

Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: The Intelligence Community's Record

Douglas MacEachin served as CIA's Deputy Director for Intelligence from 1993 to 1995 during his thirty-two year career at CIA. Mr. MacEachin was an officer-in-residence at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, from 1995 to 1997, subsequently becoming a senior at the Kennedy School.

Contents

- Introduction
- Shaping the Politico-Military Topography
- International Reactions
- Daoud Moves Away From Moscow
- The Communist Coup
- Washington Perspectives
- Party Purge—Stage Two
- The Tribes Revolt
- The Conflict Escalates
- Moscow Looks for a New Team
- The Confrontation Intensifies
- Soviet Reactions—US Interpretations
- Another Duel in the Palace
- Intelligence Community Views of Soviet Military Options
- Approaching the Boiling Point
- The Advance Echelon Deploys
- The Main Forces Deploy
- Soviet Documents on the Invasion Plan
- Targeting Amin
- The Military Decisions
- Intelligence Expectations versus Realities
- Postscript
- Source Notes, Books, Articles, Documents

Introduction

On Christmas Eve 1979, US intelligence began receiving reports that a massive Soviet military airlift was under way in and around Afghanistan. Initially the bulk of the flights were detected coming from the western USSR to air bases in the regions bordering on Afghanistan, with a smaller proportion also going into the main cities in Afghanistan. By the next morning, however, the number of flights into Afghanistan had begun to surge, reaching some 250 to 300 within the next 72 hours. These flights deployed what was believed to be five or six Soviet airborne battalions.

By the morning of 28 December, these Soviet military forces, along with additional troops who had already been infiltrated into Afghanistan in the preceding weeks, had taken control of the capital city of Kabul and other major cities and transportation nodes. They eliminated the existing government, killed its leader and installed a proxy regime that Moscow then used as a cover for sending in “requested assistance” in the form of two ground force combat divisions with 25,000 troops. These troops were already entering Afghanistan when the “request” was made.

US policy officials, including President Jimmy Carter, almost unanimously expressed surprise over the Soviet move—especially its size and scope. Explicit finger pointing was kept to a relatively low profile, but many of them made it clear that they considered the surprise to have been a consequence of an intelligence warning failure. Some intelligence officials contested this, pointing out that the preparation of the Soviet forces employed in the invasion had been described by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) in current intelligence publications in the preceding months, and that an interagency intelligence “Alert Memorandum” had been disseminated five days before the airlift began. These arguments carried little sway. Earlier intelligence reports on activities by the Soviet military units had not been accompanied by warnings that this activity might indicate Moscow’s intent to launch a major military intervention. It was also evident that by the time the Alert Memorandum was issued on 19 December the military intervention had already begun.

One indication that this was seen as an intelligence failure was a National Security Council (NSC) request—issued a few months after the Soviet invasion—for a study of the implications of the Afghanistan experience; using that experience as an indication of the intelligence capability to warn of Soviet military actions elsewhere, including an attack on NATO. An even more explicit indication was the inclusion of Afghanistan in the cases listed in a study that the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) commissioned in 1983 “on the quality of intelligence judgments preceding significant historical failures over the last twenty years or so.”¹

This monograph seeks to examine in detail—in an unclassified form that can be used in diverse forums for study and assessment—what it was in the intelligence performance that led to the “failure.” The project was undertaken as a contribution to continuing efforts to improve future performance by confronting the root causes of past problems. It re-constructs, to the extent possible from declassified documents, the intelligence chronology at the time—what information was obtained from all sources, when it was obtained, how it was interpreted, and how it was presented to US policy officials. The fundamental objective is to illuminate how the intelligence came to be interpreted and described in a way that made the invasion come as a surprise.

This reconstruction of the intelligence picture as it was drawn at the time is then compared to

information now available from Soviet archives on the military preparations actually undertaken—such as what units were chosen for the operations and when they were told to begin their preparations. This segment of the study also compares the US Intelligence Community's interpretations of potential Soviet actions with at least the partial information now available on the deliberations and debates that took place in Moscow's decision-making process.

As background for all this, the monograph begins by briefly describing the evolution of the political-military landscape in which Afghanistan existed at the time of the communist takeover in Afghanistan in April 1978.

Shaping the Politico-Military Topography²

In July 1973, Afghanistan's former Prime Minister, Sadar Mohammed Daoud, seized control of the government with the backing of Soviet-trained Afghan military officers and a Moscow-nurtured Afghan Communist political faction. This proved to be a pivotal juncture in Afghanistan's development as a Cold War battlefield. US officials viewed the central role played by the pro-Moscow military and political factions as ominous for the future.³

Daoud himself was believed to be a nationalist, but during his earlier tenure as Prime Minister from September 1953 to March 1963 he had established close ties to Moscow by entering into a panoply of agreements for economic and military aid. His turn toward the Soviet Union in his earlier tenure had been motivated not by ideology but *realpolitik*, in the face of regional alignments at the time—notably US cooperation with Pakistan and Iran, his main regional contestants. Nonetheless, his policies resulted in significant dependence on the USSR, and opened a number of avenues for Moscow to influence Afghan military officers and segments of the Afghan educated class.

The military faction that supported Daoud's seizure of power had been fostered by a mid-1955 agreement with Moscow providing long-term, low-interest credit for Afghanistan to purchase Soviet weapons and equipment. The agreement also involved deploying large contingents of Soviet military advisors to Afghanistan and training Afghan military officers in the Soviet Union. Escalating tensions with Pakistan, at least partly Daoud's doing, forced his ouster as Prime Minister in 1963. By 1973, a quarter to a third of the officers on active duty in the Afghan Army had been trained in the USSR.⁴

The other group that backed Daoud's takeover was one of two Afghan communist political factions supported by Moscow. Each operated under the title People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Each espoused orthodox Marxist ideology, an allegiance to Moscow, and a vague vision of a "social democratic" Afghanistan. Their differences were mainly a matter of personalities, personal alliances, the rival power aspirations of their leaders, and their strategies and tactics in seeking political power.

The faction that supported Daoud's coup was led by Babrak Karmal, whose approach was to appear to cooperate with whatever contingent held national power, in hopes of eventually appropriating power for himself. Noor Mohammed Taraki, a journalist, and his strong second in command, Hafizullah Amin, headed the other faction. Their approach tended more toward open opposition to the ruling establishment. The Soviets saw Karmal's faction as adhering closer to their line and considered the Taraki-Amin group radical to the point of being counterproductive. The division between the two factions would play a major role in Soviet policies toward

Afghanistan and ultimately in Moscow's military intervention in December 1979.⁵

Each of these factions had evolved separately as underground dissident cells during Daoud's previous tenure as Prime Minister. They came together to form what would turn out to be a relatively short-lived, unified Communist party in January 1965, after the reigning Afghan monarch, Zahir Shah, had removed Daoud as Prime Minister and issued a new constitution. This draft constitution established a parliamentary system of government (albeit with some ambiguities in the allocation of authority between the monarch and the parliament) and permitted the formation of political parties. Elections for the newly created parliament were scheduled for September 1965.

Moscow had long been urging its two client factions to put aside their differences and form a unified party. The advantages for competing in the parliamentary elections provided added incentive and, in January 1965, they joined to establish the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). As soon as the parliamentary elections were over, however, the fissures quickly reopened. Largely because of demographics, the only PDPA members to capture seats (four) in the new parliament were of Karmal's faction. These results reinforced each faction's commitment to take a separate path to political power. From inside the establishment, Karmal began attacking "leftist adventurism," clearly aimed at the opposition stance of Taraki. From outside, Taraki's supporters began referring to Karmal's group within the government as "royal Communists."⁶

By spring 1967, the two factions had split into what were, in effect, two parties. Each continued to identify itself as the PDPA, and to operate under the same manifesto and constitution. But each had its own Central Committee, and Karmal's "party" operated as part of the government while Taraki's posed as the opposition. Each faction became known under the name of its separate newspaper—Karmal's as "Parcham" (Red Banner) and Taraki's as "Khalq" (Masses).⁷

Largely because of incompetence and hubris, Karmal's strategy of appropriating power by conniving from inside the constitutional monarchy did not produce the results he sought. By the early 1970s, he was looking for another horse to ride to power. He was not, however, ready to return to an alliance with the Khalq. Instead, his Parcham faction began holding secret meetings with members of a growing cadre of Soviet-trained military officers. Some of these military officers had also begun to congregate around Daoud because they saw him as a strong nationalist leader. It was this collaboration that boosted Daoud into power in July 1973.

After Daoud's coup, the Parcham faction formed what amounted to a coalition government with him. Karmal and a few of his closest allies were brought into Daoud's inner circle, in what a former member of his government described as "an accommodation for the time being." A large number of ministerial positions—notably in the Ministries of the Interior, Education, and Information and Culture—were given to members of the Parcham faction. Meanwhile, the Khalq faction refused to back Daoud, treating his takeover as a palace coup within a regime to which Khalq was already in opposition, and regarding Parcham participation in the Daoud government as a sellout.⁸

Parcham leaders later would claim they had persuaded Daoud to take over the government, but it was clear he was seeking to exploit them as much as they were using him. For Daoud, the Communists and Soviet-trained military officers offered immediate and expedient forces for taking power. Karmal saw his support for Daoud's takeover as a way to reinsert himself into the political power chain, hoping eventually to be the successor. A knowledgeable observer said Karmal sought to make Daoud "the shoulder he could use to fire the gun which would inaugurate the [next phase] of the revolution."⁹

International Reactions

Moscow, not surprisingly, hailed Daoud's takeover. His record in facilitating extensive Soviet influence, and the fact that Soviet-supported political and military factions had backed his move, were viewed in Moscow as promising signs for the future. A message from the Soviet leadership a week after the takeover expressed confidence that the "friendship and ... cooperation" between their governments would "further successfully develop."¹⁰ Offers of increased assistance followed, and during a visit to Moscow in June 1974, Daoud concluded an agreement for an additional \$600 million in economic assistance. The Soviets were investing in the expected future accession to power of Karmal and his Parcham faction, which they considered more pliable than the headstrong, confrontational Khalq.¹¹

The implications of Daoud's coup for expanding Soviet power in the region generated shared concerns in Washington, Tehran and Islamabad. The leaders in Iran and Pakistan made this clear to US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger when he visited their capitals in November 1973. Their worst nightmare was of Soviet power creeping closer to the Indian Ocean. Iran took the lead in a joint effort to use generous economic and technical assistance to wean Daoud away from dependence on Moscow and to persuade him to shed the Soviet-backed factions in his government. In 1974, Iran gave \$40 million in easy credit to the Daoud regime as an initial step in what subsequently would develop into an economic aid package larger than those offered by any other group including Moscow. Secretary Kissinger visited Kabul in November 1974, and shortly thereafter dispatched a delegation from the US Agency for International Development to Afghanistan with an offer of economic and technical assistance.¹²

A significant impediment to US political and economic initiatives, however, was the continuing conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the status of the ethnic Pashtuns

in Pakistan's border regions.¹³ This ongoing antagonism in the face of the US-Pakistan anticommunist alliance had impeded US aid to Afghanistan during Daoud's earlier tenure as head of the government and contributed to his turn to Moscow.¹⁴ Iran, in the wake of a booming oil market, offered a potential new source of assistance. But once again, Afghan antagonism toward Pakistan impeded an offer of aid. Because of Tehran's status in US regional security arrangements, the Shah found himself with little room for maneuver. He also had his own problems with ethnic minority spillovers in Iran.

These issues were escalating at the time of Daoud's coup. By early 1974, an armed revolt was underway in Baluchistan, the southwestern region of Pakistan bordering on Afghanistan and Iran. In northwest Pakistan, populated mainly by ethnic Afghan-Pashtuns, insurrectionist sabotage was a common occurrence. The extent of the Daoud regime's involvement in these insurrections has been a matter of some debate, but he clearly was allowing Baluch resistance fighters to set up bases in Afghanistan, and was providing sanctuary to Pashtun dissidents who were under warrant of arrest in Pakistan.¹⁵

To retaliate against Afghanistan's actions, Pakistan provided funds, material and weapons to Islamic fundamentalist organizations and other anti-Daoud Afghan extremists conducting raids and sabotage inside Afghanistan. A former member of Pakistan's government at the time has insisted that these operations were not intended to overthrow Daoud but to force him to negotiate.¹⁶ This could explain why Iran, at the same time it was offering economic aid to

Daoud and pressing him to resolve the conflict with Pakistan, was also supplying US weapons and equipment to the insurgent groups in Afghanistan. Some of this material went through Pakistani channels and some passed directly to groups operating in western Afghanistan. Iran, because of its own sizable Baluch community, had its own motives for seeing the armed revolt in Baluchistan quelled, and provided Pakistan with US helicopters for use in this effort. According to at least one source, these actions by Iran were carried out in “loose collaboration” with the US. Egypt and Saudi Arabia also were providing support to Afghan Islamic fundamentalist groups,¹⁷ some of which would have a lasting presence on the Afghan battleground.

A former deputy foreign minister of Afghanistan has said that a message came through clearly in diplomatic channels: demonstrable efforts to resolve the conflict with Pakistan were necessary if Daoud hoped to sustain significant economic aid from the US and its allies. Iran’s Prime Minister, visiting Kabul in August 1974, proposed the opening of a dialogue between Afghan and Pakistani representatives, as did Turkish officials. Kissinger pressed the issue in his visit in November.¹⁸

Daoud had his own reasons for widening his international sources of support and suppressing the power of Soviet-backed elements inside Afghanistan. One observer on the scene has said that Daoud probably understood the motives and objectives of the Parcham faction better than it understood his.¹⁹ So it is hard to assess how much the external pressures and enticements accounted for his turning away from Moscow and the Soviet-backed factions inside Afghanistan, but turn he did.

