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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

11 July 1986

Afghanistan: Are Soviet Intentions Shifting?

Summary

Recent developments in the Afghan situation suggest to us that Moscow may be reassessing its policy, perhaps including the issue of the minimum outcome that Moscow might tolerate:

- The Soviets have increased their use of special forces and tactics for ambushing insurgent units and have adopted more effective security measures, while simultaneously pressing DRA forces to assume a greater part of combat operations.
- The highly partisan former head of the DRA intelligence service--Najibullah--replaced Babrak Karmal in a move accompanied by an open display of Soviet military backing in the face of apparent opposition within the Afghan Party.
- Moscow has stepped up both military and political pressure on Pakistan, at the same time disseminating propaganda

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] of the Third World Activities Division, Office of Soviet Analysis, with contributions by [redacted]. Comments and queries can be directed to the Chief, Third World Activities Division [redacted]

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emphasizing the Soviet desire for peace and the US role in prolonging the conflict.

- Moscow and Kabul took a hard line at the latest Geneva round, but reportedly have drafted an 18-month withdrawal timetable that may be introduced at a future session.

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[redacted] international and domestic strains resulting from the Afghan war have disposed Moscow to make concessions in order to withdraw Soviet troops, [redacted] the Soviets are determined to continue the war until a viable Communist government can be guaranteed. We believe Moscow almost certainly continues to seek a survivable, subservient Communist government through a war of attrition, even though recent events suggest that the Soviet leadership now attaches increased importance to containing or reducing the military and political costs of involvement. [redacted]

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[redacted] If some of our assumptions are wrong, particularly about the leadership's perceptions of the conflict, considerably different strategies may be under consideration in Moscow--though the bulk of our evidence suggests this is unlikely.

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- It is possible, for example, that we have substantially underestimated Soviet pessimism about the war and the costs that involvement in Afghanistan has imposed on the USSR. If so, Moscow may seek a negotiated formula for the reduction or withdrawal of Soviet troops, calculating either that a viable Communist regime would still be left in place, or that a non-hostile multiparty government could be guaranteed that would adequately meet the basic requirements of Soviet security. Soviet tactics at Geneva, however, have shown no urgency and do not suggest that the strain caused by the war has disposed Moscow to accept the risks that this policy would entail.

- If the Soviets take a far more optimistic view of military trends than we believe is justified, they may now judge that they can achieve a military breakthrough within the next few years by ending or significantly reducing Pakistani support for the resistance while Soviet and DRA military performance improves. [redacted]

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[redacted] the Soviets are unlikely to take so sanguine a view of either the military situation or the prospects for DRA forces becoming a significantly more prominent actor in the near future. [redacted]

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The leadership under Gorbachev is clearly dissatisfied with the status quo and has tried various tactics for improving the

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Soviet position, but a final decision on whether and how to alter Afghan policy probably has not yet been reached. Moscow appears to be probing for potential advantages in several directions, hoping to be well placed to pursue whichever opportunities might be created as a result of their maneuvering. [Redacted]

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Once Moscow's plans for Afghanistan have crystallized, we would expect to see evidence clarifying Soviet strategy. Certain developments would be compatible with more than one policy, but the most important indicators are likely to come from the Geneva negotiations--whether the Soviets have Kabul give ground or continue to raise roadblocks; the nature and effectiveness of Najibullah's efforts to consolidate his regime; and how Soviet and DRA forces fare in the summer campaign. If the Soviets are successful either in reducing political and military costs or achieving a military breakthrough, the resolve of both the resistance and Islamabad will be severely tested. [Redacted]

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The Evidence: Soviet Behavior in 1985-86

Military Trends

1. Overall, Soviet forces in Afghanistan increased somewhat during 1985 (from 114,000 to 120,000), but the number of special purpose forces (Spetsnaz) battalions doubled to eight (4500 men) between March 1985 and January 1986. A new motorized rifle regiment was deployed to reinforce Soviet/Afghan forces in western Afghanistan, while the Spetsnaz units were positioned to conduct operations near the major Soviet/DRA lines of communication. Early in 1986 additional assault helicopters were deployed, in part to support the larger Spetsnaz force.

