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Soviet Problems, Prospects, and Options in Afghanistan in the Next Year

Special National Intelligence Estimate

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SNIE 11/37-2-85/L

SOVIET PROBLEMS, PROSPECTS, AND OPTIONS
IN AFGHANISTAN IN THE NEXT YEAR

Information available as of 26 March 1985
was used in the preparation of this Estimate, which was approved by the National Foreign Intelligence Board on that date.

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THIS ESTIMATE IS ISSUED BY THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE.

THE NATIONAL FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE BOARD CONCURS.

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of the Estimate:

The Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the intelligence organization of the Department of State

Also Participating:

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The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force

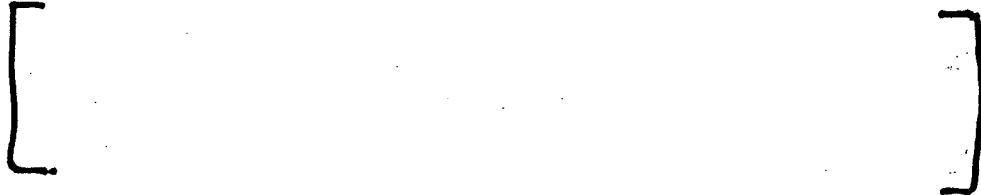
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SCOPE NOTE

Increased insurgent effectiveness and the continuing ineffectiveness of the Afghan Army forced the USSR into adopting a more aggressive approach to combat in Afghanistan in 1984. Greater outside support for the resistance this year and last means that Soviet problems probably will again increase in 1985. This Special National Intelligence Estimate assesses the measures the Soviets have taken thus far to deal with a more potent resistance and projects their options over the next year or so.



DISCUSSION

1. The Soviet military situation in Afghanistan has continued to deteriorate as a result of the increased insurgent capabilities and the continuing ineffectiveness of the Afghan Army, and despite intensified Soviet military efforts. The Soviets expect that their problems will increase as the resistance receives more and better materiel this year.
2. We believe that the Soviets will respond in the near term by attempting to apply more widely and skillfully the measures they have sought to apply in the past year. In support of this effort, additional tactical adjustments to the current economy-of-force strategy are likely and some force increases—probably not more than 5,000 to 10,000 men—are possible.
3. Moscow will continue to hold to its main objective of assuring a Communist regime in Afghanistan because:
 - The Soviet invasion itself has made it likely that any successor regime in Afghanistan not supported by Soviet military occupation would be deeply hostile to Moscow.
 - The fall of its Afghan regime would be seen as a serious blow to Moscow's reputation as a resolute power.
 - Control of Afghanistan is seen by the Soviets to be important to the security of Soviet Central Asian border regions.
 - The Soviets also see controlling Afghanistan as helping fulfill long-range aspirations to expand their influence in the region.
4. We believe that the Soviet military are examining how their military presence in Afghanistan could be utilized for various military contingencies against Pakistan and Iran. Major improvements in lines of communications and air and logistic facilities, and the deployment of significant additional forces, would be essential for the Soviets to undertake and sustain large-scale operations from Afghanistan. The Soviets almost certainly would not undertake such major improvements until they had consolidated control in Afghanistan.
5. The Soviets have a combined political-military strategy for consolidating Communist rule in Afghanistan, but appear to have consistently underestimated the difficulties they face. Initially, they reportedly thought the mere presence of Soviet forces would be sufficient to intimidate any resistance. Then they thought Soviet involvement in combat would militarily destroy most armed resistance within a couple of years. By 1983, they seem to have reconciled themselves to a longer term military strategy aimed at destroying enough of the resistance to compel the remainder to see the futility of continuing to fight. This strategy was coupled with a political strategy of trying to build up a cadre of reliable Afghan Communists to govern the country eventually. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union has made no significant progress in its attempts to obtain political backing from the Afghan people.
6. In 1984, the Soviets augmented their forces by a few thousand men and made other tactical and force adjustments designed to regain the military initiative. But the resistance, increasingly armed and trained from the outside, also continued to improve. The net result by the end of the year was that Soviet losses had increased and there had been no measurable improvement in the Afghan Government's position. The territory under government control may actually have declined slightly in 1984.
7. Moscow's lack of progress in Afghanistan has generated argument and pessimism among Soviet middle-level military and intelligence officials familiar with the situation. Many in the Soviet elite harbor doubts about the prospect of ultimate victory and the wisdom of the initial Soviet commitment. Soviet officials privately admit that Afghanistan has entailed significant costs, but they also assert that the costs of alternative policies would be even higher and that they must stay the course. The costs of Afghanistan have not been so high as to force Moscow to shrink from its objective of ultimately controlling the country. Soviet military capabilities elsewhere have not been substantially diminished, the economic costs are bearable, and dissatisfaction within the elite and populace, while noticeable, has remained within tolerable

levels. The leadership's recent decision to promote three of the key military figures who are most responsible for the USSR's operations suggests no disposition to reexamine its commitment or its strategy in Afghanistan now.