Daoud Moves Away From Moscow

As early as mid-1974, when Daoud made his first official visit to Moscow after his coup, he had already removed two communists from his cabinet and had begun to purge his interior ministry, which controlled internal security forces. By the beginning of 1975, he had reached agreement with Pakistani leader Zulfikar Ali-Bhutto to begin talks on resolving their conflicts.²⁰ The opening of these talks was derailed for more than a year, however, by the killing of a Bhutto friend and colleague by a terrorist bomb in Pakistan’s Pashtun tribal agency, which led Bhutto to retaliate against indigenous Pashtun political officials. Nonetheless, Daoud’s demonstrated willingness to work on the problem appears to have registered. In April 1975, he visited Iran and came away with a credit extension of \$2 billion, of which \$1.7 billion was to be devoted to a rail system linking the Afghan cities of Herat, Kandahar, and Kabul to Iranian lines extending to the Persian Gulf. (The subsequent collapse of the oil market and the fall of the Shah would prevent much of this from being realized.)²¹

Shortly after his return from Iran, Daoud announced that Afghanistan would not tolerate “imported ideology,” clearly a swipe at the Moscow-backed communist factions in his own government. A few months later, he removed three more communists from ministerial positions, including the Minister of the Interior. By the end of December 1975, there were no remaining Parcham communists in Daoud’s cabinet and he had drastically reduced the numbers in other government positions. He then announced that he was putting forward a new constitution that would establish a one-party state. He called for the dissolution of Parcham and Khalq and said the communists should join his new party of National Revolution.²²

Daoud proceeded more cautiously in reducing the communist factions in the army. According to one of his supporters, he was concerned over the potential implications of a military backlash. Nonetheless, in October 1975, he dismissed 40 Soviet-trained military officers and sent others to remote garrisons. He also began arranging training for Afghan military officers in India and Egypt (whose armed forces were also equipped with Soviet weapons), thereby enabling him to reduce the number of officers subject to the political influence of training in the USSR. Some military officers were sent to the US for schooling. Daoud also tried to reduce the number of Soviet military advisors in Afghanistan.²³

The following year brought a budding rapprochement with Pakistan and a further expansion of relations with Iran. After several months of rhetoric, Daoud and Bhutto held face-to-face talks in Kabul from 7-10 June 1976 on resolving the Pashtun dispute. They met again six weeks later in Pakistan. No final agreement was reached, but the two sides agreed to keep negotiating. Raids by fundamentalist groups ceased, goods moved relatively smoothly between the countries and, in March 1977, air service between the two—suspended since early 1974—was restored. A long-disputed treaty with Iran for construction of a mutually beneficial dam on the river bordering the two countries was formally ratified by both states and entered into force. ²⁴ And Daoud's new, one-party constitution was enacted, outlawing the PDPA—;and this applied to both of its factions.²⁵

The Soviets decided it was time to invite Daoud to Moscow for discussions, and a visit was set for 12-15 April 1977. On the second day of the meetings, Soviet party leader Leonid Brezhnev launched into a tirade about the large number of “experts” from “NATO countries” involved in various projects in Afghanistan. He asserted that they were “spies” and demanded they be sent out of the country. Daoud stiffly retorted that Brezhnev's remarks were “unacceptable ... interference” in Afghanistan's internal affairs. The two reportedly patched things up superficially on the spot, but Daoud canceled the remaining private discussions he was scheduled to have with the Soviet leader and returned to Kabul a day later. From the perspective of both Moscow and Kabul, this was a demonstrable end of the affair.²⁶

After the Moscow face-off, Daoud stepped up his “outreach” program. He increased the proportion of military officers sent for training in Egypt and India, and began sending air force officers to train in Turkey. He also aggressively associated himself with “moderate” non-aligned states such as Yugoslavia. By early 1978, he had concluded economic aid agreements generating about \$500 million each from Saudi Arabia and the United States. A visit to Kabul by the Shah of Iran was set for June, and Daoud was scheduled to meet with President Jimmy Carter in Washington in September.

Meanwhile, despite Bhutto's overthrow in Pakistan by a military regime in 1977, talks between Kabul and Islamabad were continuing, and there appeared to be a strong possibility of settling their longstanding dispute. Although Moscow might plausibly have encouraged such talks with the leftist Bhutto government as a wedge against the US, a settlement with a rightist regime in Pakistan, one strongly supported by Washington, held the prospect of a significant shift in regional alignments. For Soviet leaders, enough clearly was enough.²⁷

The Communist Coup

By the time of the Daoud-Brezhnev face-off, the Soviets already had begun aggressively

pressing the Parcham and Khalq factions to reunite into a single Communist party. Moscow had enlisted the help of intermediaries from other Communist parties in the region—the Iraqi and Indian parties, for example—as well as a leader of the ethnic dissident group in Pakistan who was living in exile in Afghanistan. These efforts were stymied for more than a year as each of the Afghan communist factions maneuvered for dominance. But the combination of Daoud's moves and Soviet pressure finally convinced the two factions to agree—at the beginning of July 1977—to form a unified PDPA.

The fundamental split between the factions did not end, however; it was merely papered over for the time being. As in their earlier unified party, Taraki was given the top position of party General Secretary, with Karmal in second place under the title of First Secretary. Positions on the new party Central Committee were divided equally between Parcham and Khalq.

The equal division of positions did not extend to the military, where Khalq had established widespread influence. The disaffection of military officers who had survived Daoud's purging, and their perception that Parcham was linked to him, drew them to the Khalq faction, which had launched a significant covert recruitment effort in the military after Daoud had banned open recruiting. Leading this recruiting was Amin, who now held—over virulent Parcham objection—the party position in charge of the military. This made him the point man for planning the overthrow of Daoud.²⁸

Nine months after patching together their reunified party, the communists seized control of the government. The precipitating event was the assassination on 17 April 1978 of a top Parcham official, Mir Akbar Khyber. The PDPA accused the Daoud regime of being behind it, and organized large-scale demonstrations in protest. In response, police arrested Taraki, Karmal and five other top PDPA officials in the night and early morning hours of 25–26 April, but they did not initially arrest Amin. The police reportedly searched his residence and put him under surveillance in a form of house arrest, but did not actually take him into custody until sometime later on 26 April. In the meantime, he reportedly was able to pass the coup plans and implementing orders to key party supporters in the military.

By noon the next day, 27 April, Afghan Army units had surrounded the presidential palace, the ministry of defense and other key government buildings. Late in the afternoon, helicopter gunships and jet fighters attacked government sites, pounding the palace where Daoud had withdrawn. Imprisoned PDPA leaders were found and freed. At 7 p.m., the two military officers leading the attacks announced on Radio Afghanistan that the Daoud regime had been ousted and power taken by a “Revolutionary Council of the Armed Forces,” subsequently called the Revolutionary Military Council. Sometime that night, Daoud was killed by troops assaulting the presidential palace.²⁹

A few days later, decrees announced that the Revolutionary Military Council had been replaced by a “Revolutionary Council” of a newly titled “Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.” Taraki was named Chairman of the Council (de facto President of Afghanistan) and Prime Minister. Karmal was made Deputy Chairman and Deputy Prime Minister, with Amin ranking third as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs. The military officer who led the army troops in the coup, Aslam Watanjar, nominally a Khalq sympathizer, was also given the rank of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Communications. The Ministry of Defense went to the officer who commanded the air force operations, Abdul Qadir, an open Parcham supporter.³⁰

From Washington's perspective, the Soviets' obvious motivation to reverse the direction in which Daoud had been taking Afghanistan, and to re-establish a more compliant client regime led naturally to suspicions that Moscow had engineered the government takeover. The fact that

the USSR was the first state to formally recognize the new government reinforced this view. US embassy officers also had reported seeing Soviet advisors mingling with some of the Afghan military units carrying out the operations.

US intelligence assessments, however, said there was no evidence the Soviets had been involved in launching the coup, although Moscow had moved quickly to exploit the situation once it began. The assessments said that the more fervent Soviet ideologues and military officials probably saw the developments as offering an opportunity to create another allied Communist regime on the borders of the USSR.³¹

Evidence now available from numerous and diverse sources indicates the Soviets had indeed been advised of PDPA coup planning. The coup that took place, however, was not the one they were expecting. Former PDPA and Soviet officials have all said that the plans being coordinated with Moscow envisaged the coup taking place later, around August. Often-contradictory accounts of the events that produced the move in April—beginning with the assassination of Khyber—have attributed them to diverse conspiracies and subplots. Some observers have described the move as resulting from an ill-advised provocation by Daoud, who had been informed of plotting among PDPA factions and sought to justify a preemptive strike. This scenario has Amin simply exploiting an opportunity. Many other sources have described the move as a scheme by Amin to eliminate his rivals—especially those with influence in the military—and set the stage for taking power for himself when the coup ultimately was launched. Some claim Amin planned it—with the help of clandestine supporters in the intelligence service and army—to preempt the plan being coordinated with Parcham and to position himself to dictate the resulting power hierarchy. And at least one knowledgeable scholar has argued that Amin was simply the beneficiary of actions taken by the military, on its own initiative, in response to the sweeping arrests Daoud ordered. ³²

Whatever the case, the Soviets clearly sought to make the best of the hand that had been dealt them. Moscow quickly dispatched political advisors from the CPSU International Department (the organization for coordinating relations with foreign Communist parties) to mediate the struggle for power between the two PDPA factions and coerce them into forming a viable regime. According to US intelligence reports, the number of Soviet military advisors in Afghanistan was increased from 350 at the time of the coup to 500 by the end of May, many of them in the Ministry of Defense in Kabul. US intelligence sources also disclosed that a delegation from the Soviet General Staff Operations Directorate signed a new military assistance protocol with the Taraki regime on 31 May.³³

Soon the split between the PDPA factions erupted again. In a power play reportedly assisted by the defection of at least one or two Parchamites, Amin engineered a party vote giving his Khalq faction the decisive role in setting state policy. By mid-July, Karmal and six of the other top Parcham leaders had been “exiled” to ambassadorial posts. Amin formally took over Karmal’s position as the Deputy Chairman of the ruling Revolutionary Council. Parcham supporter Abdul Qadir remained as Defense Minister for the time being, but Amin saw to it that he was isolated and under close watch. The fact that the Parcham leaders were exiled rather than imprisoned—or worse—and that Qadir and other, lower level Parcham members were allowed to retain their positions reportedly was the result of Soviet intervention. ³⁴ Amin would live to regret this benevolence.

Washington Perspectives

US intelligence analysts interpreted the purge as having had Moscow's acquiescence. They pointed out that shortly after Karmal's departure to ambassadorial exile in Prague in July, the Soviets had signed another major agreement providing the Taraki regime with \$250 million of additional military assistance. The number of Soviet military advisors was estimated to have increased to 700, double the total prior to the coup. Many additional civilian advisors were also dispatched to Kabul to help the regime consolidate its hold on power. Intelligence assessments also concluded, however, that while the increased presence of the Soviets had enhanced their ability to intervene militarily if it became necessary to prop up their client regime, they would seek to avoid a situation requiring them to send combat units to Afghanistan.³⁵

Views among US policy officials were divided. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, citing the absence of information indicating Soviet complicity in the communist coup, held out hope that even though the Afghan Government had now been seized by what he described as "radical leftists in the army," Soviet influence could be contained. He believed the best way to "maintain a measure of influence" was to sustain the limited US economic assistance that had been underway before the coup. He also reportedly supported arguments by the State Department's Bureau of Middle East and South Asian Affairs that the US should avoid actions that could push the new Afghan regime even closer to the USSR. President Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, saw the coup as part of a Soviet plan to acquire hegemony in the region. He is said to have favored cutting off US relations with Afghanistan and mounting covert operations to counter Soviet aspirations in the region. One former US Government official has said that Brzezinski was not concerned that such a policy course might provoke the Soviets because he believed they already were intent on taking control of Afghanistan.³⁶

The State Department's approach for the most part prevailed. Washington officially recognized the new Afghan Government, maintained normal diplomatic relations, and continued modest economic aid at the pre-coup level. In July—about the same time the Parcham leaders were departing for their exile posts and Moscow was bolstering its advisory contingents—the United States named a new ambassador to Afghanistan, Adolph Dubs. Dubs vigorously supported a "holding action," which was designed to avoid driving the Afghan regime closer to Moscow and, hopefully, to encourage the regime eventually to lean in the opposite direction. Also in July, Undersecretary of State David Newsom made an official visit to Kabul to review the US economic aid program. He returned pessimistic about the situation there, but nonetheless met with the Shah of Iran on the same trip to reinforce US requests that Iran also try to work with the new Afghan regime.³⁷

Party Purge—Stage Two

A month after Newsom returned from Kabul, Afghan Defense Minister Qadir and two other senior military officers associated with the Parcham faction were arrested on charges of plotting to overthrow the new government. Their confessions were publicized a month later. As is the case with most other events in Afghanistan during this time, there are diverse accounts of what actually transpired, including the means by which the confessions were obtained. The most commonly accepted version is that Karmal, shortly before he left for Prague in July, conspired to have Qadir and a group of Parcham supporters in the army seize control of the government. The move was to be carried out on the Muslim holiday Eid, at the end of Ramadan, which that year would have been 4 September. (This timing has led some scholars to suggest that what Karmal and Qadir intended was to carry out the original plan the PDPA had been

coordinating with Moscow prior to Amin's April preemption.) Qadir's plan was leaked to Amin—according to most accounts, by the Afghan ambassador to India, who was secretly an Amin supporter. Amin then ordered the arrests of the three senior Parcham military supporters.³⁸

Amin used the plot as grounds for purging the remaining Parcham members from the government, imprisoning many and executing some. He also summoned the seven exiled Parcham ambassadors back to Kabul, but they all—understandably—went into hiding, taking with them substantial funds from their various embassies. US intelligence reported that safe havens for the Parcham exiles had been arranged by Moscow. Intelligence analysts also concluded that the purges had substantially narrowed the regime's political base and diminished the reliability of the army.³⁹

With the elimination of Qadir as Defense Minister, Amin sought to take the post himself, in effect to take overt, official control over what already was his principal—albeit eroding—power base. He was opposed by Watanjar, who believed that—as an army officer and the primary field commander of the coup that brought the PDPA to power—he was entitled to head the military. While nominally a Khalq supporter, Watanjar's strongest loyalties were to himself and to the military cells formed under the tutelage of Soviet military intelligence. In a superficial compromise, Taraki took the Defense Minister title for himself, but Amin, as the principal Deputy Prime Minister—with widespread, as well as some covert support elements in the military—exercised primary control. Watanjar was demoted from his Deputy Prime Minister status, and became one of those whose enmity to Amin would play a key role in future events.⁴⁰

The Tribes Revolt

By this time, PDPA efforts to impose a socialist revolution throughout the countryside were meeting a violent backlash. Some scholars have pointed out that the regime's declared objectives of reducing the inequities and repressive measures of Afghanistan's tribal feudalism were justified. The regime's program of revolution called for redistributing monopolized land holdings, relieving peasant indenture status, reforming women's marriage rights, and outlawing old customs that propped up the tribal leaders and Mullahs. But the measures were imposed dictatorially, and the inevitable resistance of feudal landholders and tribal chiefs, moneylenders, and mullahs was met with a repressive pattern of arrests and summary trials. Many mullahs were among those arrested and many others were ejected from their positions. Provincial administration in much of the countryside was placed under the central control of the Communist Party.⁴¹

Armed opposition erupted. In November 1978, US intelligence reported that fighting in the provinces was escalating, and that insurgents appeared to have taken control of large areas of north and east Afghanistan. The insurgents reportedly were receiving arms and assistance from ethnic Pashtun guerrilla organizations operating from Pakistan. Intelligence reports that the loyalty of the army was eroding were borne out when the commander of the Afghan Army corps in Qandahar, in southeast Afghanistan, was arrested for supporting the insurgents. Soviet military advisors reportedly had been assigned to Afghan units directly engaged in combating the insurgents. US intelligence analysts learned that one Soviet military advisor concluded that a large Soviet military advisory presence would be needed for several years.⁴²

Early in December, Taraki and Amin flew to Moscow on what US analysts interpreted as a mission to gain increased assistance for combating the insurrection. On 5 December, the two governments signed a 20-year treaty on “cooperation and friendship.” US intelligence assessments pointed out that it included no explicit mutual defense commitment and contained a clause referring to Afghanistan’s non-alignment. But the treaty also included an article under which the two governments would continue military cooperation and “consult with each other and take appropriate measures to ensure the security, independence, and territorial integrity” of the two states. As intelligence reporting pointed out, the Afghan government could invoke this provision to request military assistance from the USSR.⁴³

The 5 December treaty marked the beginning of a turn in US policy. Former Secretary of State Vance has since said that Washington saw the treaty “as a Soviet reaction to the fact that Kabul’s authority outside major cities had collapsed.” Former National Security Advisor Brzezinski is reported to have said in an interview after leaving office that while the United States continued strict adherence to President Carter’s injunction against direct US assistance and the use of US weapons to support the Afghan insurgency, the CIA did consult with the Pakistan Government on its support to the opposition forces. At the same time, however, apparently reflecting both US hopes of offering Amin alternatives and Amin’s efforts to assuage US concerns, Washington agreed to resume a small program for training Afghan military officers in the US that had been cut off after the April coup.⁴⁴

In mid-January 1979, a guerrilla force composed of Afghan refugees from Pakistan carried out a raid on a provincial capital—Asadabad—near the northeastern border of Afghanistan, and seized an army garrison there. The guerrillas were eventually driven out, but were able to hold the garrison briefly because the Afghan commander had already secretly defected to the insurrection. That same month, US intelligence reported that a high-level Soviet military delegation had arrived in Kabul to discuss further Soviet military aid. By this time, according to US intelligence information, the number of military advisors had been raised to as many as 1,000, with another 2,000 Soviet political and economic advisors also in the country.⁴⁵

On 14 February, US Ambassador Dubs was abducted off the streets of Kabul by an extremist Afghan anti-government cell. The kidnapers offered to swap him for the release of a group of their leaders imprisoned by the Afghan regime. The regime refused to deal with the abductors, despite demands from the US Embassy. Dubs was killed a few hours later when Afghan police stormed the hotel room where the terrorists were holding him. According to intelligence reports, Soviet advisors were seen accompanying the Afghan forces that carried out the raid. To some senior Washington officials, the Afghan leaders’ refusal to accept responsibility or apologize for the action reflected their anti-US, pro-Soviet bent. A week later, the Carter Administration cut its already modest economic assistance and canceled its plan to train a small number of Afghan military officers.⁴⁶ The fact that the killing of the ambassador occurred one month after the Shah of Iran was ousted in a seizure of power by an Islamic fundamentalist regime may have influenced the US reaction.