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3. Both Soviet and DRA operations have concentrated on the eastern border region, attacking insurgent supply routes and base camps and trying to forestall resistance assaults on DRA garrisons. There have been no campaigns comparable to the Panjsher and Konar operations of previous years, and the results thus far have been mixed. For example, a large Soviet offensive to clear part of northern Paktia Province in late May was inconclusive, and neither Soviet nor regime forces have been able to stabilize the Afghan border posts in Nangarhar Province to the east of Kabul. The Soviets have not conducted any ground forces campaigns against Masood's strongholds in the Panjsher Valley this year--in part because of the low level of insurgent activity--but apparently are moving to counter Masood's efforts to organize resistance groups in Baghlan and Qonduz provinces.

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5. The Soviets have had some success in using Spetsnaz forces, especially for night ambushes. [Redacted] the mujahideen have been forced to adopt expensive countermeasures--using alternate supply routes and moving base camps--in some areas of the country. Whether the Soviets can extend these tactics sufficiently to have a long term impact on the level of supplies reaching major insurgent groups, or whether the resistance will learn to counter Soviet small unit tactics remain open questions. Even with the introduction of additional battalions last year, there still appear to be too few Spetsnaz units to influence the war decisively. [Redacted]

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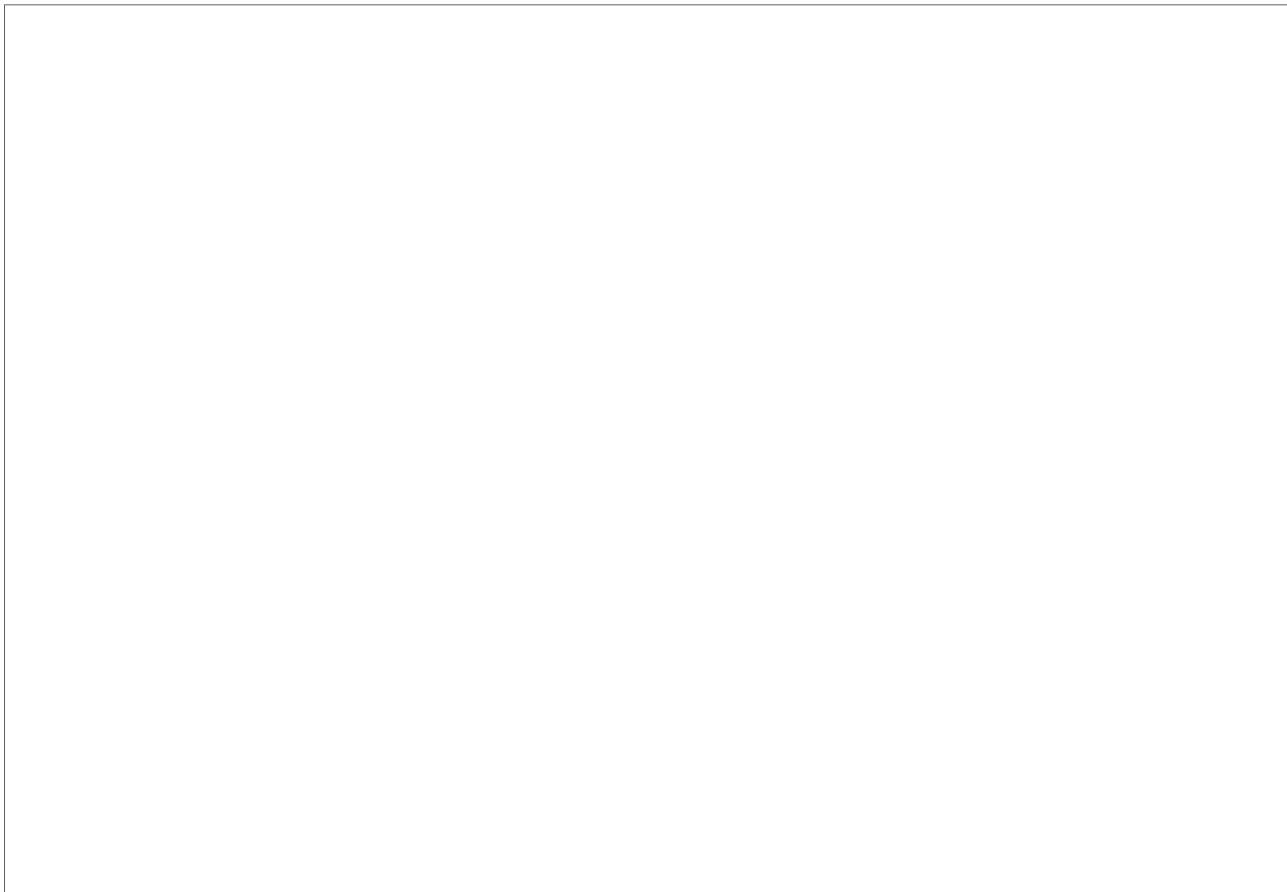
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Political Developments in Afghanistan