8. The new party General Secretary, M. S. Gorbachev, like all other top leaders, has avoided significant direct comment on Afghanistan in public. As a key figure in the leadership during the last year, Gorbachev has presumably developed a degree of commitment to current Soviet goals and strategy in Afghanistan. He used his meeting with Pakistan's President Zia at Chernenko's funeral to chastise Islamabad over its policy toward Afghanistan. Gorbachev would naturally wish to solve the Afghanistan problem in some way, but, while he is consolidating his power in the Soviet leadership over the next year or so, he has a strong political interest in avoiding positions that might make him look weak or open him to charges of adventurism. He therefore does not seem to have an immediate interest in seeking to revise Soviet goals and strategy.

9. A major escalation or expansion of the war would certainly raise the costs to the Soviet system while not necessarily leading to a quick victory. Intensification of the conflict at roughly present levels of Soviet commitment—which is what we expect—will raise the costs somewhat. The Soviet Union has the economic and military resources to continue this war indefinitely at present or escalated levels. It is the prospect of a very protracted war with potentially large domestic and international costs that is politically and psychologically troubling to many in the Soviet population and elite, and presumably of concern to the Soviet leadership. The Soviet Union is more capable than other countries might be of bearing the political costs of direct involvement in an open-ended war. Its tolerance for a protracted war in Afghanistan may not be limitless. We cannot say at this point, however, what the limits might be and whether or when they might eventually be reached.

10. On the basis of an improving military supply situation, we project that the performance of the resistance in Afghanistan will improve steadily during 1985 as it did in 1984:

- The greater availability of ammunition and other materiel will increase the operational effectiveness and persistence of those already under arms.

- The number of near-full-time fighters, now estimated at about 150,000,¹ will increase substantially.
- Resistance effectiveness against aircraft is likely to increase substantially, against both airborne targets and airbases.
- The number of resistance fighters with rudimentary military training will continue to rise, and all are learning from combat experience.

11. At the same time, the inevitable sluggishness and unevenness of the resistance logistic network, shortages in many needed items, food problems, and the fragmented nature of the war will probably cause these factors to increase resistance effectiveness only gradually. They will not confront the Soviets with a dramatic crisis or sharp deterioration of their military situation, or prevent the Soviets from making selected improvements to it.

12. Even so, the Soviets know that in 1985-86 they will be facing a more militarily capable resistance. They have already signaled that more outside support will not dissuade them from pursuing their objective of full control over the country. They are already planning military measures aimed at negating the improvement in insurgent capabilities. These measures, we believe, are most likely to be extensions of what the Soviets did in the recent past:

- More operations by Soviet forces without the Afghan Army.
- More agile and aggressive ground force tactics, particularly with special and air assault forces.
- Better use of tactical air and ground-based firepower.
- Temporary augmentations of Soviet forces for high-priority operations.
- Further efforts to improve tactical intelligence and command and control.
- More efforts to interdict resistance supplies near Afghanistan's borders.
- Continued improvement of the logistic infrastructure.

¹ This is the estimated number of resistance fighters for whom the war is a full-time or primary activity; some 30 percent of them are in daily action against the Soviets. The number of occasional fighters is probably several times as large.

— Continued efforts to build a Communist cadre to control the country in the long term.

13. We expect the Soviets to continue making a concerted effort to destroy Panjsheri resistance leader Masood and his men in 1985. We also anticipate more Soviet effort to improve security in Afghanistan's major cities. Interdicting infiltration across the borders with Pakistan and Iran will mean more Soviet/Afghan air and artillery strikes and perhaps a few ground incursions—both deliberate and accidental—against insurgent targets in both these countries. Despite the Soviet desire to keep them down, Soviet casualties and equipment losses will probably continue to rise.

14. As an adjunct to their military efforts, the Soviets will attempt to do more politically and diplomatically to reduce support for the resistance. However, we see no signs that Moscow is now prepared to seek a genuine political solution that requires abandoning Soviet objectives and withdrawing from Afghanistan:

— In addition to continuing cross-border incidents, the Soviets will apply strong diplomatic and propaganda pressures on Pakistan. They may increase efforts to destabilize the Zia regime. They have had strong incentives to do so in the past, but apparently lack adequate means.

— In recent months the Soviets have toughened their stance toward Iran, and we expect this trend to continue. However, the Soviets might try a more flexible approach to Iran in which they seek to exploit Iran's interest in an improved relationship to get Iran to cut back its support of the Afghan resistance.

— The USSR and China have moved to improve relations with each other despite the "three obstacles" raised by China—Soviet troops on China's borders; Soviet support of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia; and Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Even if the Afghan issue has become more significant because of the growing Chinese role in aiding the Mujahedin, we judge that neither side is likely to make the continuing improvement of relations contingent on its resolution.