The Conflict Escalates

In mid-March, an uprising in Herat—the main city in northwest Afghanistan—clearly indicated the rebellion had reached a new level. The fighting in Herat lasted well over a week, during much of the time cutting the city’s links with the rest of the country. Parts of the Afghan Army

forces garrisoned in Herat defected to the insurgency, and a significant portion of the other troops refused to engage in the fighting. The uprising was finally suppressed after other Afghan forces were brought in from Kabul. Intelligence reports suggested that Soviet advisors had been singled out for attacks, with up to 20 having been killed along with hundreds of Afghans.⁴⁷

The Herat uprising also set off a new round in the Afghan regime's internal power struggle. To assuage charges of weak performance in the military leadership, Taraki finally granted Watanjar his long-sought-after position as Minister of Defense.⁴⁸ To placate Amin, Taraki conferred on him his own position of Prime Minister, retaining for himself the mantle of President of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Watanjar's move to take over the Defense Ministry was a demonstrable exploitation of Amin's vulnerability in the aftermath of the failings of the army. It intensified the personal animosity that would continue to be a critical variable in the events playing out in Afghanistan.

For US intelligence analysts, the Herat conflict brought Afghanistan to the front burner of intelligence issues. By all reckoning, the Soviet client regime in Kabul was steadily losing ground to the insurgency. There were signs of a growing perception among the Afghan populace that Marxism—especially as represented by the Taraki-Amin regime—was anti-Islam, and this was believed likely to continue to erode the morale of the Afghan army. The intelligence question was whether Moscow could accept the overthrow of the communist regime by a Muslim rebellion being supported by the US ally Pakistan. How far was Moscow prepared to go to try to prevent it? Would the USSR commit its own combat forces to do so?

Shortly after the uprising in Herat, intelligence revealed unusual activity in two Soviet motorized rifle divisions (MRDs)⁴⁹ garrisoned within about 10 kilometers of the Afghan border in what was known as the Turkestan Military District of the USSR. One was the 5th Guards Motorized Rifle Division at Kushka, near the main road in Afghanistan leading to Herat. Components of this division were leaving their garrisons and moving toward the border in convoys of tanks, trucks and personnel carriers, with various support elements. The other active division, the 108th MRD located at Termez near the main highway toward Kabul, was assembling convoys. Intelligence assessments interpreted these activities as training exercises.⁵⁰

Both of these were divisions of a category normally maintained at very low manpower levels, from about 10 percent to, at the very most, 30 percent of their prescribed combat strength of 12,500 troops per division. The training observed was highly unusual for these particular units, which in the past had been essentially dormant; some analysts argued that it was virtually unprecedented. Both divisions clearly had received an infusion of personnel from at least a short-term reservist call-up, although it did not appear that they had been brought to full combat strength. Thus some analysts argued (in internal debates) that while the observed activity may have been only contingency preparations, it did seem to indicate that the contingency was being taken very seriously.⁵¹

Other, smaller Soviet units were also seen deployed near the Afghan border. High levels of activity and vehicle movement were also detected at the garrisons of two Soviet airborne regiments in this same Soviet military district bordering Afghanistan. All together, at full strength, these forces being readied would have made up an intervention force of some 30,000 combat troops.

Although these activities bore the print of contingency preparations for a move into Afghanistan, CIA's intelligence assessments concluded that:

The Soviets would be most reluctant to introduce large numbers of ground forces into Afghanistan to keep in power an Afghan government that had lost the support of virtually all segments of the population. Not only would the Soviets find themselves in an awkward morass in Afghanistan, but their actions could seriously damage their relations with India, and—to a lesser degree—with Pakistan. As a more likely option, the Soviets probably could seek to reestablish ties with those members of the Afghan opposition [Parcham] with whom Moscow had dealt profitably in the past.⁵²

Less than a month later, a delegation of Soviet “political generals” arrived in Kabul. Intelligence analysts presumed that its purpose was to assess the political-military situation and the capabilities and especially the loyalty of army components around the country in the wake of the Herat uprising. Intelligence reporting pointed out that the head of this delegation—General Yepishev, chief of the Main Political Administration of the Soviet Ministry of Defense—had rarely traveled outside the Soviet-East European military alliance. When he had done so in the past, it had been to bolster troubled communist regimes with political and administrative advice and offers of military assistance. US intelligence agencies learned that, upon his arrival in Kabul, General Yepishev warned the Afghan leaders that Moscow’s aid for combating the insurgency was not open-ended, and that it was up to the Afghans to improve their own effectiveness. Upon returning to Moscow a week later, Yepishev was said to have reported to his superiors that the “poor ideological outlook” (read “weak commitment to the Communist cause”) among Afghan Army officers was a major problem. The Soviets subsequently stepped up their political indoctrination efforts both within the Afghan Army and in the population at large.⁵³

In May and June, the level of insurgency continued to grow in eastern and northeastern Afghanistan, and incidents began to occur in the vicinity of Kabul. The performance of the Afghan Army continued to decline, and the effectiveness of the guerrilla units continued to grow. By June 1979, according to estimates by the US Embassy, the regime controlled—at most—only half the country.⁵⁴

The Soviets responded to the deteriorating situation by shipping more weapons to the Afghan Army and Air Force, providing not only additional tanks, artillery and small arms, but also fighter aircraft, helicopter gunships and transports. Soviet military transport aircraft delivering aid operated regularly in and out of Bagram air base just north of Kabul. At least 2,500 Soviet military advisors reportedly were in Afghanistan by the end of June along with some 2,000 civilian advisers. There were reports that additional military advisors were being assigned to Afghan units engaging in combat, and that some Soviet military personnel were piloting helicopters in ground strikes and operating tanks in combat.⁵⁵

Continued erosion of the Afghan regime’s control, coupled with the increasing Soviet involvement, led intelligence analysts again to review the factors that might lead to outright Soviet military intervention. One possibility raised was that the Soviets might resort to such a course if they became convinced that the ouster of the Afghan regime by the insurgents could lead to an arc of militant Islamic anticommunist states on the USSR’s southern border that would threaten stability in the Soviet Central Asian republics. Some analysts also pointed out that the loss of Afghanistan, after a major Soviet commitment, would be seen as a blow to the prestige and image so highly valued by the Soviet leadership.

On balance, however, intelligence assessments at the time continued to portray the insertion of Soviet combat forces as unlikely, although it was not ruled out. The main factors seen as weighing against it were both military and political. Mountainous terrain and limited—and

vulnerable—ground transportation routes in Afghanistan would compound the military difficulties inherent in confronting guerrilla forces, according to intelligence assessments. Moscow also was seen as loath to absorb the high political costs of quashing the prospects for ratification of the SALT-II arms limitation treaty. Moreover, invading Afghanistan would be certain to provoke a backlash in other Muslim countries. In line with this judgment, a senior Soviet political counselor in Kabul, Vasily Safronchuk, told the US chargé on 24 June that the USSR had no intention of sending combat troops to Afghanistan. He pointed to the harm such a move would do to the SALT-II Treaty, and to the USSR's political position worldwide.⁵⁶

Moscow Looks for a New Team

As the situation in Afghanistan worsened during the summer of 1979, US intelligence received numerous indications that the Soviets were seeking alternatives to the Taraki-Amin regime. Soviet officials made no effort to hide their displeasure with their inability to coerce the regime into pulling back from the extreme social and economic measures that were inflaming tribal and Islamic groups. In conversations with US Embassy officials and other members of the international diplomatic corps in Kabul, Safronchuk made it clear that Moscow was looking for a way to replace Taraki and Amin—especially Amin. According to various accounts, Safronchuk said the Soviets were frustrated by their inability to persuade the Afghan regime to create a coalition that might win stronger support by bringing representatives of diverse political constituencies into the government. Other Soviet officials took the same line.

In mid-July, the East German ambassador in Kabul told US diplomats that the Soviets' desire to replace the Afghan regime was such that they were willing to use force if necessary. Other sources said Moscow was planning a takeover by military officers opposed to Amin. There were several reports that exiled members of the Parcham faction in East Europe were claiming that the Soviets had promised to return them to power. Intelligence analysts viewed the "military takeover" option as the more likely, believing that Moscow would have no reason to expect the base of support for a Karmal government to be any broader than that of the Taraki-Amin faction.⁵⁷

The same stories appeared in the press. A *New York Times* article on 2 August said the Soviets were seeking an alternative to the Taraki-Amin regime, and apparently were focusing on the military as a source for a government takeover. The *Times* article said Amin was considered a "zealous revolutionary" who was the real power in Afghanistan and who continued to push his inflammatory reform policies despite Soviet urging to proceed more cautiously. The high visibility being given to this Soviet outlook led the US Embassy in Kabul to posit in July that Moscow was engaged in a calculated effort to soften reaction to the growing Soviet military presence and to mitigate reaction if a regime turnover ultimately was achieved. Another purpose not mentioned in this Embassy report may have been to step up pressures on Taraki and Amin to moderate their revolutionary policies.⁵⁸

Whatever the reason for the high noise level, Taraki and Amin clearly got the word that the Soviets were out to replace them. In late July, US intelligence analysts described a shakeup in the Afghan cabinet as a move by Taraki and Amin to preempt a feared Soviet-sponsored takeover by alienated military officers. Amin reclaimed the post of Defense Minister, a move that intelligence analysts described as probably designed to improve his vantage point for spotting and heading off any coup from within the military. This interpretation also appeared in

the Western press. According to intelligence analysts, Watanjar was “reported to have figured in the plan” for installing a new government, and was sent back to the Interior Ministry, deepening his antagonism toward Amin.⁵⁹

The Confrontation Intensifies

Meanwhile, at the beginning of July, the Soviets crossed a new threshold with their first known movement of a combat unit into Afghanistan: a battalion of airborne troops deployed at the Bagram air base near Kabul. Bagram already had essentially become the main Soviet operational base in Afghanistan, with Soviet military air transports shuttling in and out with supplies of weapons and military equipment. Intelligence analysts concluded that the combat troops were sent to Bagram to provide security for the air transport units, and that there was no intent to commit them to combat operations elsewhere in Afghanistan.⁶⁰

Insurgent attacks grew steadily throughout July, and the Afghanistan territory under government control continued to shrink. Mutinies were spreading throughout the Army, and insurgent raids were capturing Army munitions. Roads were being cut and Afghan Army units were increasingly dependent on supply by air, including transport helicopters. The regime still owned the cities, but the insurgents owned the countryside. The press quoted US officials who said the civil war in Afghanistan had reduced the government’s control to about 25 percent of the country. And, as already demonstrated in Herat, even the control of major cities depended on the regime’s ability to deploy defense and rescue missions from the central power center of Kabul. Afghan Army units, with the benefit of Soviet-supplied weapons, could still make such movements through the countryside, but could not hold significant tracts of territory outside the main cities.

This deterioration was continuing despite the increased involvement of Soviet personnel in guiding Afghan combat operations and logistics. The role of the Soviets reportedly was expanding from advice to active participation in a wide variety of operations with regimental and battalion sized units. New intelligence information reinforced earlier reports that Soviet helicopter pilots with Afghan copilots (or vice versa) were flying the strikes on insurgent positions. There were additional reports of Soviets operating tanks in combat missions.⁶¹

Increasing Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan and widespread resistance to the Soviet-supported regime—combined with Moscow’s rebuffs when Washington warned about jeopardizing US-Soviet relations—prompted an initial Presidential authorization (officially called a “finding”) for covert support to the Afghan insurgency. The covert aid helped with propaganda activities in support of the insurgents’ cause, and provided medical assistance and other non-military supplies. The aid was channeled through “third countries,” mainly Pakistan. National Security Advisor Brzezinski also proposed to the President that the US make a more public expression of “sympathy” for the Afghan “independence” forces. He also raised with the President, in a 23 July discussion, the prospect that the Soviets might try to unseat the current government, whose tactics were proving counterproductive to Moscow’s aims. The President directed that something be done to put a public spotlight on the issue.⁶²

One apparent result of this was a speech by Brzezinski on 2 August that *The New York Times* reported in an article headlined “US Indirectly Pressing Russians to Halt Afghanistan Intervention.” Brzezinski’s speech—describing US “prudence” with regard to Iran and declaring

that others were expected to “abstain from intervention and from efforts to impose alien doctrines on a deeply religious and nationally conscious people”—did not explicitly mention the Soviet Union or Afghanistan. The article said, however, that a “US official” had made clear “privately” that the speech was specifically directed at the threat of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, where the pro-Soviet government was near collapse in the face of widespread Islamic opposition and tribal rebellion. The article also described “Western intelligence reports” of “several hundred ... armed Soviet advisors around an airfield [Bagram] north of Kabul,” and said that “Mr. Brzezinski’s statement was evidently intended as a warning against deeper [Soviet] involvement.”⁶³

Three days later, on 5 August, a mutiny erupted in an Afghan garrison at Bala Hissar, on the outskirts of Kabul. A group of officers seized control of the garrison command center, put together a formation of tanks and armored troop carriers, and set off for the presidential palace in Kabul. The move was crushed within a matter of hours by vastly superior loyalist Afghan Army forces employing tanks and helicopter gunships.