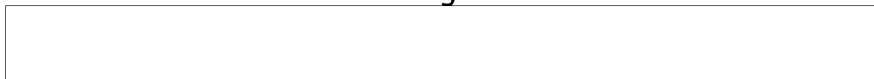
9. Babrak Karmal was replaced as General Secretary by former Khad chief Najibullah just before the start of the Geneva talks on May 5. Najibullah has close ties to Moscow and a track record of vigor, efficiency, and ruthlessness, while Babrak was apparently in the Soviets' bad graces for his inability--or unwillingness--to implement policies designed to shift the burden of the war to the Afghans. Babrak may also have resisted Moscow's decision to resume proximity talks and its professed readiness to discuss withdrawal. 

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10. The appointment of the former Khad chief strongly suggests that in making the changes Moscow was more interested in effective management than in "reconciliation" or broadening the appeal of DRA to Afghans marginally dissatisfied with the communist regime. Najibullah, moreover, has been a highly partisan, factional figure even within the context of the PDPA, and his replacement of Babrak has apparently met with substantial opposition within the party. Furthermore, though the Soviets encouraged interpretation of the move as an accommodation to



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Islamabad's aversion to dealing with Babrak, the selection could not seriously have been expected to appeal to Pakistan, which sees Najib as at least as unacceptable as his predecessor.

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11. In his first weeks as party leader, Najibullah has focused on the need to improve DRA military performance and party unity and to root out official corruption. He has made a concerted effort to increase the Afghan army by ending student deferrals--reportedly including those for Afghans studying in the USSR--and limiting other draft exemptions. He has also made overtures to tribal leaders and may be expected to continue his earlier efforts as Khad chief to reconcile them with Kabul while encouraging them to subvert Pakistan's border provinces.

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12. Moscow probably would have preferred to avoid the display of military power that accompanied the change of leaders in Kabul and the appearance of instability that it conveyed on the eve of Geneva, but its hand may have been forced by the need for a more capable leader to force unpopular policies on a recalcitrant government and military establishment [Redacted]

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[Redacted]. There was considerable effort to portray the change as an orderly, routine transition--notably by retaining Babrak as president of the Revolutionary Council--but pro-Babrak, anti-Soviet demonstrations in Kabul were reported both during and after the change. In Qandahar in May, more than 600 of Babrak's supporters were arrested [Redacted]

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[Redacted]. Further changes designed to remove Najibullah's rivals from the party and the government are constantly rumored.

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13. Moscow continues to have Kabul publicize regime-"broadening" measures, designed to establish the "national," "democratic," and "Islamic," credentials of the government. Among these have been the holding of a traditional tribal council (jirgah) last fall, the appointment of non-party members to cabinet and sub-cabinet positions in December and to the Revolutionary Council in January, recent promises to hold parliamentary elections, and renewed efforts to woo the Afghan clergy. At the same time, "Sovietization" and cadre-building programs continue, including media indoctrination, education in the USSR of Afghan children and military and party personnel, and reshaping of the educational system in the urban areas controlled by the regime. [Redacted]

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Soviet-Afghan Pressure on Pakistan

14. The Soviets follow Pakistan's domestic scene closely and have been employing a variety of tactics to exploit the more fluid political situation since the end of martial law. Some Soviet officials reportedly have made pointed references to the country's instability in conversations with Pakistani officials. During the last six months, Afghan air violations of the Pakistani border have more than doubled, the Soviets have orchestrated Kabul's destabilization campaign along the border (which includes sabotage directed at both resistance and Pakistani targets and the subversion of tribal dissidents). In addition, Moscow has been in open contact with some opposition leaders--not only People's Party leader Benazir Bhutto, who visited Moscow in April, but well-known separatist leaders, whom Islamabad may regard as an even greater threat.