— Toward the United States, the Soviets could attempt to make US support for the resistance more of a factor in bilateral relations than they have in the past. But there are inhibiting risks in either of the two approaches they might take. Should they suggest that other improvements in the relationship, such as arms control progress,

are jeopardized by US policy toward Afghanistan, they risk sacrificing other important political goals, such as encouraging restraint in US military programs. Should they, on the other hand, hint at the possibility of a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan without prior guarantees for the Kabul regime in order to encourage reductions in US support for the resistance, they would risk signaling their own vulnerability in Afghanistan and emboldening their major adversary. For these reasons we do not believe that the Soviets will wish to make Afghanistan stand in the way of changes in US-Soviet bilateral relations in the near future.

15. We doubt that any of these military or political measures will be sufficient to put the war convincingly on the path toward a Soviet victory. To the contrary, if our appreciation of the situation is correct, the Soviets are likely to find themselves no better off after another year or so of tactical adjustments and small troop increases. At some point, a continued military stalemate might no longer be tolerable to the Soviets and they might consider radical alternatives to their present strategy. These could include a large Soviet military buildup in Afghanistan and more forceful attempts to diminish Pakistan's support to the resistance or—less likely—serious efforts to get a political solution involving Soviet military withdrawal.

16. For the time being, however, we believe that Moscow prefers to avoid the military costs and risks of a major troop increase. Logistic preparations for an increase of 50,000 troops, for example, would require several months and would probably not decisively affect the course of the war. A much larger expansion—to a level of 400,000 to 500,000 troops—designed to assure Soviet control would take a year or more to accomplish and still might not lead to quick suppression of the insurgency.

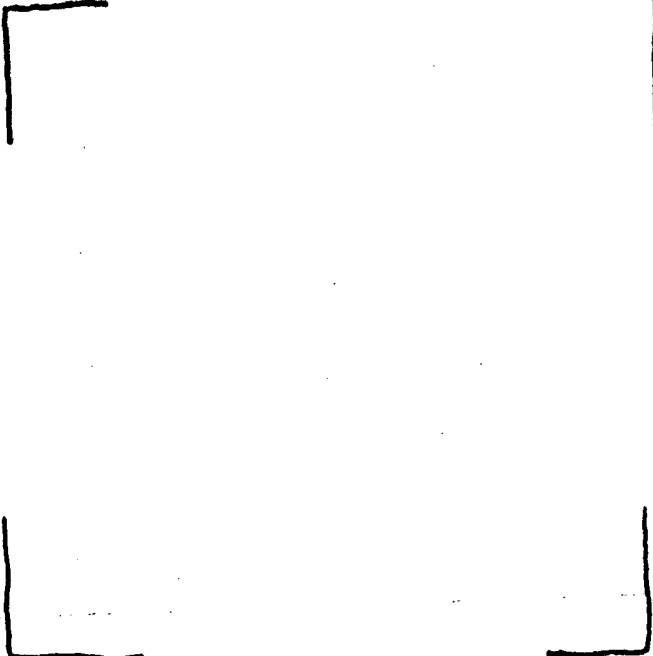
17. We also believe that Moscow is not yet ready to face the military risks and political consequences of a significant expansion of hostilities into Pakistan or Iran. Major action against either country from Afghan territory would require extensive logistic preparations, including securing of supply lines.

18. We believe, therefore, that the Soviets will continue for at least the next year or so to try to make progress against the insurgents without a major expansion of their forces or of the geographic scope of the war. But we believe that such progress will continue to elude them.

19. There are a number of developments, which do not now seem likely, that could upset our calculations. Although we see no evidence that Gorbachev is ready to depart far from current Soviet strategy, Soviet leadership politics could produce debate that leads to more radical changes in Soviet policy than we currently foresee. A Pakistani government without President Zia might be less committed to current Afghan policy, despite the consensus that supports this policy now. Iran might reduce its support for the Afghan resistance to improve its relations with Moscow; but an increase of Iranian support is as likely in the near term. Regional political development adverse to the Afghan resistance might curtail but probably would not altogether cut off Mujahedin resupply. If there were a cutoff of outside support for the resistance in Afghanistan, the Soviets would start making progress toward gaining control of Afghanistan. This would reduce pressure on them to escalate their commitment to the war or to seek a political accommodation.

20. If present trends continue, the Soviets may well face 10 years or more of fighting in Afghanistan. We cannot judge with any certainty how this will impact on Soviet society and the Soviet political system. The case can be made that the USSR would find the prospect of indefinite and costly conflict preferable to the alternatives of significant reinforcement or abandonment of Soviet objectives, and will continue the present course indefinitely in the belief that eventually the resistance and its outside supporters will give up. The contrary case can be made that the prospects of

indefinite and protracted conflict in Afghanistan would be unacceptable to Moscow; that sooner or later the domestic and international costs of a continuing war in Afghanistan will force the leadership to either radically increase the Soviet military commitment to the war, accepting the costs and risks of its expansion beyond Afghanistan's borders, or to seek a political path for withdrawal, even at the cost of the Kabul regime's collapse. If the Afghan resistance continues to grow in scale and effectiveness in the years ahead, the odds increase that the Soviets will eventually confront such choices.



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