The US Embassy described this event as among the most serious challenges yet encountered by the Afghan government. Although the regime showed it still had the strength to defend its fortress cities, the mutiny bared one of the regime’s fundamental weaknesses: the deteriorating loyalty of regular army units. In the Embassy’s view, this foreshadowed growing problems for the Afghan regime and its Soviet mentors. Western press accounts described the mutiny as the most serious clash since the ouster of Daoud sixteen months earlier. The press also reported that, although the regime had fairly quickly put down the revolt, the US Government was sufficiently concerned over the situation in Kabul that it began reducing the number of personnel at its Embassy there.⁶⁴

Within the US Intelligence Community, an internal memorandum submitted to the National Intelligence Officer for Warning ⁶⁵ offered the view that the latest mutiny increased the prospect for direct Soviet military intervention. It pointed out that earlier intelligence assessments had already concluded that the Afghan regime had been driven into a fortress defense posture. The Afghan Army constituted the wall of this fortress, and the Bala Hissar mutiny showed that there were significant cracks in the wall. The Soviets were now faced with the possibility that the army to which they were providing assistance might come apart. The memo said this was forcing the Soviets to examine options and costs for taking over the major burden of the counterinsurgency by deploying their own forces rather than accepting the consequences of an insurgency takeover in Kabul.

Soviet Reactions—US Interpretations

This view was reinforced when, on 17 August, a top-level Soviet military delegation of 13 generals and six colonels arrived in Kabul. Unlike the group of officers sent to Kabul in April after the Herat uprising, this delegation was not made up of “political generals” concerned with “ideological outlook.” It was headed by the Deputy Chief of the Soviet General Staff and Commander of the Soviet Ground Forces General I. G. Pavlovsky, and was composed of officers responsible for planning and directing military operations. The fact that this delegation was dispatched less than two weeks after the Bala Hissar uprising led intelligence assessments to report that its mission was probably to conduct a close-up examination of the military situation and operational conditions in the aftermath of the rebellion. And the rank and composition of

the delegation also led intelligence analysts to suggest Moscow was contemplating a major decision on the level and form of field-level military support it was willing to give to the Taraki regime.⁶⁶ (Some analysts could not help attaching significance to the fact that Pavlovsky had led Soviet Army units into Czechoslovakia in August of 1968.)

At about the time of the Bala Hissar mutiny, US intelligence analysts had concluded that the Soviets had essentially given up on their efforts to replace Taraki and Amin. Having been unsuccessful in their attempts to create an Afghan coalition that would offer anything better, the Soviets appeared to have decided to focus on the aid and advisors needed to help the existing regime survive. If the Soviets were to make such an investment, however, they presumably needed some assurance that the Afghan Army could muster the cohesion and commitment to take the offensive against the insurgency. And in view of the uncertainty about this, some analysts presumed that part of the Pavlovsky delegation's mission was to evaluate the operational feasibility of committing Soviet military forces to the task of crushing the insurrection.⁶⁷

Nonetheless, a week after the delegation had arrived in Kabul, CIA reported that the majority of its analysts "continue to feel that the deteriorating situation does not presage an escalation of Soviet military involvement in the form of a direct combat role."⁶⁸

US Embassy assessments from Kabul in early September expressed similar views. It reported that one "possible" purpose of the Pavlovsky mission was to lay the groundwork for Soviet military intervention, in the event Moscow decided that it was necessary. An Embassy cable concluded that "at some point the hemorrhaging of Khalq military manpower [through death, desertion and defection] will require the USSR to make a decision whether to commit its own combat units." The cable pointed out that "there were not enough Afghan tank crews to man the large number of tanks being delivered by the USSR," and that at some point the Taraki-Amin regime might feel compelled to ask for assistance from Soviet troops.⁶⁹

The Embassy also reported that many diplomats in Kabul did not rule out the possibility that Moscow might feel compelled to send in troops to save the revolution. These officials believed that, in such an event, the initial involvement would be limited—perhaps to a special airborne force to protect Soviet housing installations—but that, once there, the troop commitment probably would expand. Other diplomats believed the Soviets would withhold combat support in the belief they could "do business with almost any successor regime." The Embassy's own view was that "The time has not yet arrived for a Khalq plea for help—nor is there yet any solid evidence that the USSR is poising itself for armed intervention. Undoubtedly, the USSR has... been making its contingency plans and preparations."⁷⁰

A somewhat more somber and less equivocal account appeared in *The New York Times* on 6 September. Citing "diplomatic sources," it said the Soviets' inability to find a political solution was moving them toward direct military intervention. The article described the growing number of Soviet military personnel already in the country, their "takeover" of Bagram air base, the heavy traffic of military transport aircraft there, and the reports of Soviet advisors participating in combat operations. The Soviets were said to recognize that military intervention would have severe implications for relations with the US, India, Iran and other Islamic countries. Nevertheless, the article quoted one "foreign expert" as saying that "If you accept the premise that the Russians cannot let Afghanistan go, and if you also realize that the Afghan institutions can no longer hope to contain the insurrections, the only possible conclusion is that the Soviets come in forcefully."⁷¹

Meanwhile, in the last week of August, US intelligence agencies were again seeing activity in

some of the same Soviet combat forces opposite the northern border of Afghanistan that had been active in March. The 5th Guards Motorized Rifle Division at Kushka had again moved components out of garrison. Some of its subordinate units—including a battalion of tanks, an antiaircraft artillery battalion, a mortar battery, and groups of trucks—had been moved to a nearby rail yard. Intelligence assessments said the movements appeared to be connected to a field training exercise, again with some apparent reservist participation.⁷²

Components of the 105th Guards Airborne Division also were again detected in what appeared to be preparations for air movement. (Unlike the motorized rifle divisions, airborne divisions based in the USSR were maintained at or near full manning levels.) The airborne unit activities seemed to involve training in specific techniques for loading equipment on a new and more advanced military transport aircraft (the IL-76) than the model (AN-12) normally used by this airborne division. This prompted the first intelligence assessment suggesting that the Soviets might be preparing to commit airborne troops to Afghanistan. The assessment said the likely purpose of such an operation would be to defend Kabul in the event of a sudden, drastic deterioration that threatened to overwhelm the Afghan capital (for example, an operation along the lines postulated by some diplomatic representatives in Kabul).⁷³

The majority view in the US Intelligence Community continued to rate the chances of a major movement of Soviet forces into Afghanistan as unlikely, but some analysts pressed for a more active examination of alternatives for direct military action. They pointed to the number of Soviet military advisors, their increased involvement in combat and logistic support operations, the Pavlovsky delegation and the activities seen in Soviet units bordering Afghanistan as signs that Moscow had not yet set a limit on its commitment.⁷⁴

An Alert Memorandum on 14 September from Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner to the President and other senior US officials, reflecting this concern, warned that “The Soviet leaders may be on the threshold of a decision to commit their own forces to prevent the collapse of the regime and to protect their sizable stakes in Afghanistan.” This memorandum also said, however, that Moscow was sensitive to the potentially open-ended military and political costs that could result from such a venture. Therefore, if the Soviets ultimately did increase their military role they were likely to do so only incrementally—raising the number of military advisors, expanding involvement in combat operations, and possibly bringing in small units to provide security in key cities. The Alert Memorandum nonetheless acknowledged that, even if the commitment initially was limited to incremental steps, the Soviets would risk amplifying their stake in the ultimate outcome, making it harder to resist further increasing their military commitment if their initial steps did not produce the results they sought.⁷⁵

Another Duel in the Palace

The same day this Alert Memorandum was sent to US policy officials, a new leadership crisis occurred in Kabul. On the evening of 14 September (mid-day in Washington) Kabul radio announced the dismissal of four top government officials—Minister of the Interior Watanjar, Minister of Communications Ghulabzoy, Minister of Tribal Affairs Mazdoorjar, and Chief of Intelligence (the AGCA, which included the secret police) Sarwari. The radio announcement said the dismissals had been at Amin’s recommendation and with Taraki’s approval. The US Embassy in Kabul reported that shortly before the dismissals had been announced, troops and armored vehicles had surrounded the presidential palace and begun to occupy key positions in

the capital. (These military components were from the 4th Afghan Army Armored Corps, which had carried out similar functions in the coup against Daoud a year and a half earlier.) Gunfire had been heard in the palace area.⁷⁶

Two days later, on 16 September, Kabul radio announced that an “extraordinary meeting” of the PDPA Central Committee had been held and that Taraki had “requested that he be relieved of his party and government leadership positions due to health reasons and physical incapacity.” The announcement said that Amin had been appointed to replace Taraki as the new party general secretary. The top government body, the “Revolutionary Council,” had also met that day, according to the radio broadcast, also “approving” Taraki’s “request” to be relieved of the Presidency and appointing Amin as his successor.⁷⁷

In the following days, US intelligence again detected heightened activity in Soviet combat forces across the border from Afghanistan. A regiment of the 105th Guards Airborne Division had once more been moved into convoy formation, apparently being readied for deployment. Armored troop carriers and field artillery normally kept in covered storage were again positioned for loading aboard transport aircraft. Partial mobilization also appeared to be taking place in a ground force motorized rifle division—the 58th located at Kizyl Arvat, west of Kushka—that was not one of those seen engaging in such activity in March. This raised to three the number of such divisions in this region seen mobilizing in recent months. Two airborne divisions located farther from the Afghan border—the 104th in the Transcaucasus and the 98th in Odessa—also appeared to be preparing to deploy. The activity in all these forces would continue until the beginning of October, at which time all would return to their garrisons.⁷⁸

On 19 September, the State Department included in its press briefing a statement that the US had detected “increased activity” in Soviet military units near the Afghan border. The statement said that while the purpose of this activity could not be confirmed, the US “wanted to reiterate [its] opposition to any intervention in Afghan internal affairs.”⁷⁹ On the same day, National Security Advisor Brzezinski informed the President that he believed a Soviet invasion was becoming more probable. A day later, officials from various US agencies met to examine plans for dealing with this potential development, and Brzezinski asked the DCI to prepare an intelligence appraisal “of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan to date, so that we can differentiate between creeping involvement and direct invasion.”⁸⁰

Meanwhile, information from diverse sources was providing a basic outline of the events that had brought about the sudden leadership change in the Afghan regime.⁸¹ A few days before the shootout at the presidential palace, Taraki—returning from a conference in Havana—had stopped off for discussions in Moscow. Upon Taraki’s return to Kabul, Amin demanded that four officials whom he accused of plotting his ouster be summarily dismissed. (He reportedly had been tipped off by conspirators of his own.) Taraki sternly rebuffed this demand, but Amin defiantly dismissed the four officials. Taraki reacted by summoning Amin to a meeting at the presidential palace on 14 September. (There would be later reports that the Soviet ambassador played a role in arranging this meeting and persuading Amin to attend.) When Amin entered the palace and began to mount the stairs to Taraki’s suite, one or more of the palace security guards—reportedly acting under instructions from one of the dismissed plotters—tried to shoot him. Amin survived because of the effort of the chief of the palace security force, a secret Amin supporter who was killed in the shooting (and later extolled as a hero). Amin escaped, and immediately launched his military move to take power.

Uncertainty surrounded the question of a Soviet role. US intelligence analysts tentatively concluded that Amin’s action “may have been a preemptive move to forestall a Soviet plot to

have Taraki remove him.” The various conflicting reports received through diplomatic and other channels included allegations that Taraki had discussed the plan during his stopover in Moscow, and that an Amin sympathizer who was in Taraki’s travel delegation got wind of it and warned Amin. These stories varied as to whether the scheme originated with the Afghan plotters and was supported by the Soviets, or was pushed on Taraki by Moscow. The US Embassy in Kabul, for its part, was skeptical that the plot had been discussed in Moscow.

Taraki’s whereabouts in the immediate aftermath of the announcement of his ouster were initially unknown. Stories circulated that he had been injured, if not killed, in the shooting at the presidential palace on 14 September. The Embassy subsequently learned that he was alive but being held prisoner at the presidential palace. In the ensuing weeks there would be reports that three of the plotters had escaped (Defense Minister Watanjar, intelligence chief Sawari, and Minister of Tribal Affairs Ghulabzoy) and were hiding at the Soviet mission compound in Kabul, although the US embassy again expressed skepticism about the validity of such stories. (The fourth plotter, Minister of Communications Mazdoorjar, was known to have been captured and placed under house arrest.)⁸²

As murky as the picture was, there was one point on which reports were virtually unanimous, and that was that Moscow was not happy with the outcome. Western news media pointed out that Amin had been a principal obstacle to Soviet efforts to find a political solution to the turmoil in Afghanistan. The Intelligence Community concluded that the Soviets probably believed Amin’s coup had narrowed the regime’s base of support and made the counterinsurgency task even more difficult. An Interagency Intelligence Memorandum disseminated on 28 September, prepared in response to Brzezinski’s request a week earlier, said that “Moscow probably views the situation as even more unstable...[and] may fear that this coup might fragment the Afghan Army and lead to a breakdown of control in Kabul.” It said that “The threat raised by the Muslim insurgency to the survival of the Marxist government in Afghanistan appears to be more serious now than at any time since the government assumed power in April 1978.”⁸³

Intelligence Community Views of Soviet Military Options

The 28 September 1979 Interagency Intelligence Memorandum also provided an in-depth examination of where Moscow’s military involvement in Afghanistan was likely to lead in the longer term. It noted that the estimated number of Soviet military advisors in Afghanistan had grown from 350 at the time of the communist coup to some 750-1,000 by the beginning of 1979, and to 2,500 at the time of Amin’s takeover. It also pointed out that advisors were attached to every command level in the Afghan Army, including at least some regimental and battalion level units engaged in combat.⁸⁴

The Interagency Intelligence Assessment described the Soviet military as having two very distinct options in Afghanistan: to serve in a support capacity, assisting in a military campaign carried out primarily by the Afghan Army, or to mount a large-scale intervention in which Soviet forces would take over most of the combat operations. Potential actions in the first category were described as including:

- 1) Increased equipment and advisors, with advisors allowed to participate more extensively

in combat and combat air support and in ferrying men and material within Afghanistan; 2) Limited intervention of combat and combat service support units, including attack helicopter units and logistic support and maintenance components to enhance Afghan “combat reach and effectiveness;” 3) Limited intervention with Soviet combat units to provide security for Kabul and key cities and critical points, and perhaps to operate selectively in combat operations alongside Afghan Army units to stiffen their resolve.⁸⁵

To do anything beyond securing Kabul and a few other key cities or critical points, the interagency assessment gave the Soviets only the second category of military options—committing massive numbers of ground forces in a potentially open-ended operation.

As a practical matter, the three courses of action postulated under the first category were not alternatives, but gradations of escalating military involvement, and the choice was how far to go and how fast. All of these moves were designed to help the Afghan Army defeat the insurgent forces, and all of them relied on the Afghan Army taking the main role in nationwide military operations. Thus the linchpin of Moscow’s willingness and ability to undertake one or more of these steps was, according to intelligence analysts, its assessment of the loyalty and cohesion of the Afghan Army.⁸⁶

Analysts also believed that, even for limited combat support options, the Soviets would need to move cautiously lest they alienate rather than bolster the Afghan forces they still were counting on to play the major combat role. For this reason, even if the Soviets decided to introduce limited combat forces, they were expected to do so incrementally, beginning with a few battalions and working up to an airborne division or two at the most. The 105th Guards Airborne Division—seen in preparatory activities during previous upheavals in Afghanistan, and with a full-strength troop complement of 7,900—was judged to be the most likely force to be brought in.⁸⁷

One postulated exception that might cause the Soviets to move more rapidly would be a backlash to the Amin coup that provoked severe fighting in the capital. In such a situation, according to the intelligence assessment, the Soviets probably were prepared to deploy one or more airborne divisions to Kabul and vicinity to protect Soviets already there as well as to maintain a pro-Soviet regime. (Again, the preparations of the 105th Guards Airborne Division would certainly have supported such a view.) The intelligence community analysis said that such a deployment would not be intended for use in fighting the Muslim insurgency but acknowledged that, once there, Soviet units could get drawn into the fighting.⁸⁸

If the Afghan Army came apart, according to this analysis, Moscow would confront the prospect that preserving the current Afghan regime would mean taking the lead role in combating the insurgency—what the assessment described as “massive” Soviet military intervention. Soviet ground force units moving into Afghanistan would meet armed opposition not only from the insurgents but from defecting Afghan Army forces.