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The Geneva Talks

15. In March the seventh round of proximity talks was scheduled after Moscow had Kabul submit a draft of the fourth instrument--including a four-year withdrawal timetable--to UN negotiator Cordovez and drop its demand for direct talks with Islamabad on the withdrawal issue. During the three weeks of negotiations, which were recessed on 23 May, other provisions of a settlement were agreed upon, but four key issues remained: the composition and scope of a monitoring authority, unconditionality of implementation, who should officially consult with the refugees, and most importantly, the length of the withdrawal timetable.

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Conflicting Soviet Statements About Settling the War

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17. [Redacted] before the Geneva talks in May that Moscow was ready to be flexible on several issues vital to an agreement--including simultaneous implementation of withdrawal with other settlement provisions, recognition that Pakistan's pledge of non-interference cannot reasonably be expected to end all resistance activity, acknowledgement that Iran will not be bound by a DRA-Pakistan settlement, and the nature of the post-settlement regime. The Soviet ambassador in Kabul even listed for the US charge early this year those resistance leaders who were and those who were not acceptable candidates for inclusion in a coalition government. [Redacted]

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19. Despite Soviet public statements that Moscow desires a settlement--particularly Gorbachev's February Party Congress references to Afghanistan as a "bleeding wound" and to withdrawal in the "nearest future"--official Soviet pronouncements have continued to take a hard line on conditions for a settlement. Soviet media treatment has contained occasional items indicating dissatisfaction with the performance of the Kabul regime, but has

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largely focused on indissoluble fraternal ties, the heroic deeds of Soviet soldiers in the course of performing their internationalist duty, and the unbounded gratitude of the Afghan people. [Redacted]

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What Are the Soviets Up To?

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[Redacted] in our view, [Redacted]

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Moscow continues to seek--through a war of attrition--a survivable regime subservient to the USSR. Our judgment on precisely what the Soviet strategy is, however, depends highly on our reading of Moscow's evaluation of the domestic and international costs of the conflict, Soviet assessments of their own progress on the military front, and DRA prospects for effectively assuming an increasing share of the fighting. Substantial uncertainties surround each of these important elements of the picture, and different Soviet perceptions than those we assign to the Kremlin could lead to quite different strategies. [Redacted]

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Reducing Costs While Still Pursuing an Attrition Strategy

22. If the Soviets are reviewing their options with respect to Afghanistan, it seems to us most likely that they are exploring a variety of tactical expedients for reducing their military and political exposure. This would be particularly likely if we have somewhat underestimated the international and domestic costs that high-profile involvement in Afghanistan has imposed on the Soviets. While continuing to seek a survivable Communist regime in Kabul and remaining convinced that a war of attrition will ultimately secure it, Moscow may be less willing than we have assumed to maintain its present course of gradually increased military activity. If so, in the future Moscow might:

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- Continue to press the DRA to assume more of the military burden, using prolonged negotiations only as a means to temper international condemnation and to wear down the resolve of the other side while the new regime has an opportunity to consolidate its position. A Soviet decision to withdraw would be determined by DRA performance, not by agreement with Islamabad.
- Intensify even further its carrot-and-stick campaign to end Islamabad's support for the resistance, judging that Pakistan's domestic politics makes it increasingly vulnerable to such pressures. The Soviets almost certainly calculate that with the collapse of the greater part of the resistance's outside support, a war of attrition might be maintained--or even shortened--at less military and political cost to Moscow.
- Even go so far as to conclude an agreement at Geneva that it has no intention of keeping. The Soviets would calculate that a plausible pretext for renegeing--such as continued resistance activity--would be readily available, that international opprobrium would be no worse than before, and, most importantly, that Islamabad would not renew support for the resistance at former levels. [Redacted]

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23. Such a strategy would offer the Soviets the prospect of reducing the discomforts caused by the war in Afghanistan--perhaps even making possible some reduction of Soviet forces in the fairly near term--while sacrificing nothing in the way of Soviet control of Afghanistan. A potential disadvantage would be that in the course of its complex playing out of the negotiations, Moscow might unintentionally precipitate the collapse of the Afghan regime, some of whose leaders reportedly have displayed anxiety over talk of Soviet withdrawal. A further disadvantage would be that realistically Moscow must regard pressing the recalcitrant DRA army and government to develop competence and reliability as a problematic and very long-term project. [Redacted]

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24. This interpretation probably best reconciles the range of evidence that we have seen in recent months. It takes into account signals indicating Soviet concern about the war but concludes that while these strains have caused Moscow to probe for ways to reduce costs, they have not yet altered Moscow's ultimate objectives. This assessment is consistent with Soviet military and political activities in Afghanistan, Soviet behavior in the negotiations up to now, and the Soviets' multifaceted treatment of Pakistan. [Redacted]

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Less Likely Interpretations: The Withdrawal of Soviet Forces...

