. But they do not have the capacity to conduct coordinated assaults against major regime garrisons. They lack the planning, battlefield command and control, logistic support, and supply discipline characteristic of a conventional force. We believe the resistance will continue as a factionalized guerrilla movement. []

Commanders Pursue Their Own Agendas

A successful guerrilla movement requires that a majority of resistance commanders be motivated to step up and sustain nearly concurrent pressure against regime installations and cities in their own areas. Since the Soviet withdrawal, the resistance has not

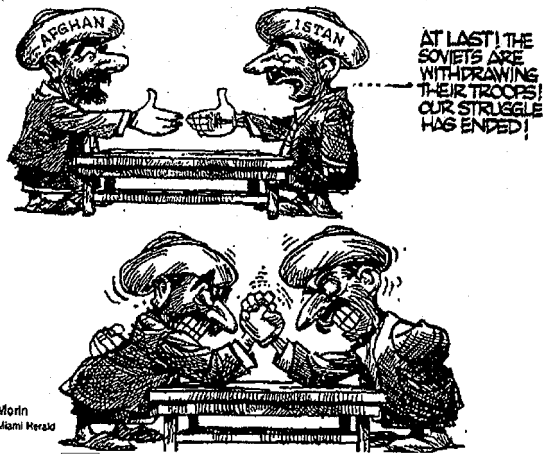


Figure 1.

demonstrated that capability. The absence of a regime threat in the countryside and continued expectations of a regime collapse have led resistance members to focus more on strengthening their individual positions than on bringing down the regime. The Mujahedin are beset by the personal, ideological, tribal, and ethnic divisions that have characterized the movement since its inception. Many commanders perceive themselves to be in competition with the others. Some believe they are not receiving their fair share of military supplies and expect they will be denied any significant political role once the fighting is over. Consequently, the focus of some commanders on strengthening their local positions has reduced the vigor with which they have attacked the regime since the Soviet departure.

In some regions, traditional Afghan political arrangements are reasserting themselves. An increasing number of resistance commanders have been working out accommodations with local regime commanders whereby they mutually administer the territory on a live-and-let-live basis.² Indeed, rather than see a

² CIA analysts agree that accommodations have increased since the Soviet withdrawal. They note, however, that many of the accommodations have occurred in areas where combat has been low—Ghowr, Herat, and Badghis provinces, for example. In the militarily pivotal areas of Afghanistan—Nangarhar and Paktia provinces, the provinces surrounding Kabul, in those along the road to the USSR—such accommodations are not increasing. In addition, we observe that accommodations in all areas have tended to be transitory.

competing resistance faction take power in Kabul, some of these commanders probably prefer that a weak, unpopular People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) regime remain there, at least for the time being.

Because of the military impasse, and the factionalization of the resistance, we now expect the PDPA regime to remain in power over the next 12 months.³ Nevertheless, we do not believe that major commanders will abandon their ultimate objective of removing the Kabul regime.

Absent any major changes in the level of supplies available to either side, we anticipate a continuation of the status quo during the coming winter months. Where not restricted by the winter's snows, the Mujahedin will continue their interdiction and attrition operations. The regime will have some problems keeping supply lines open, possibly creating opportunities the Mujahedin can exploit.

Potential Longer Term Trends

The regime's profound weaknesses, internal cleavages, and narrow appeal continue to make it vulnerable to determined resistance efforts to bring it down. The longer the regime survives, however, the greater the possibility that an Afghan political system with greater domestic and international legitimacy could evolve *without* a dramatic victory by the resistance, a comprehensive settlement, or the capitulation of the regime. Kabul long ago abandoned efforts to establish a Marxist system in Afghanistan and now portrays itself as the champion of Islam and Afghan nationalism. In the context of a prolonged and painful stalemate, we believe that a series of separate deals with powerful insurgent commanders and changes in the regime's makeup could diminish resistance objections

³ The CIA's Deputy Director for Intelligence agrees that the regime's prospects have improved from what they were at the time of the Soviet withdrawal. At the same time, the fundamental political and military threats the regime faces have not changed, with the result that Najibullah will remain vulnerable within the coming year, just as he will remain vulnerable if he survives beyond one year. The fall of the current Afghan regime is less likely to come about as a direct consequence of a Mujahedin military offensive than it is from a combination of military pressure and internal political fissures. We know that such fissures exist, but our information is not so detailed as to predict when they will become critical and how many months this regime will endure