The Interagency Intelligence Memorandum described such an undertaking by the Soviets as a “multidivisional operation” requiring more than the four ground force divisions and one airborne division (the 105th) based in the Turkestan Military District. It noted that some additional divisions could be drawn from the nearby Central Asian Military District opposite the Xinjiang Province of China, but said the Soviets probably would be reluctant to weaken their position there. “An operation of this magnitude would therefore require the re-deployment of forces—and their supporting elements—from western and central [USSR] military districts, in addition to those near the Soviet-Afghan border,” according to the assessment.⁸⁹

The memorandum said Moscow had seemed prepared before the Amin coup to offer some combat help well short of the major intervention that the assessment defined as a “multidivision ground force operation.” Given the uncertainty immediately following the coup, any such moves probably had been deferred, according to the memorandum, until the Soviets were satisfied that Amin would consolidate his position. But as soon as Moscow felt assured he had done so, according to intelligence analysts, the Soviet leaders’ desire to avoid facing an all-or-nothing choice would cause them to begin increasing their combat support, up to what the memorandum characterized as a “sprinkling” of Soviet combat units.

If, in fact, the Afghan Army did come apart, and Moscow confronted a situation where only large-scale intervention by Soviet troops would save the regime, the intelligence analysis concluded that Soviet leaders were more likely to abandon the Khalq regime than to be willing to incur the costs of invasion. Their first choice obviously would be to find some viable leftist alternative to Amin, but if no such faction appeared, according to the analysis, “the Soviets would promote installation of a moderate regime willing to deal with them.” Intelligence analysts acknowledged that abandoning a communist regime Moscow had so demonstrably sponsored would be seen by many Soviet leaders as damaging to the USSR. The Soviets could deflect this to some extent by standing behind their policy and blaming the Afghan communists for not following Moscow’s guidance.

By comparison, according to the intelligence analysis, the price of an invasion would include:

“the grave and open-ended task of holding down an Afghan insurgency in rugged terrain. The Soviets would also have to consider the likely prospect that they would be contending with an increasingly hostile and anti-Soviet population. The USSR would then have to consider the likelihood of an adverse reaction in the West, as well as further complications with Iran, India, and Pakistan. Moscow would also have to weigh the negative effects elsewhere in the Muslim world of a massive Soviet military presence in Afghanistan. ... A conspicuous use of Soviet military force against an Asian population would also provide the Chinese considerable political capital.”

On balance, the Interagency Intelligence Memorandum concluded (with no dissents) that Moscow would not believe that saving the current Khalq regime or even another communist regime was worth this price. The final sentence of the memorandum listed examples of situations in which there would be a “substantially greater” chance that Moscow would be willing “to pay the price of large-scale and long-term military intervention.” Examples included “the prospect of the advent of an anti-Soviet regime,” “foreign military intervention” and “prolonged political chaos.”⁹⁰ In light of the events that ultimately occurred, it should be noted that the condition of “prolonged political chaos” could accompany most scenarios for intervention.

The interagency assessment did not address the activities that had been observed in the airborne division or in three of the four motorized rifle divisions in the Turkestan Military District. Nor did it mention the alerting of airborne divisions in the central and western USSR during times of crisis in Afghanistan. The only comment offered on the status and activities of the Soviet forces was the conclusion that “We have not seen indications that the Soviets are at the moment preparing ground forces for large-scale military intervention in Afghanistan.” By “large scale” the memorandum presumably was referring to the “multi-division” force described above.

Approaching the Boiling Point

On 10 October, Kabul radio announced that Taraki had died the previous day of a “serious illness,” and that his remains had immediately been buried. In Washington it was generally believed he had in fact been fatally wounded during the palace shootout and probably had died well before the official announcement.⁹¹

Less than a week later, an entire infantry division of the Afghan Army garrisoned at Rishkor, about nine miles southwest of Kabul, mutinied and launched an attack toward Kabul. Several days of intense combat ensued before the mutiny finally was put down. In addressing the critical importance of the Afghan Army’s loyalty in determining Soviet actions, the intelligence appraisal disseminated at the end of September had pointed out that “with four major mutinies in the past seven months, its continued allegiance is suspect.”⁹² The “frequency ratio” was now up to five in eight.

According to intelligence received at the time, the mutiny seemed especially alarming to the Soviets and “a number of major steps were taken shortly thereafter.”⁹³ Once again, as had been the case in every crisis in Afghanistan since the Herat uprising in March, the Soviet 105th Guards Airborne Division at Fergana—the military unit the recent Interagency Intelligence Memorandum had described as most likely to be deployed to Kabul if Moscow urgently sought to beef-up security there—was seen getting ready to move.

Heightened activity also was detected again in the same three divisions: the 5th Motorized Rifle Division at Kushka; the 108th at Termez; and the 58th that Kizyl Arvat that had been periodically engaging in field deployments and unusual training and mobilization rehearsals in the preceding months.⁹⁴

Intelligence reporting described the alerting of the airborne division at Fergana as probably linked to the latest Afghan mutiny and Moscow’s concern for its personnel in Kabul. The activity of the three other Soviet ground force divisions was said to be “possibly” related to the events in Afghanistan, although—as a retrospective intelligence evaluation put it—“this linkage was not made strongly.”⁹⁵

The progressive weakness of the Afghan Army was becoming increasingly apparent at the same time insurgent attacks were growing in size and frequency. The insurgents had begun to focus particularly on cutting supply lines to cities and military bases. The Afghan regime was forced to provide armored convoys for movements along major roads linking Kabul and the other major cities, and to increase its reliance on aerial supply of its major army garrisons. US government analysts were publicly quoted as saying that, while the Afghan Army controlled Kabul and a handful of major cities, insurgents operated with impunity in about half of the country.⁹⁶

Offensive operations by the Afghan Army succeeded only when Soviet military personnel were heavily involved both in combat and combat support at all echelons down to the front-line units. A Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessment disseminated in late October said that “without Soviet support the [Afghan] Army would have collapsed a long time ago.” DIA said the Soviets were “the backbone of Afghanistan’s logistics system...they maintain all technical equipment and provide massive quantities of supplies and other equipment.”⁹⁷

Reports continued to circulate in diplomatic and intelligence channels as well as the news media that Moscow was dissatisfied with Amin. Soviet officials were making it known on the diplomatic circuit that, while the USSR would continue to provide weapons, equipment and advisors to the existing regime, Moscow was trying to come up with an alternative leader—most likely one not associated with the present Afghan government. Intelligence sources reported that Amin was aware of this—Moscow had, after all, tried to get rid of him in September—and was making gestures, albeit not very convincing ones, to moderate some of the policies the Soviets considered counterproductive. These minimal gestures were undermined by the murders and disappearances attributed to Amin's efforts to eliminate his known or suspected rivals and thus prevent Moscow from assembling an alternative regime.⁹⁸

By late November, it had become clear to intelligence analysts that the Soviet 105th Airborne Division, put on alert at the time of the latest mutiny in mid-October, had remained at heightened readiness. Also, the Soviet motorized rifle divisions in the area were again engaging in activity that, although below a level indicating imminent deployment, suggested efforts to raise their overall readiness. This mainly was field training at the battalion and regimental level, apparently including activated reservists. By the last week of November, at least two of these divisions—the 5th at Kushka and the 108th at Termez—appeared to be mobilizing at least to a limited degree.⁹⁹

The predominant intelligence view attributed these activities—particularly the readying of airborne units—to Moscow's concern for the safety of Soviet personnel in Kabul. By this time, however, the crisis ignited in Iran by the seizure of the US Embassy there was adding a new element of ambiguity to the analysts' interpretations of Soviet military activities in the region. This was especially so for the ground force motorized rifle divisions. Some intelligence reporting postulated that the apparent effort to improve their readiness was a manifestation of Moscow's unease over possible US reactions to the Iranian crisis.¹⁰⁰

The Advance Echelon Deploys

On 29 November, senior Soviet Deputy Interior Minister Viktor Paputin, who carried the rank of general in the Soviet internal security forces, arrived in Kabul. Over the next few days he met with his counterparts in the Afghan internal security forces and with Amin. These meetings were reported by the Kabul radio station, but did not draw particular attention at the time.¹⁰¹

Also on 29 November and continuing for the next few days, Soviet military transport aircraft were detected flying into Kabul. Some of them remained parked at the Kabul airport, but reports from observers in Kabul indicated that a portion of the aircraft had apparently discharged whatever cargo or personnel they were carrying and quickly departed. The type of aircraft seen at Kabul, and other evidence, indicated that they probably had come from the western USSR, either flying directly or staging through Soviet bases north of Afghanistan.

The purpose of the flights was unclear. Whatever they brought had been expeditiously removed from the airport, and there were unconfirmed reports that some special Soviet troop units had been moved into the city.¹⁰² US intelligence officers in Kabul described an apparent infiltration of special Soviet troops into the city, and numerous reports from the field also indicated some covert operations seemed to be afoot. An on-the-spot assessment by the senior US intelligence officer in the field concluded that some Soviet military operation was being readied.

On 8 December, the intelligence community reported that a second Soviet airborne battalion had been brought to the airfield at Bagram, site of the main operating base for Moscow's military assistance mission. (As noted above, at least one airborne battalion had been based at Bagram for some months.)

The *National Intelligence Daily* (*NID*) and DIA's *Defense Intelligence Notes* (*DIN*) both stated that deployment of this additional airborne battalion to Bagram probably was intended to upgrade defenses at the air base in the face of the increasing insurgent threat. The battalion could also provide added security if Moscow was forced to evacuate its personnel from the country. This interpretation was consistent with the earlier assessments of the most likely purpose of any additional military units Moscow might insert into Afghanistan. The *DIN* added that the heightened preparations suggested "the threat is perceived in Moscow as greater than our reporting indicates...[and] demonstrates Moscow's resolve in pursuing its interests in Afghanistan despite obvious pitfalls and at a time when the Kremlin may consider the US to be preoccupied with events in Tehran."¹⁰³

Two days later, intelligence revealed the arrival of what appeared to be a motorized rifle battalion, equipped with the usual complement of armored vehicles for transportation and for combat operations, as well as with field artillery and antiaircraft artillery. This represented a new level of Soviet military presence. The new unit clearly had been airlifted into Afghanistan during the preceding day or so.

The *NID* noted that the deployment could be "indicative of a decision by the Soviets to increase their forces substantially." DIA estimated that, in addition to security for Soviet operations at Bagram, the newly deployed combat units could be used for quick-reaction, limited-combat security missions elsewhere in Afghanistan, and to help evacuate Soviet personnel if the situation should require. DIA added, however, that

"...it is also possible, although much more speculative, that the airborne and motorized rifle elements now at Bagram are merely the first increment of a much larger combat force that may be deployed to Afghanistan during the coming year. ...It is not certain that Moscow has embarked on such a plan...but it is clear that the Soviets have made a qualitative increase in their military presence and capabilities...."¹⁰⁴

On 11 December, the National Intelligence Officer for Warning convened a group of senior analysts to address the question of whether the deployment of the motorized rifle battalion to Bagram signaled that the Soviets had "crossed a line" in their intentions to engage in military combat operations in Afghanistan. The clear majority of those participating in this meeting supported the view that already had been given in the daily intelligence: that the additional forces had been introduced to provide increased security, especially in the event of a potential need to evacuate Soviet personnel in a rapidly deteriorating situation. Their judgment was, therefore, that although the deployment significantly expanded the security forces, it did not yet foreshadow intentions to escalate Soviet engagement in the Afghan conflict itself. A small minority of the participants dissented, pointing out that the battalion included a full complement of anti-aircraft artillery. These analysts argued that it was difficult to conceive of any aircraft posing such a threat to Soviet troops in Afghanistan as to warrant including anti-aircraft weapons, with one exception—the Afghan Air Force. They believed this suggested that Moscow might be contemplating an operation of sufficient magnitude to risk a reaction by at least parts of the Afghan military.¹⁰⁵

In the next few days, the US Embassy in Kabul reported that observers there had seen what were believed to be soldiers of a Soviet combat battalion being stationed discreetly around the Afghan capital. This information seemed to confirm what some analysts believed was the most likely explanation for the mysterious Soviet military air transport flights into Kabul at the end of November. Their presumption was that these troops probably were from the “Spetsnaz,” Soviet military units roughly comparable to US Special Forces.¹⁰⁶

By 15 December, intelligence disclosed that the Soviet 5th Guards and 108th motorized rifle divisions—the ones most frequently seen in heightened training and mobilization activity—had been brought to what appeared to be full strength, and that the 108th was leaving its garrison. A buildup of transport and combat helicopters had been detected at Kokaty air base in the south of the USSR’s Turkestan Military District, and other military transport aircraft were being marshaled at air bases in this area. A substantial buildup of tactical combat aircraft—fighters, fighter-bombers and light bombers—also was seen at Soviet airfields in the region, including at some airfields that normally did not serve as bases for such aircraft.¹⁰⁷

That afternoon, a Saturday, a number of US intelligence community officials and analysts (including the author) were notified by telephone that the DCI, following discussions that day at the White House, had directed that a meeting be convened the following Monday (17 December) to prepare an alert memorandum on the implications of the increasing Soviet presence in Afghanistan. National Security Advisor Brzezinski already had sent a memorandum to the DCI earlier in the week informing him that the President— after reading intelligence reporting that a second Soviet airborne battalion had arrived at Bagram—wanted to publicize the information. In the memo, Brzezinski asked the DCI to provide by 14 December (Friday) text “sanitized” in a way that would permit it to be used publicly (i.e., in a way that would protect the sources of the information).¹⁰⁸ By the time the DCI received Brzezinski’s memo, however, the motorized rifle battalion already had arrived at Bagram. This discovery presumably figured in the discussions between Brzezinski and the DCI on 15 December, followed by the DCI’s call for an alert memorandum laying out the implications.