25. Despite the occasional line from Soviet officials that Moscow no longer cares what form of government prevails in Afghanistan, as long as it is non-hostile and neutral, we believe there is no prospect that the USSR would simply withdraw its forces from Afghanistan and leave the PDPA to its own devices. The mass of evidence continues to show the Soviets consider their interests in Afghanistan compelling and do not yet see the costs of involvement as sufficiently high to warrant the damage to Moscow's prestige that would accompany such a move. [redacted]

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26. Nonetheless, if Soviet dissatisfaction with the consequences of involvement in Afghanistan is considerably greater or Soviet views of the USSR's long term prospects in the war far more pessimistic than we believe, Moscow may be reassessing not only its tactics, but the minimum conditions that it might be able to tolerate in Afghanistan. Two scenarios mark the range of conceivable possibilities:

- The Soviets could attempt to negotiate withdrawal and some form of coalition in Kabul, setting terms that they believed would guarantee the persistence of a non-hostile government with communist participation adequate for Soviet security and prestige--probably communist control of all important ministries with some participation of certain resistance leaders.
- Moscow could still aim at a viable Soviet satellite but be willing nonetheless to negotiate withdrawal, hoping that by the end of the withdrawal period, the regime under Najibullah would be able to stand on its own or with KGB and Soviet military "advisory" support. Should the regime seem in danger of collapse during this period or at its end, Moscow could find an excuse to renege and try to recoup the Kabul government's position by reintroducing Soviet forces. [redacted]

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27. Both of these options would obviously run the risk, however, that the post-settlement regime might be unable to survive Soviet troop withdrawal, even--in the case of a repudiated agreement--should Soviet forces be reintroduced. The reintroduction of troops, moreover, could be difficult and dangerous, and encounter much harsher conditions than the original invasion, and the position of the remaining Afghan and Soviet forces might have dangerously deteriorated in the meantime. [redacted]

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28. Recent Soviet efforts to improve their own military performance, the attempt to get DRA forces to assume more of the

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burden, and the installation of Najibullah would be consistent with a plan to prepare the ground for withdrawal, hoping to leave the Afghan regime in as strong a position as possible--either to stand on its own or to win a dominant role in a coalition--after a settlement. Soviet behavior at Geneva, however, has shown no urgency and does not suggest that the stress caused by Afghanistan has become severe enough to force significant risk-taking. Nor have the Soviets yet shown a serious desire to discuss a "government of reconciliation," despite Pakistani probes. [redacted]

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...and Military Breakthrough

29. Another possibility is that Moscow takes a far more sanguine view of the military situation than our evidence suggests. If so, the Soviets could believe that they are poised for a military breakthrough that could--within the space of a few years enable them to win the war or at least to ease insurgent pressure so radically that they could reduce their commitment of troops to Afghanistan. A necessary element of such a strategy would be a sharp reduction or halt in Pakistani support to the insurgency, but the Soviets may calculate that:

- Their military performance is improving, and continued efforts to interdict mujaheddin supplies, expanded use of Spetsnaz, and other small, mobile units, improved firepower, air support, and better use of intelligence may combine to demoralize the resistance.
- Their position can be even further strengthened by improved DRA performance.
- Some of the resistance--or at least internal elements supportive of the mujahideen--can be coopted, and that Khad can exploit traditional ethnic and tribal rivalries to further isolate the resistance.
- A sharp intensification of Soviet intimidation and subversion against Pakistan could strengthen domestic opposition elements and convince Islamabad to limit support to the mujahideen, and--combined with domestic problems--could even lead to a leadership more willing to negotiate than the present government. [redacted]

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30. Under this scenario, as in the attrition scenario described above, Moscow could have Kabul conclude an agreement with no intention that it would be carried out, expecting that Islamabad would be unable or unwilling to resume support to the

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insurgents once the agreement was abrogated. Negotiations would probably be pursued only for their propaganda value and the opportunity to disrupt the opposition. [Redacted]