Figure 2
Afghan Interim Government

Party (Leader)	Offices
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Traditionalist Afghanistan National Liberation Front-ANLF (Sibghatullah Mojadedi)	President; Ministry of Health
<input type="checkbox"/> Islamist Ittihad-i-Islami (Abdul Rasul Sayyaf)	Prime Minister; Ministry of Communications
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Traditionalist Harakat-i-Inqilab-i-Islami (Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi)	Ministries of Defense, Agriculture, and Scientific Research
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Traditionalist Hizbi Islami (Gulbuddin Hikmatyar)	Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Justice, and Border and Tribal Affairs
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Traditionalist Hizbi Islami (Mohammad Yunis Khalis)	Ministries of Interior, National Security, and Religious Affairs
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Traditionalist Jamiat-i-Islami (Burhanuddin Rabbani)	Ministries of Reconstruction, Information, and National Resources and Industries
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Traditionalist National Islamic Front of Afghanistan-NIFA (Sayed Ahmad Gailani)	Chief Justice; Ministries of Finance and Education

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to a broader settlement. To achieve such a settlement, however, would require continued pressure on the regime and Najibullah's eventual removal.

fighting. Moreover, widely publicized atrocities by certain resistance units against surrendering regime forces dissuaded other regime troops from surrendering.

Political Prospects

The failure of the resistance to fashion a credible political instrument has deprived the Mujahedin of a potentially powerful asset in the struggle. From the start, the Mujahedin's key advantage was political: nationwide grassroots opposition to the PDPA. But the resistance has been weakened by internecine

On the positive side, the Afghan Interim Government (AIG) has managed to create an administrative infrastructure and has instituted several important educational, health, and agricultural programs. It is on the verge of establishing formal links to two important resistance field commanders.

On balance, though, we judge that the resistance leaders will be unable to provide unified direction during the next year. There is no trend toward greater unity among the Mujahedin; there is no upwelling of political support for the AIG in the Afghan countryside. The preponderance of Islamist and Ghilzai Pashtuns from eastern Afghanistan has led other groups in the resistance—Durrani Pashtuns, Shias, ethnic minorities, some important commanders—to feel they have no stake in the AIG. Furthermore, the Interim Government is tainted by its close association with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, whose intelligence organizations are perceived by many Afghans to manipulate the resistance by channeling most aid to certain favored groups, particularly Gulbuddin Hikmatyar's Hizbi Islami.

A Way Around the Impasse?

Pakistani officials have discussed the possibility and advisability of convening a new resistance assembly (shura), perhaps next February on the anniversary of the shura that created the Interim Government. Many antiregime Afghans opposed to or disillusioned with the Interim Government might see this as an opportunity to create a new, more representative interim government; some of them claim that the Interim Government's mandate will expire in February, in any case.

At present, Interim Government leaders and most major commanders refuse to negotiate with the PDPA. For them, the departure of Najibullah and top regime officials is a prerequisite for considering negotiations, although some major commanders may find even this insufficient. We cannot exclude the possibility that indirect talks might take place over the next year to try to negotiate Najibullah's removal. Should Soviet-Mujahedin talks take place, they could be a step in this process.

Role for the King?

The possible return in some capacity of the exiled king, Zahir Shah, would be highly divisive. Although there is support for the king's return in many Afghan circles, there would also be strong opposition on both personal and ideological grounds.

The Afghan War and Pakistan

Pakistan has little choice but to support the Afghan resistance until the conflict is resolved. Prime Minister Bhutto and her senior military and foreign ministry advisers are currently pursuing a two-track Afghan policy: they will continue full military support to the resistance while pressing the Interim Government to broaden its political base, become more effective, and reopen talks with the Soviets. The Pakistanis will also consider taking advantage of international forums such as the United Nations or the Organization of Islamic Conference to pursue a political settlement. We see no prospect of any fundamental change in Pakistan's policy during the next year; that policy has wide support among Pakistani politicians in both government and in the opposition.

Pakistan does not want a protracted Afghan war that would prevent the more than 3 million refugees from returning to Afghanistan. Although the Pakistanis, until now, have supported the resistance without serious complaint, this attitude could change if the refugees are seen as contributing to Pakistan's social and economic problems. The refugees aggravate tensions in an already fragile society, but we do not see this as threatening Pakistan's overall stability in the next year.

While supporting the resistance, the government of Prime Minister Bhutto has attempted to draw back from some aspects of the policy defined by the late President Zia. In part because of charges that Pakistan's pro-Islamist policy favored such leaders as Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, to the detriment of others, Bhutto relieved Zia's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISID) chief earlier this year. She has provided assurances that Pakistan will follow a more evenhanded policy, but to date Afghan perceptions of Service favoritism have not been altered.

A cutoff or severe reduction in US support for the resistance would make it more difficult for Bhutto to continue aiding the Mujahedin. It would cause her to expedite the search for a political solution and to look for aid from other sources.

Soviet Attitudes and Policies

Soviet policy will focus on achieving a political settlement in Afghanistan over the period of this Estimate. The military and economic support the Soviet Union has been providing to the Kabul regime is estimated at some \$4 billion this year, but Moscow probably feels it is getting its money's worth as long as Najibullah holds sway in Kabul.⁴ Thus we expect the Soviets to continue to provide the PDPA with *high levels of support* for at least the next year. Despite Moscow's desire for a political settlement, it probably will not agree to the removal of Najibullah as a prerequisite to negotiations. They probably would, however, acquiesce to his departure, along with that of the rest of the top PDPA leadership, as part of a final settlement.