Also on 15 December, the Secretary of State’s special advisor on Soviet affairs, Marshal Schulman, called in the chargé from the Soviet Embassy (Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin had departed for the USSR a week earlier) and asked that Moscow provide an explanation for the sudden increase of its military presence in Afghanistan. A cable was also sent that day to the US Embassy in Moscow instructing the ambassador to put the same question directly to the Soviet Foreign Ministry.¹⁰⁹

On Monday morning, 17 December, the Afghan situation was taken up at a meeting of senior national security officials initially called to address the Iran hostage crisis. (Participants included Vice President Walter Mondale, National Security Advisor Brzezinski, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the DCI.) DCI Turner reported that the recent movement of new units to Afghanistan—including a third airborne battalion added to the Soviet forces at Bagram—raised the number of Soviet military personnel there from 3,500 to an estimated 5,300. He also pointed out that two Soviet military command posts had been created just north of the Afghan border, that two more divisions in the vicinity appeared to be on the move, and that a buildup of air assets was underway. According to the record of the meeting, the DCI said:

CIA does not see this as a crash buildup but rather as a steady, planned buildup, perhaps related

*to Soviet perceptions of a deterioration of the Afghan military forces and the need to beef them up at some point. ... We believe that the Soviets have made a political decision to keep a pro-Soviet regime in power and to use military force to that end if necessary. They either give this a higher priority than SALT [the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty being debated at that time in the US Congress] or they may believe it is irrelevant to SALT.*¹¹⁰

It was decided at the national security meeting that the US would explore with Pakistan and the United Kingdom the possibility of providing additional funds, weapons and communications to the Afghan rebels “to make it as expensive as possible for the Soviets to continue their efforts.” The US also would increase worldwide propaganda relating to the Soviet activities, recommending to its European allies that they encourage more media attention to the Afghan situation and step up efforts “to cast the Soviets as opposing Muslim religious and nationalist expression.” The participants in the meeting also concluded, however, that for now the US would continue to keep its diplomatic demarches to the Soviets in private channels “for the record,” in the belief that “there was no benefit in going public at this time.”¹¹¹

By the time this meeting adjourned, the State Department had received a cable from US Ambassador Watson in Moscow reporting that “The Soviets did not respond to our request for an explanation of their deployments into Afghanistan. Their total presentation was essentially a rebuff.” According to the ambassador, the Soviet deputy foreign minister had described as “inventions” the activities the US questioned, and asserted that affairs between the “sovereign states” of Afghanistan and the USSR were “solely their own business.”¹¹²

Also on 17 December an event occurred in Kabul which, in the light of later developments, may have been of greater significance than was recognized at the time. An assassination attempt on Amin took place at his presidential palace residence. Once again he survived, although there were reports that he suffered a slight leg wound. His nephew, who was head of the intelligence service and Amin’s top security aide, was seriously wounded and taken to the USSR for treatment. Two days later, Amin moved his residence to a former royal palace complex about seven miles southeast of the center of Kabul, and took his security detachment with him.¹¹³

Meanwhile, completion of the Alert Memorandum DCI Turner had ordered was being delayed by disagreement among analysts over the implications of the Soviet buildup north of the Afghan border. All agreed that the Soviets were preparing to engage directly in combat operations and that this would, by itself, represent a distinct escalation of their commitment. The disagreement was mainly over the magnitude and purpose of the military operations Moscow was preparing and how soon they would occur. A sizable majority of analysts from all the intelligence agencies argued that Moscow intended a graduated “augmentation” to shore up the deteriorating Afghan military; this had been the basis for the view the DCI presented at the 17 December White House meeting. A few analysts contended, however, that the steps being taken indicated that Moscow was about to launch a major military intervention that would include the full-scale deployment into Afghanistan of the two ground force divisions being readied north of the border along with one or more airborne divisions. This would involve some 30,000 or more troops and would amount to a full-fledged military intervention to seize control of the situation in the country. And these analysts argued that signs showed this move to be imminent.¹¹⁴

The Main Forces Deploy

The alert memorandum finally was shaken loose on 19 December when intelligence revealed large stocks of gasoline and other fuels pre-positioned in mobile containers near the key road crossings from the USSR into Afghanistan. A train was also unloading bridging equipment near one of the crossings. The 5th Guards Motorized Rifle Division had left Kushka and was heading toward the border. Confirmation came that preparations were under way to move additional airborne units from three air bases in the western USSR. The buildup of tactical aircraft was continuing at airfields in the border region. There also was evidence that troops from a Soviet unit already in Afghanistan (suspected to be from the motorized rifle battalion recently brought to Bagram) were securing a key intersection (the Salang Pass) on the main road from the USSR to Kabul.¹¹⁵

This information enabled analysts to reach a consensus that a move of additional forces probably was imminent, but they continued to disagree over the size and significance of the military force likely to be involved. As a result, the wording of the Alert Memorandum issued on 19 December was somewhat cautious on this point. It said, "The pace of Soviet deployments in recent weeks does not suggest that the Soviets are responding to what they perceive as a time urgent contingency, but rather that they are reacting to the continuing deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan." The buildup near the border, according to the memorandum, suggested that "further augmentation [of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan] is likely soon, and... preparations for a much more substantial reinforcement may also be under way." Introducing the "augmentation" forces (described in the *NID* a day later as a "multidivisional force") would, according to the Alert Memorandum, enable the Soviets to "hold other key points, engage insurgents in selected provinces, or free Afghan Army units for operations elsewhere." It also said, however, that "To conduct extensive anti-insurgent operations on a countrywide scale would require mobilization of much larger numbers of regular ground forces drawn from other military districts in a potentially open-ended operation."¹¹⁶

On 21 December, the administration began publicizing extensive details of the expanded Soviet military presence in Afghanistan and the buildup of Soviet forces north of the Afghan border. According to press reports, "Carter Administration officials" said they were providing this information "in line with a recent decision to publicize Moscow's military role in the Afghan war" (presumably referring to the recommendations of the 17 December White House meeting). They described the movement of three battalions of Soviet armored and airborne troops to an air base near Kabul within the previous two weeks, resulting in the addition of some 1,500 combat soldiers to the Soviet forces already in country. The press also was told that two Soviet motorized rifle divisions and an airborne division, totaling more than 30,000 troops, had been put on alert near the border. One State Department official "who asked not to be identified" said that "several times in recent days" the US had voiced its concern to Moscow over the buildup of forces in and near Afghanistan.¹¹⁷

These same press accounts also reflected divided views among intelligence analysts and Administration officials over the implications of the buildup. Some officials were described as believing the Soviets were preparing for a full-scale invasion. One "White House national security aide," was reported to have said that the Soviet preparations around Afghanistan "show all the marks of a major military intervention," pointing out that the same signs had been seen before the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. Some intelligence analysts reportedly had cited the creation of a special Soviet operational headquarters near the border as a signal that Soviet forces were about to go in.

"However, other officials said that they doubted that Moscow would begin a major invasion and that the buildup was part of a more gradual process of military intervention in the guerrilla war,"

according to the press reports. Many “intelligence aides” were also said to be unsure about Moscow’s motives, and some were cited as saying there was “no clear sign of the purpose of Soviet forces in or near Afghanistan.” Some Administration officials reportedly believed the force being mobilized probably was not large enough to undertake full-scale counterinsurgency operations and expected that, if it were in fact sent to Afghanistan, it probably would be used to secure certain key points while the 50,000-man Afghan Army carried out the direct combat. Officially, however, the State Department spokesman who provided the basic information in a press briefing declined any comment, and in a separate venue Secretary of State Vance responded to a question by saying that any comment would be only speculation on his part.

On 22 December, the same day these accounts began appearing in the press, National Security Agency Director Vice Admiral Bobby Ray Inman telephoned Brzezinski and Defense Secretary Brown to inform them, according to one account, that there was “no doubt” the Soviets would begin a major military intervention in Afghanistan within the next 72 hours. He called again on 24 December to report that the move would begin within the next fifteen hours.¹¹⁸ His information certainly proved to be correct.

Late in the evening of 24 December Washington time, US intelligence began reporting a massive airlift by Soviet military transport aircraft. The majority of flights were from the western USSR to air bases in the Soviet Military District of Turkestan, but a sizable portion also were landing at Kabul and Bagram airfields in Afghanistan. The following morning the DCI issued another Alert Memorandum, warning that the Soviets had completed preparations for a major move into Afghanistan and that the move probably had already begun. The same day, the National Security Agency issued a report saying a major Soviet move into Afghanistan was possibly imminent.¹¹⁹

By the time these alerts were dispatched to policy officials on December 25, waves of military aircraft were surging into Afghanistan, most from the Turkestan Military District. It quickly became apparent that the aircraft detected the night before flying into airfields in the Soviet border region near Afghanistan were using those airfields as staging bases. It also was clear that units being airlifted included not only those from the 105th Airborne Division at nearby Fergana, but also the 103rd Airborne Division headquartered at Vitebsk, in the Belorussian Military District in the Western USSR. Some flights also were coming from bases in the Moscow Military District, and analysts assumed they were carrying special forces units. In addition to landing at the two main air bases of Bagram and Kabul, some flights were detected going into Shindand and Qandahar, in the western and southern parts of Afghanistan.¹²⁰

Reporting on these events in the daily intelligence publications of both CIA and DIA continued to reflect the perception of an incremental augmentation of forces already in the country. At the end of the day on 25 December, analysts still described the primary mission of these forces as one of providing security to Soviet personnel in the Kabul area and other centers. At that point the number of troops estimated to have been brought in was about 800. A *NID* article on 26 December pointed to the large field petroleum depots set up near the border at Termz and Kushka as suggesting the Soviets intended to use these sites as staging areas for introducing additional units. The daily current intelligence reporting on 26 and 27 December said that, if the newly deployed forces were to be used in combat operations, it was likely to be on a small scale intended to assist the Afghan regime in maintaining its “dwindling authority.” This was the same picture US officials gave to the media.¹²¹

The airlift continued at a high level until the evening of 27 December, when it began to tail off. Between 24 and 27 December 1979 there were 250 to 300 flights. The forces brought in were

initially estimated to be about five to six battalions, amounting to 2,000 to 2,500 troops.¹²²

The perception of an operation merely to prop up the existing Amin regime was definitively squashed on 27 December (late in the evening Kabul time) when Soviet troops carried out an assault on Amin's new residence that resulted in his death. In a broadcast purporting to be on Kabul radio, Babrak Karmal—whose sudden reappearance was itself revealing—announced that Amin had been ousted by the “People's Democratic Party and the Revolutionary Council of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.” Karmal said he was heading the new government even then being formed. Intelligence fairly quickly determined that the broadcast was transmitted on the Kabul radio frequency from across the border in the USSR. In one of their small slip-ups, the Soviets were slow in seizing the real Kabul radio transmission facility, and thus it was still on the air when it suddenly was overpowered by the broadcast from the USSR.¹²³

There still are differing versions, even from Soviet and Afghan participants, of exactly how Amin was killed—whether his Soviet attackers shot him, or he shot himself as they burst into his palace. There were no doubts even at the time, however, that it was a Soviet operation to install the new regime of their choice. Soviet special forces (“Spetsnaz”) troops attacking Amin's presidential palace were outfitted in Afghan Army uniforms and appeared to have been selected by ethnic origin to assist their disguise, but it did not sell. Too many eyewitnesses observed Soviet combat units simultaneously seizing or cordoning off several other key political and military facilities, including the ministries of defense, interior, and even the Kabul radio station. Some of the Soviet units included armored combat vehicles, and in some cases they engaged in firefights with the few Afghan units that put up nominal resistance. Some analysts quickly concluded that they now understood the purpose of the airlift of quasi-covert troops into Kabul in the first week of December.¹²⁴

By 28 December, intelligence confirmed that the two Soviet motorized rifle divisions near the border were moving into Afghanistan. The 108th Division from Termez was moving along the road that went through the now-secured Salang pass to Bagram and Kabul. The other, the 5th Guards from Kushka, crossed over further west and headed down a road that circled through Herat toward the major southwest Afghan city of Qandahar. At this point, intelligence analysts also raised their estimate of the forces airlifted in during the preceding four days to about 5,000. The airlift, together with the movement of the two motorized rifle divisions meant that there now were some 30,000 troops in or entering Afghanistan. The Carter administration immediately publicized this information.¹²⁵

At about the time these divisions were crossing the border, the new Kabul regime announced in a broadcast that Moscow had accepted its request for military assistance. The broadcast also announced the formation of the new government, whose members would include at least two of the plotters (Watanjar and Sarwari) who had been in hiding—reportedly with Soviet assistance—since their failed attempt to remove Amin in September.¹²⁶

There no longer was any doubt in Washington about what had begun on Christmas Eve. The Soviets had airlifted major combat forces into Afghanistan, using them to seize control of the capital and major cities and transportation nodes. They eliminated the existing government, installed a proxy regime and used it to provide cover for sending in the additional combat divisions. At a National Security Council meeting President Carter chaired that day, “All knew,” according to Brzezinski, “that a major watershed had been reached.”¹²⁷ There was a new combat zone on the Cold War battleground.

Soviet Documents on the Invasion Plan

Soviet records released in recent years show that the military operation carried out in December 1979 began to be shaped at least nine months earlier, as part of Moscow's reaction to the mutiny of the Afghan Army troops in Herat. At an extended Politburo meeting beginning on 17 March, held specifically to examine responses to the situation in Afghanistan, senior Politburo member and acting chairman Kirilenko (Brezhnev was not present for this session) referred in his opening comments to "proposals which have been completed and are now in front of you."¹²⁸ The subsequent discussions clearly indicate that use of Soviet combat forces in Afghanistan was on this list.

After various Politburo members referred to the possible use of combat units, Defense Minister Ustinov described military contingency measures then being prepared. He said one option called for getting the 105th Airborne Division and a motorized rifle regiment ready to move into Kabul on a day's notice. Two ground force divisions would be moved to the border area. Once there, they would be prepared, if necessary, to go into Afghanistan within three days. Ustinov said the military was preparing an alternative plan in which the ground force divisions would be immediately moved into Afghanistan. The two divisions he named—the 5th Motor Artillery Division—which US intelligence listed as the 5th Guards Motorized Rifle at Kushka, and the 68th motorized division known by US intelligence analysts as the 108th Motorized Rifle Division at Termez—were the same two divisions US intelligence detected a few days later as they began training and selective reservist call-ups that continued sporadically until the units entered Afghanistan in December.¹²⁹

In a session of the same extended Politburo deliberations, Ustinov said two days later that a third ground force division also was being prepared "in the Central Asian Military District." A third division was, in fact, mobilized at the time of the invasion and it moved into Afghanistan about a month later. This division (known by US analysts as the 201st Motorized Rifle Division) was garrisoned at Dushambe, in Tajikistan, a Soviet republic that made up part of the Central Asian Military District.¹³⁰

The commitment of combat forces into Afghanistan was treated as an open question during the first day of this extended Politburo meeting.¹³¹ Early in that session Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko asserted that, in considering assistance to the Kabul regime:

We must proceed from the fundamental proposition that...under no conditions can we lose Afghanistan. For 60 years now we have lived with Afghanistan in peace and friendship. And if we lose Afghanistan now and it turns against the Soviet Union, this will result in a sharp setback to our foreign policy.¹³²

KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov, discussing the need to develop a public justification for inserting military forces, said this should be done "bearing in mind that we will be branded as an aggressor, but that in spite of that we cannot lose Afghanistan." And later in the meeting, Premier Aleksei Kosygin interjected that "All of us agree—we must not lose Afghanistan." Although he clearly showed reservations about the merits of committing Soviet troops, Kosygin explicitly acknowledged that it remained an option "as a last resort." The discussions addressed tactics such as conveying to Taraki the need for the Afghan regime to "request" Soviet forces in order to provide nominal public justification for any military move Moscow might make. Ustinov pointed out that if Soviet combat troops were committed, they should not be mixed with the Afghan forces.¹³³

Major concerns also were raised by several participants over the prospect that strong support for the insurgency among Muslim fundamentalists could cause a Soviet intervention force “to wage war in significant part” against the Afghan population. The reliability of the Afghan Army also was questioned. Gromyko, despite his belligerent injunction on “not losing Afghanistan,” emphasized that “it is one thing to apply extreme measures” in collaboration with the Afghan Army, but “it is an entirely different matter if the Army does not support the lawful government... If the Army is against the government, and as a result against our forces, then the matter will be complicated indeed.”¹³⁴

At the end of this first session, a Politburo decision on whether actually to undertake direct military involvement was put on hold until a clearer picture developed—for example, on the real status of the Afghan armed forces. As Kirilenko phrased it: “Who will we be fighting if we send [our troops] in there?” In effect, “What are we getting ourselves into?” Nevertheless, the Defense Ministry was authorized to proceed with the contingency preparations Ustinov proposed, including explicit authorization to move the two divisions to the border.