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31. If outside aid were reduced, the Soviets might be prepared to increase their military effort for a short period in the expectation that the temporarily higher costs would provide a secure, communist Afghanistan at relatively small cost afterwards. It is also possible that the Soviets are convinced that their own tactical refinements, coupled with improved DRA performance, will allow them to win the war within a reasonable period even if outside support to the insurgents continues at present levels. [Redacted]

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32. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] This material not only reflects no clear trend towards defeat of the insurgency but continues to include Soviet assessments that stress the war's long-term, "generational" character. Moreover, the Soviet statements indicating concern over continuing involvement in Afghanistan and increased interest in a political solution would, under this assumption, have to be interpreted exclusively as an elaborately orchestrated disinformation effort. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] the Soviets intend their signs of flexibility since the November summit to buy time and to deceive the other side. But while Soviet professions of readiness to negotiate might--taken alone--represent sheer deception, the acknowledgements of serious strain that sometimes accompany them would be of questionable utility in such a strategy. Moscow would probably realize that these signals--though possibly confusing the other side--might undermine DRA resolve while the resistance and its supporters would be encouraged to persist in their course by signs that it was sapping Moscow's determination. [Redacted]

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Indicators of Soviet Strategy

33. For the moment, Moscow appears to be pursuing a multitrack policy. Its current maneuvers seem to be aimed primarily at Pakistan in the hope that this will eventually lead to an arrangement whereby support for the resistance would cease, permitting the Soviets at least to reduce their military visibility, and the Communist regime--perhaps with further cosmetic changes--would remain in place. Meanwhile, Moscow is positioning itself to adopt alternative strategies. With the Geneva talks recessed until 30 July, the Soviet leadership will have more time to judge which way to press on the basis of the

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summer military campaign and the success of the changes in the DRA government. In addition, the recent change of leadership in Kabul may have touched off more internal resistance than expected, and Moscow may need additional time for Najibullah to consolidate his position. [redacted]

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34. Once Moscow's plans for Afghanistan have crystallized, we would expect to see evidence that would clarify Soviet strategy. The key indicators are the Geneva talks, developments in Najibullah's regime, Soviet treatment of Pakistan, military developments, and expressions of Soviet opinions about Afghanistan. Some indicators could be relatively clear signs of Soviet intentions, but others are likely to be ambiguous or contradictory. Certain events, of course--such as a radical change in the military situation, or erosion of Pakistan's stability or steadfastness--could alter whatever strategies the Soviets may have begun to consider. [redacted]

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#### Progress through Attrition with Reduced Costs

35. If Moscow adheres to its original objectives but intensifies its efforts to reduce the political and military costs, future evidence might resemble what we have seen in recent months. For example, Kabul would remain in the Geneva talks and could continue to show flexibility on nonessential points, as the Soviets seek to deflect international disapproval to the other side, stimulate divisions within the resistance and with its supporters, and buy time for Najibullah to consolidate his regime. At the same time, we should see delaying tactics, including a refusal to propose a reasonable timeframe for Soviet withdrawal or the elevation of the Iran issue. [redacted]

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36. Regardless of Soviet intentions, we would expect to see roughly the same kind of military developments over the next several months. For example, the Soviets will continue to push the Afghan regime to improve its military performance and its ability to govern regardless of their strategy. If the Soviets intended to continue manipulating the negotiations, however, we would not expect Najibullah to carry out these efforts in so ruthless a fashion as to eliminate his opponents or substantially increase subversion against Pakistan. [redacted]

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#### Withdrawal of Soviet Forces

37. If the Soviets mean seriously to negotiate a withdrawal of their troops--assuming this depended on the viability of Najibullah's regime--they might continue to spin out the Geneva talks to buy time for Najibullah and in hopes that developments would make Pakistan more amenable to Soviet terms. But we would expect Kabul to propose a withdrawal timetable at the July

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session that is significantly shorter than its earlier offers. If the Soviets decide they can live with a multiparty Afghan regime, the issue of a post-settlement regime probably would be addressed in discussions with Pakistan or by appeals from Najibullah to resistance leaders to join a coalition. [Redacted]

[Redacted] Soviet views of Afghanistan might indicate concern about damage to Moscow's international standing or the drain on economic resources, or pessimism about a military victory in the near future. [Redacted]