Hoping to Outlast the US

Moscow will continue to reject symmetry in arms supplies except in conjunction with a cease-fire. Many Soviet officials regretted in private Moscow's rejection of bilaterally symmetrical cuts in arms supplies in the period preceding the final Soviet withdrawal. Now, however, they probably believe that the military situation is evolving in Kabul's favor. Moscow probably has been encouraged by recent debates in the US media over Washington's policy in Afghanistan.

What Would Lead Moscow To Change Its Policies?

Given the unlikelihood of any major change by the resistance during the next 12 months, the impetus for any change would most likely come from events in Kabul. We know the PDPA is factionalized and unstable; we do not know how likely it is to come unglued.

Gorbachev might also want to remove the Afghan issue from the US-Soviet agenda before the summit next year. Developments at home and in Eastern Europe are probably already dwarfing Afghanistan in

⁴This figure represents an estimate of the cost of assistance to Afghanistan. The burden of this assistance on the Soviet economy presumably would be less; much of the equipment may come from a drawdown of already existing stockpiles, or may be produced on the margins of a regular production run. It is also less than half of the approximately \$11 billion required for Soviet military operations and total aid in 1987—the latest year for which detailed estimates are available.

their importance to the Soviet regime. Recognizing Gorbachev's penchant for diplomatic initiatives, Soviet internal dynamics might generate policy changes in Afghanistan. Buoyed by Kabul's continued survival and what the Soviets perceive as a stalemate on the battlefield, the Soviets may once again propose discussions with the United States on some form of negative symmetry in conjunction with a cease-fire. This would be done as part of a broader effort to reach a political settlement in Afghanistan. Toward this end, Gorbachev could also take unilateral actions—such as halting deliveries of certain weapons systems or proposing talks with the resistance with no preconditions—which would not threaten the PDPA's survival.

Saudi and Iranian Afghan Policies

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran want to guarantee their own future influence in Afghanistan while limiting that of the other country. They will continue to aid their clients regardless of what other countries do. Both want to strengthen their clients for future negotiations. Iran's current role is not central to the struggle.



The Iranians, seeking a significantly greater role for themselves and the Afghan Shias than they have had in the past, want an Afghanistan free of US and Saudi influence. Iran's policies have been consistent with its efforts to improve relations with the Soviet

Union. Tehran has helped Moscow to promote Kabul's plan for a political settlement and has encouraged efforts to promote talks between the Kabul regime and the Afghan Interim Government. Iran would not object to a settlement involving the formation of a coalition government in which the PDPA would participate; it has not ruled out the possibility that Najibullah might retain some role in such a government. [redacted]

Impact of Cuts in Military Assistance

Unilateral Cuts

The Mujahedin remain dependent on a sustained high level of US aid, even though some alternative sources of support are available. A unilateral cutoff of US aid, or even a significant reduction of it, would reduce the military capabilities of the resistance and damage its morale. The military balance would be substantially altered in favor of the regime, which would have the upper hand in setting the terms of local live-and-let-live arrangements. The influence of third-party supporters—such as Saudi Arabia and Iran—would probably increase. [redacted]

A unilateral cut in Soviet aid to the Kabul regime would be more damaging than a US aid cut would be to the resistance. If Soviet aid to Kabul ceased while US aid to the resistance continued, we doubt the regime would last long in power. [redacted]

Negative Symmetry

Absent a cease-fire, coordinated bilateral or multilateral cuts in aid to both sides would hurt the Kabul regime more than the resistance because of the regime's

near total reliance on Moscow for support of its sophisticated weapons systems. Both sides would probably manage to obtain some supplies through their own channels. [redacted]

While negative symmetry would lower the overall intensity of hostilities, the use of arms to determine the outcome of power struggles would continue indefinitely. [redacted]

Mujahedin morale would plummet initially, but, if it became apparent that the cuts were hurting the regime even more, some resistance commanders—particularly those who believe they are currently not receiving their fair share of US weapons—would ultimately see negative symmetry as a net personal advantage. The concept would nevertheless be hard to sell to most commanders, who would regard any cut in US aid as a sellout, regardless of whether it was accompanied by a cut in Soviet aid to the other side. US leverage over the resistance, already limited, would be much reduced. Groups with alternative sources of supply—primarily the Islamists—could benefit most. [redacted]

⁴ We are confident of our ability to monitor overall Soviet compliance with an agreement on negative symmetry. We can monitor general trends in deliveries from the Soviet Union and can detect on a timely basis the delivery of large numbers of big items such as aircraft, tanks, and trucks. [redacted]



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