The Politburo agreed that, in the meantime, they would go ahead with most of the other assistance measures that had been proposed and even accelerate some. These included shipping armaments (except for systems that might provide the Afghan leaders a wedge for requesting Soviet crews), economic assistance and material supplies. There also was agreement to begin diplomatic moves aimed at governments—such as Pakistan and China—believed to be providing aid to the insurgents.¹³⁵

The record of the Politburo’s second session, on 18 March, reads—almost—as though it had been held by a completely different set of actors with no connection to what had been said the previous day. Andropov, who on the day before insisted that despite the cost of being labeled an aggressor, “Under no circumstances can we lose Afghanistan,” now declared that because Afghanistan did not conform to Lenin’s definition of a revolutionary situation, suppressing the insurgency with the aid of Soviet bayonets was an inadmissible risk. Gromyko, who had twice avowed the “can’t lose” imperative, now said he “completely support[ed] Comrade Andropov’s proposal to rule out...deployment of our troops into Afghanistan.” According to Gromyko, the answer to the previous day’s question “Against whom will [our army] fight?” was “against the Afghan people,” and this would mean that “All we have done in recent years with such effort in terms of détente, arms reductions and much more—would be thrown back.”¹³⁶ The cost of sending in troops was now judged to be too high a price to pay for saving Afghanistan, which had been described a day earlier as something that “could not be lost.”

For the remainder of this session, each of the main participants dutifully agreed with this conviction. Someone who had no familiarity with the details of the previous day’s discussions could plausibly interpret the record of the second day as indicating that military intervention had never been considered. Kirilenko, however, committed a couple of breaches of this line. He commented that:

Yesterday...we were inclined toward the conclusion that we ought, perhaps, to deploy some measure of military detachments. Today...the discussion here has quite correctly taken a somewhat different course, namely we are all adhering to the position that there is no basis whatever for the deployment of forces.

Andropov quickly asserted that “Yesterday...the Afghans were not talking about the deployment

of troops.” (The record of the previous day’s meeting shows the Afghans were talking about it, and the Soviets certainly were talking about it, including the question of whether they should pressure Taraki to ask for Soviet forces.) Andropov said “The people do not support the government of Taraki,” and declared that the Afghan leader needed to be told “in no case will we go forward with a deployment of troops into Afghanistan.” Kirilenko then corrected his characterization of the previous day’s discussions, saying that “Yesterday we were unanimous as to the rendering of military aid, but we carefully discussed the matter, considered various options, and searched for different ways, other than the deployment of troops.”¹³⁷

Brezhnev gave what appears to be a more accurate summation of the Soviet position a day later (19 March), when he surfaced at the Politburo meeting to approve officially the proposals coming from the earlier sessions. Brezhnev said:

The question was raised as to the *immediate* participation of our troops in the conflict that has arisen in Afghanistan. In my view, the Politburo has correctly determined that *the time is not right* for us to become entangled in that war. (Emphasis added.)¹³⁸

Clearly, between the first two Politburo sessions, discussions took place off line, probably informed by additional assessments and information and reflecting Brezhnev’s outlook. The leadership as a group agreed not to commit military forces, at least for the time being. Nonetheless, steps were taken to ensure that forces would be prepared in case this decision changed, as indicated by Ustinov’s statement near the end of the session:

We are forming two divisions in the Turkestan Military District [the two he had described in the earlier session] and one division in the Central Asian Military District. We have three regiments [about 3,500 to 4,000 troops, depending on the type of regiment] that could arrive in literally three hours. But I am saying this, of course, only to emphasize our state of readiness. Like the rest of my Comrades, I do not support the idea of deploying our troops to Afghanistan. I would request permission [to] conduct tactical exercises on the border with Afghanistan and to form regiments and divisions [presumably by calling up some reservists.]¹³⁹

Declassified US intelligence from this period clearly verifies that this proposal was carried out.

A large number of publicly released Soviet documents covering the ensuing months show the Soviets rebuffing Afghan regime requests for Soviet troops. Many documents making a similar point also have been disclosed in treatises on the Afghan invasion by former Soviet military officers. Evidence from other sources also indicates that the Afghans did make such requests and that Moscow was for some time unwilling to involve combat units. It is also true, however, that the principal defense that former Soviet officials have offered for the military intervention is that it was ultimately a response to Afghan pleas for assistance in fighting an insurgency that was receiving outside help. It is thus understandable that more documents seem to have been released on this aspect of Soviet decision making on Afghanistan than any other.¹⁴⁰

The earliest known Soviet document mentioning a specific deployment of a combat unit to Afghanistan jibes with the first one that US intelligence detected: the airborne battalion discovered at Bagram in July 1979. A report dated 28 June 1979 from the Politburo’s special

commission on Afghanistan (composed of Foreign Minister Gromyko, KGB Chairman Andropov, Defense Minister Ustinov, and head of the Central Committee International Department Boris Ponomarev) recommended deployment of an airborne battalion to protect Soviet air units at Bagram. It said the troops were to be disguised as being involved in aircraft maintenance and service. Approval for this deployment was given at a Politburo meeting the next day.¹⁴¹

Also recommended in this same document was the dispatch of a special KGB detachment to Kabul, disguised as embassy service personnel, “for defense of the Soviet Embassy.” And last but not least, the document proposed that “a special detachment of the GRU of the General Staff” (a military intelligence *Spetznaz* unit) be sent to Bagram at the beginning of August “after preparations [not further specified] have been completed.” This GRU detachment was to deal with any “sharp aggravation of the situation for the security and defense of particularly important government installations.” Stealth and disguises notwithstanding, and allowing for the difficulties in deriving precise head counts and organizational origins, the presence of these special detachments did not go long undetected.¹⁴² What is perhaps more revealing is the glimpse of an early step in what would be an ongoing process of infiltrating small—usually battalion-size—combat units and special force detachments into Afghanistan. In the end, these units provided what in military science terms would be called a bridgehead.

Targeting Amin

A number of documents support the view of intelligence analysts at the time that Moscow was chagrined over the botched effort in September to get rid of Amin that backfired into Taraki’s ouster. These documents also show that Soviet leaders were, at a minimum, uneasy over the potential repercussions of Amin’s takeover. The records offer little help in sorting out various subsequent versions of the shootout, but one document does seem to confirm the Soviet ambassador’s role in setting up the meeting at which it occurred. On 13 September, the Politburo instructed him to arrange a meeting, but the way the message was worded does not provide any basis for assuming he would have known an assassination was in the works. Most of the evidence today points to one or more of Amin’s rivals in the Afghan regime being responsible for the ambush, but the Soviet intelligence services in Kabul almost certainly were aware of it.¹⁴³ The second paragraph of the 13 September Politburo instruction reflects Moscow’s involvement:

Guide yourself by the fact that we cannot take it upon ourselves to arrest Amin with our own battalion force, since this would be a direct interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan and would have far reaching consequences.

That the Politburo felt it necessary to issue such directions is itself instructive, even more so because this part of the message also was sent to the three top Soviet security officials then in Afghanistan: Army General Pavlovsky, who was there to assess the Afghan military; Lt. Gen. Gorelov, chief of the military advisory mission, and Kabul KGB *Rezident* Boris Ivanov. It appears very much to have been a warning to officers who knew that a political showdown was under way between the two Afghan leaders and that Moscow was seeking Amin’s removal, and who therefore needed to be advised not to do anything rash.

Moscow almost certainly was counting on Taraki and/or his cohorts to oust Amin by themselves. Soviet leaders' subsequent disappointment that Taraki was unable to do so is seen in their after-the-fact descriptions, which consistently blame his "indecisiveness," "hesitation," and "inability to take swift and effective measures" as the reason Amin was able to take power.¹⁴⁴

Soviet documents indicate that in the aftermath of the botched effort to remove Amin, Moscow's initial reaction was to hold its ground and not make things worse, while seeking a new "solution." A report to the Politburo on 15 September pointed out that Amin had taken control of "all the levers of power." Instructions sent to Soviet missions in Afghanistan said it was "expedient, considering the real state of affairs as it now exists, not to refuse to deal with H. Amin and the leadership he represents." An East German transcript of a meeting between Honecker and Brezhnev on 4 October shows the Soviet leader complaining that "We are not pleased by all of Amin's methods and actions." Brezhnev pointed out that Amin's basic platform—"development of the Revolution [i.e., staying on the Communist course] and furthering cooperation with the Soviet Union"—meant Moscow would continue to support "Afghanistan" (he did not say continue to support Amin).

Before long, charges would appear that Amin was not hewing to the "revolution" and "furthering cooperation with the Soviet Union." A report from the Gromyko-Andropov-Ustinov-Ponomarev commission on 29 October, after listing Amin's repressive actions and counterproductive domestic policies, cited putative evidence of his contacts with the US. "Taking account of this and starting from the necessity of doing everything possible not to allow the victory of counterrevolution in Afghanistan or the reorientation of H. Amin toward the west," the report recommended continuing to work with him in a way that does not "give him grounds to believe that we [Soviets] do not trust him or do not wish to work with him." These sustained contacts would provide an opportunity "to expose his true intentions," according to the report, and "upon the availability of facts bearing witness to a turn by H. Amin in an anti-Soviet direction, introduce supplemental proposals about measures from our side."¹⁴⁵

In other words, once the justification was assembled, the commission would be back with a proposal to replace him. The replacement plan probably was already being put together. According to information now available, at the time this report was submitted Karmal had already been brought to Moscow. Various sources at the time reported that three of the anti-Amin plotters in the September clash had taken refuge in the Soviet mission in Kabul, and were presumed to have been smuggled from there to Moscow sometime in late October.¹⁴⁶

On 4 December, Andropov and Chief of the Soviet General Staff Marshal Ogarkov signed a recommendation that the Politburo send a 500-troop contingent to Afghanistan "in a uniform that does not reveal its belonging to the Armed Forces of the USSR" to defend Amin's residence. The recommendation said Amin had been "insistently" requesting this. It said the troops would be "in a detachment of the GRU of the General Staff" [*Spetnaz*], which had been "prepared for these goals," and whose deployment had been envisaged in the Politburo protocol of 29 June (the same protocol that authorized deploying the first airborne battalion to Bagram). It proposed airlifting the GRU unit to Kabul "in the first half of December of this year." The Politburo formally approved the recommendation on 6 December 1979.¹⁴⁷

The real mission of this detachment, however, is revealed in a personal memorandum from Andropov to Brezhnev in early December, about the same time the Politburo was approving his recommendation to move the unit to Kabul. The memo asserted that Amin's "mass repressions" were destroying the Afghan government and armed forces, and said evidence confirmed his

turn toward the west. It said this created the danger of simultaneously “losing the gains of the April [1978 Communist] revolution,” and creating a “threat to our positions in Afghanistan” through a “shift to the West.”

The Andropov memorandum reported that “We have been contacted by a group of Afghan Communists living abroad” (referring specifically to Karmal and Sawari—by then living in the USSR among the plotters who had holed up in the Soviet mission after the September attempt to oust Amin). They have a plan “for opposing Amin and creating a new party and state organs,” and they have requested assistance, including military forces, Andropov told Brezhnev, concluding: “We have two battalions in Kabul that could render such assistance,” and which appear to be “entirely sufficient for a successful operation. But, as a precautionary measure against unforeseen complications, it would be wise to have a military group close to the border.”

148

Unless one wishes to believe that Andropov was simultaneously backing proposals both to protect and to remove Amin, it seems clear that the recommendation sent to the Politburo on 4 December was intended as cover for inserting troops that were to carry out the coup. The plan had cover on both ends. According to the recommendation, sending the detachment was in response to Amin’s request; had been “agreed upon with the Afghan side;” and was approved by the Soviet Politburo. Based on the furtive arrivals at Kabul airport during the first days of December, there is a good chance the recommendation also was intended to provide post facto official endorsement of a move already under way, if not already completed. Andropov’s comment about already having “two battalions stationed in Kabul” makes this even more plausible. The uncertainty arises mainly from evidence, both at the time and since then, showing that infiltrating special troop units was done off and on over an extended time. Exactly when and which troops were inserted remains murky.

It seems clear, however, that by the first week of December, at the latest, the basic plan was on. Amin was to be taken out, a new Afghan regime installed and, if necessary, ground forces moved across the border. Having failed in their previous attempt to remove Amin because of what they euphemistically termed “indecisiveness” on the part of Taraki, the Soviets were determined to make this one work.

But their task this time was much more demanding. Previously, the lead person in their replacement regime was already in Kabul, along with key players such as Watanjar and Sawari, who had influence in the military and security forces. This time, however, they had no shadow regime in Kabul; Amin controlled the Afghan Army and security forces, and they would have to insert their proxy regime from the outside. They would also need to import the firepower to take out the existing regime and the muscle to neutralize the unpredictable Afghan Army and security forces.

In hindsight, it seems likely the attempted assassination of Amin on 17 December was to have launched this plan. The gunman, reportedly a Muslim extremist, was killed immediately, preventing him from being interrogated. Various accounts since then have attributed the assassination attempt to a Soviet plot. Obviously this is not the sort of thing normally borne out in preserved archives, and some of the stories have more recently been discounted. A strong indication that it is true, however, came relatively recently in a description by a former Soviet general who was at the time assigned to the Soviet Army headquarters at Termez, north of the Afghan border. He has said that when Deputy Chief of the General Staff Marshal Akhromeyev arrived at the Termez headquarters on 14 December to take command of the Afghanistan operations, he commented that Amin had been “removed.” A few days later, Akhromeyev is

reported to have said that it turned out that the action against Amin had not been carried out.¹⁴⁹

If the assassination had succeeded on this date [17 December], it would have provided better cover for the operation (although this fairly could be said to be damning with faint praise). The Soviet troop units already inserted into the Afghan capital area could have rapidly cordoned off key government centers to “protect them” from similar attacks by insurgent fanatics. They could have safeguarded the return of Karmal and protected him as he formed a new leadership and requested additional Soviet military assistance.

Whether this would have enabled the Soviets to avoid some of the reactions that followed—reactions with monumental long-term consequences—is a matter of speculation. Once Amin had escaped the 17 December attack and moved to the fortified residence out of town, the Soviets apparently decided that time and physical circumstances left little recourse other than the blatant assault they carried out. What seems most baffling in all this is the extent to which Amin appears to have been blind to the fact that it was the Soviets who were the greatest threat to his life. He continued to ask for “security” from Soviet troops, which in the end made it easier for them to remove him. ¹⁵⁰

The Military Decisions

The officially released Soviet materials contain almost nothing dealing specifically with the decision to send in ground forces at the end of December. The nugget that has drawn the most attention in recent years is a simple handwritten note, dated 12 December 1979, under the title of “Resolution of the CC CPSU Concerning the Situation in `A.” The complete text reads as follows:

1. Ratify evaluations and measures set forth by Andropov, Yu.V., Ustinov, D.F., and Gromyko, A.A. Authorize them to introduce amendments of non-essential character in the course of execution of these measures.

Questions concerning the decisions of the CC should be expeditiously introduced to the Politburo.

The execution of all these measures should be entrusted to Comrades Andropov, Ustinov, and Gromyko.