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38. We would not necessarily expect a decline in military activity; we might even see an increase to give the post-withdrawal regime a running start and to cover the drawdown of Soviet troops. The Soviets could reduce activities against Pakistan as a gesture of goodwill but also could intensify such intimidation to provide breathing space for the Afghan regime and to pressure Islamabad to accept terms more favorable to the Soviets, such as an extended withdrawal timetable. [Redacted]

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Military Breakthrough

39. If the Soviets judge that they can prevail militarily within a few years, we would expect Kabul to continue to equivocate at Geneva or even let the talks break down. Najibullah might be given free rein to eliminate his rivals and pursue a harsh policy toward Pakistan. In the military sphere, we might see tentative signs that the Afghan military is doing better; more small unit raids and ambushes, suggesting Soviet confidence that recent tactics are on the right track; more pressure along the border to cut insurgent supply routes; additional special purpose forces, artillery, or air units, and upgrading of facilities. [Redacted]

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40. Each of these developments would be consistent with an attempt to reduce Soviet costs, to put Moscow and Kabul in a strategic position to negotiate withdrawal, or to put the Afghan regime in a better position to survive it. Taken together, however, they would support the conclusion that the Soviets have determined to intensify the effort to defeat the insurgents militarily, particularly if a significant military build-up were to occur. [Redacted]

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41. [Redacted] Soviet opinion might contain optimistic views of the military situation and a hard line on Soviet operations. We might see continued emphasis in the media on Soviet heroism in Afghanistan. [Redacted]

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Implications

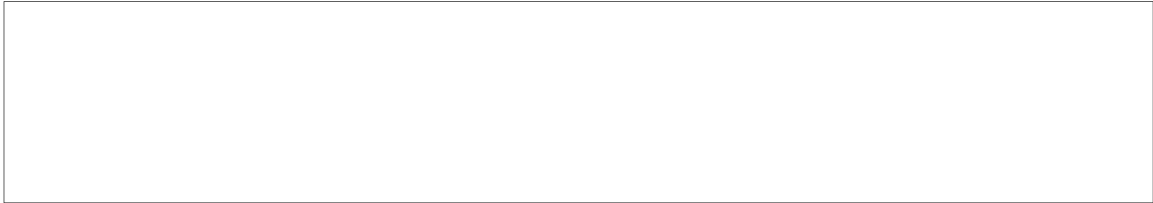
42. The impact of Soviet decisions and actions on the opposing actors in the Afghan equation--the mujaheddin, Pakistan and other supporters, and US policymakers--will vary depending upon the strategy the USSR is trying to pursue and the success of various elements of that strategy. The Soviets have identified Pakistan as the key--and most vulnerable--link in the chain of support for the mujahideen, and most of the possible strategies we have identified work in some combination of ways to loosen Pakistani commitment to the Afghan resistance. The impact of Soviet actions on Pakistan is likely to present the US with difficult decisions and choices in coming months and years.



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43. If, for example, a Soviet effort to obtain a military breakthrough by a combination of stronger Soviet/DRA military performance and diplomatic and destabilization measures to weaken Pakistani support produced improvement in the Soviet/DRA position:

- The resistance might become demoralized and we would probably see growing debate in Pakistan about the wisdom of its current Afghan policy.



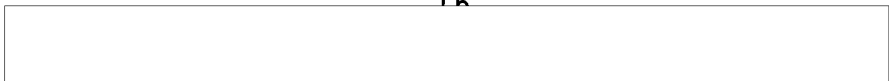
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- If Pakistan decided that the resistance's cause was doomed, it might want to loosen ties with the US, distancing itself still further from any overt support for the insurgents. In such a case, the utility of continued aid to the insurgents could be called into question even in the United States. Alternatively, Pakistan's need for assistance to cope with the absorption of the Afghan refugees who would now be unable to return home might serve to reinforce Islamabad's interest in its ties with the US.

44. Many of these same issues would crop up if the Soviets are successful in influencing domestic developments in Pakistan that threaten President Zia. Similarly, if the Soviets were able to create a widely accepted impression that progress in the negotiations was at least partly due to Pakistani intransigence, domestic and even international pressures might then build on Pakistan to meet the Soviets "halfway." This strategy would



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fail, however, if the Soviets and Afghans are widely seen to be the ones obstructing the process with such maneuvers as delaying tactics at the negotiations and attempts to destabilize Pakistan. [Redacted]

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SUBJECT: Afghanistan: Are Soviet Intentions Shifting?

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