2. Entrust Comrades Andropov, Ustinov to keep the Politburo informed on the status of the execution of the outlined measures.¹⁵¹

The document has signatures of nine Politburo members written diagonally across the text, all under the 12 December date. Additional signatures with the later dates of 25 and 26 December

appear lower down. Various accounts have been given as to how this note came into being and the sequence in which some of the signatures were added. The accounts all agree, however, on the essential point that it was drafted by Chernenko with guidance from Andropov, Gromyko and Ustinov, who signed it immediately and then obtained Brezhnev's signature. Brezhnev, described by some witnesses as in a doddering condition at the time, reportedly scrawled his signature after being fed distorted descriptions by Andropov and his colleagues of the situation in Afghanistan. The main differences in accounts of this have to do with when the other Politburo members signed the note—some saying when Brezhnev signed it and others saying later.¹⁵²

More recent testimony gives a somewhat different perspective. A former Soviet officer on the Soviet General Staff at the time has said that Andropov and Ustinov got Brezhnev's verbal approval for the intervention plan at a meeting with him on 8 December. Former Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin says essentially the same. He was unable to put a date on the meeting where this occurred, but has confirmed it was in early December, which certainly seems supported by the Andropov memo laying out the scheme for using Soviet troops to back the Parcham takeover. Dobrynin claims that Gromyko was also present. According to Dobrynin, it was Brezhnev who ordered that the proposals be presented to the larger Politburo.¹⁵³

All of this merely reinforces the impression that the 12 December meeting and the handwritten note were *pro forma* exercises to put the stamp of an official "collective decision" on a process already set in motion. By the time this note was drafted and signed, the US intelligence community already had discovered at Bagram the motorized rifle battalion that later secured the Salang pass for Soviet ground forces moving into the Kabul area. The first of two additional airborne battalions had been brought in, and an unknown number of special forces had been infiltrated into Kabul. Andropov already had informed Brezhnev of the scheme to provide forces to back the creation of a new government by the Parcham faction.

Because of the paucity of official documents from the period leading up to the military intervention, most of what is understood today about Soviet decision-making regarding this operation is drawn from accounts by political or military participants. Many have given interviews, and written or contributed to articles and books on the subject. Details of the accounts make fascinating reading, but few are without a point of view. Nonetheless, even after allowing for a certain level of exculpatory purpose, the evidence clearly is persuasive that the planning and decision-making were done mainly in compartment by the small group of Andropov, Ustinov and Gromyko. Each one's defenders point to the influence of one of the others, and in this contest Ustinov seems to have the fewest defenders. ¹⁵⁴

The military intervention carried out in the last week of December 1979 was essentially the plan Ustinov outlined in March, plus the covert operation to install a new regime. Declassified intelligence shows that preparation of the forces to carry out this original plan continued steadily if modestly throughout the summer and fall, and intensified sharply when the September attempt to remove Amin backfired. The airborne division based near the border was raised to a sustained higher level of readiness, and airborne units in the west were moved to an area from which they could deploy more quickly. All of which indicates that the military option in Afghanistan was not as completely off the table as has been generally alleged.

The military preparations recorded by US intelligence make a good case that Soviet officials behind the intervention were getting their operation ready even before they had gone through the formal political decision process. Some former Soviet military sources have said it was not until 10 December that Ustinov ordered a full call-up of reservists to bring the two ground force

divisions to full readiness. This squares with what intelligence saw, but both divisions had been at least partially mobilizing since the last week of November. Declassified US intelligence confirms that two combat battalions, including one motorized rifle battalion, already had moved into Bagram by 10 December, and an unknown number of special forces troops already were in Kabul.

The Andropov-Gromyko-Ustinov team apparently presumed they would be able to get the somewhat-enfeebled Brezhnev to agree, and with that the others would be obliged to sign on. The 12 December meeting appears to have been presented with a near *fait accompli*. Many advance units already had been inserted into Afghanistan, the ground divisions that were to deploy were poised to come to full readiness in a few days, and the party Chairman, Defense Minister, Foreign Minister and KGB Chairman all agreed that it should be done. 155

On 14 December, two days after the handwritten note was signed, Marshal Akhromeyev arrived at Termez to take command of the operation. The next day, intelligence saw the now fully mobilized division based there leave its garrison and head toward the border. Three days after that, on 18 December, a team from Akhromeyev's headquarters arrived at Bagram air base. (Preparing this air base as the site of the advance operational command post was probably a key factor in inserting the additional combat units the preceding week.) It was the next day that intelligence detected a second division in the Turkestan Military District leaving its garrison, and discovered the mobile fuel containers near the border crossing points.

And it was on that day, 19 December 1979, that the DCI sent an Alert Memorandum stating that "the buildup...near the Soviet-Afghan border suggests that further augmentation there is likely soon and that preparations for a much more substantial reinforcement may be underway."

Intelligence Expectations versus Realities

The military intervention the Soviets carried out in the last week of December 1979—particularly its timing and scope—came as a surprise to the US intelligence community at large and to US policy officials in general. This was acknowledged in the intelligence community's own retrospective assessment, produced in response to a request from the National Security Council after members of the NSC staff expressed concern over the extent to which the Soviet move had been unexpected. There were, at most, only a few exceptions to the consensus that Soviet introduction of military forces would continue to be in small increments to augment security for Soviet personnel and to help the Kabul regime maintain its authority. This view continued to prevail even after the beginning of the Soviet airlift on Christmas Eve. It was not until 28 December—after learning of Amin's removal and the crossing of the border by the two divisions—that daily intelligence reporting acknowledged that a large-scale military intervention was under way.¹⁵⁶

This was *not* because of an absence of intelligence information on Soviet preparations for the move. It was that the operation being prepared was contrary to what intelligence analysts had *expected* Moscow would be willing to do. All the major military units that made up the invasion force had been seen during the preceding months increasing their readiness. The two Soviet ground force divisions closest to the Afghan border began increasing readiness in March, and were detected doing so again in the summer and fall. In the second half of October, both these divisions again were observed in unusual levels of activity. By this time, at least one other

ground force division in the area had also been observed in similar, although less frequent, activity. At the beginning of November, the ground force units returned to what appeared to be a normal posture, but in the last week of the month the two divisions closest to the border began partial mobilization. For most of this time, the Soviet airborne division in the same area had been kept at higher-than-normal readiness.

If all this was not enough to suggest that the introduction of around three divisions (with a total of about 30,000 to 35,000 troops) was at least an option that the Soviets might be preparing, there were additional signs. Two additional combat battalions and some special forces units were inserted into Afghanistan in the first week of December, and another airborne battalion a few days later. Sending in a small number of advance units to take control of the capital and other key centers was an operational scenario already observed in the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

At the time these activities were being observed, the plight of the Soviet-sponsored regime in Kabul was becoming increasingly precarious—and the prospect that it would survive without major military support from the USSR was becoming increasingly questionable. Thus the readiness of Soviet forces for a major military intervention was increasing at the same time the potential motivation for such an act was increasing. And all this information on Soviet force preparations and the deteriorating internal situation in Afghanistan was fully reported in daily intelligence publications.

None of this would have been sufficient to warrant a judgment that military intervention was inevitable. Taken on its own merits, however, and unfiltered by theories about how Soviet leaders rated their options, the evidence certainly should have warranted serious concern that there was at least a real prospect the Soviets might do what they had prepared themselves to do.

Analysts had concluded early on, however, that military action along the lines indicated by Soviet force preparations was unlikely. One key intelligence assessment, in fact, specifically identified it as an operation Moscow would **not** be willing to undertake. The declassified Interagency Intelligence Memorandum of 28 September 1979 said that any insertion of Soviet combat forces was doubtful. If Moscow did intervene with combat units, the Intelligence Community judgment was that they would do so on one or the other end of a spectrum. At one end—the most likely would be a limited operation by a few battalions up to an airborne division or so, carried out incrementally to strengthen security and perhaps conduct a few carefully circumscribed operations. “Anything beyond that,” according to the Intelligence Community assessment, would require—at the other end of the spectrum—a multidivision force well beyond the four divisions in the military district bordering Afghanistan.

Any operation in-between these poles, involving two or three ground divisions and one or two airborne divisions, thus fell into the very realm intelligence assessments had practically ruled out. As a consequence, the preparations that were seen were not evaluated in terms of what might be intended, but rather in terms of how they fit with what was expected. And they did not fit with what was expected.

This is certainly not because the analysis or judgments about Soviet attitudes was somehow far off the mark. On the contrary, the documents now available from Soviet archives show that the political costs that US intelligence analysts saw as exerting a deterrent effect on Soviet moves were in fact the same arguments raised by several top Soviet officials in opposing or at least questioning military involvement. There has been ample, credible testimony from former Soviet officers that most of the professional military planners were against intervention as well.

Their calculation of the military imbroglio was much the same as that of the analysts in Washington, and Soviet military planners shared the US intelligence analysts' view that if the military had to intervene, it must do so with a multidivision force. One of the dark humor jokes circulating around CIA in the months after the invasion was that the analysts got it right, and it was the Soviets who got it wrong. (The actual wording was somewhat more colorful.)

Those who study the history of intelligence performance will recognize this as illustrating probably the most recurrent trap for analysts. As many studies have noted, the trap is not unique to intelligence analysis.¹⁵⁷ One part of it might be called the "model cage." Once having constructed an intellectual model of how the variables are likely to play out, each new piece of information is weighed in accordance with the components of that model. Evidence that does not fit is far more likely to be explained away than used to question the model's validity. In this case, the actions taken (military preparations) were not used to interpret intentions so much as the conclusions about intentions were used to interpret the actions.

This also illustrates the commonly noted failing of presenting analysis with more conviction about what other actors will decide than is held by those actors themselves. Whatever the limitations of the released records from Soviet meetings, one thing they demonstrate clearly is that the "decision" to deploy combat forces was a work in progress from its conception in March to its execution at Christmas.

At the same time, it would be unfair not to acknowledge the pressures on intelligence either to express more certainty—justified by evidence—or to engage in safe hedging. Clearly, at a time when détente was being challenged and the SALT II treaty appeared to be in a life-threatening status with the Senate, allegations that Moscow was about to engage in yet another Third World aggression barely two years after what was regarded as its proxy intervention in Ethiopia was not something most US policy officials wanted to see casually aired. As the minutes of the 17 December White House meeting show, even at that late date, and with the amount of evidence available, policy officials agreed "there was no benefit to going public at this time." In hindsight, that was probably right, but mainly because at that stage they would have been trying to stop a train that had left the station.

Speculation on what, if any, policy action might have resulted from a more forceful intelligence presentation, and what the effects might have been, is left to the counterfactuals. There were some in the Intelligence Community who thought at the time that the last good chance for such a presentation—the missed opportunity—came with the discovery on 10 December that a motorized rifle battalion had been moved to Bagram. By that time, an additional airborne battalion had also been discovered in Bagram, two divisions near the border were mobilizing and some special troops had been slipped into Kabul. Given the extent to which the military intervention plan was hidden from much of the Soviet Politburo, it is possible that publicity might have caused some trouble in Moscow for those hatching the plot. This is at best uncertain, because there were events taking place globally—for example, the agreement in Europe to deploy a new generation of intermediate range US missiles—that might well have persuaded the Soviets that détente was already in recession.

Perhaps it might have been possible to put Amin more on alert, and to offer additional arguments for the professional Soviet military planners and Politburo members who opposed intervention. It is worth pointing out in this regard that the strident public denials from Moscow on 23 December, reacting to the Carter administration's release of the intelligence picture the day before, probably were not so naively composed as to expect they would be believed by anyone in Washington. And the denials came with full certainty that within 24 to 48 hours it

would be open knowledge worldwide that they were lies. About the most Moscow could have been hoping to achieve from them was to preserve a little tactical surprise on the operational scene.

However slim the chances that a forceful public offensive by Washington around 11 December could have had an impact, by the time the 17 December intelligence community meeting convened to draft what would become the second Alert Memorandum on Afghanistan, the die probably was already cast. Intelligence analysts can point to the fact that they did inform the policy officials that the Soviets had completed preparations for a military move and that some move—albeit not the one that took place—was imminent. By 19 December, when the Alert Memorandum finally was delivered, the Soviet invasion was—as one NSC staff officer put it later—“a spectator sport.” The US could make a lot of noise from the stands, but could not have much impact on the playing field. That would have to wait until the next round of the Great Game.

Postscript

Shortly before this monograph was scheduled to be printed, additional information became available on Soviet actions leading up to the military intervention in Afghanistan. The information was from Vasili Mitrokhin, a former KGB officer and archivist who, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, brought out to the West an enormous body of documents, many of which have since been used in publications by British scholars. On the subject of Afghanistan, Mitrokhin does not provide any copies of the actual documents, but instead describes the information he obtained from them (and in some cases provides quotations) in a paper he wrote clandestinely in the mid-1980s in the hope—now realized—that he would someday be able to release it to the public.¹⁵⁸ Mitrokhin's descriptions are not only completely consistent with the description of events outlined in this monograph, he in fact provides substantial reinforcement to many of the monograph's judgments, most notably on the extent of Moscow's scheming to get rid of Amin.

For example, as is described in the text, at the time of the September 1979 confrontation that led to Amin's takeover and the death of Taraki, there was and has continued to be a wide spectrum of views on how much Moscow was behind the specific, ill-fated attempt to oust Amin. Mitrokhin's information would seem to put this to rest. He describes a 1 September 1979 KGB report to the Soviet Politburo presenting “the need to remove Amin.”¹⁵⁹ Mitrokhin says this KGB report was used to prepare talking points for Brezhnev's meeting with Taraki on 10 September, when the Afghan leader stopped in Moscow enroute to Kabul from Havana. Mitrokhin's accounts also describe the intimate involvement of Soviet officials in the meetings that took place in Taraki's residence in Kabul over the next few days, leading up to the attempt on Amin's life on 14 September. Mitrokhin's descriptions of these meetings suggest that by the time the shooting took place, the Soviets had already perceived that Amin had been tipped off and was taking pre-emptive measures, and that the challenge to the Soviet officials in Kabul at that point was to prevent the kind of confrontation that would lead to the very result they most feared—a takeover by Amin. After this actually occurred, the KGB portrayed it as a coup by Amin.

Mitrokhin also confirms the earlier stories that the three Afghan plotters who escaped Amin's attempts to arrest them had taken refuge in the Soviet Embassy, and were smuggled out to the

USSR a few days later. According to Mitrokhin the three were then sequestered temporarily in Bulgaria.

Almost immediately after Taraki's death was announced, according to Mitrokhin, Andropov—with Brezhnev's authorization— instructed the KGB to contact Babrak Karmal in Czechoslovakia and begin planning the next attempt at replacing Amin. KGB officers then held some meetings with Karmal in Prague, and by the beginning of November he was brought to Moscow, along with the three plotters who had been sequestered in Bulgaria. They and a few additional Amin opponents, who had been exiled or had chosen to depart Afghanistan, formed a group that the KGB documents called "the Center." This group worked with the KGB, in Mitrokhin's words, "to develop a political platform and concrete plans to remove H. Amin from power ...under the influence of the recommendations of the CPSU Central Committee which were conveyed to the Afghan friends." Mitrokhin includes what is apparently a quoted passage from an unidentified document from this time:

"...the healthy forces of the PDPA intend to come to power by overthrowing the regime. A military committee to plan the military and political operation to eliminate H. Amin has been set up... [A] former member of the Central Committee of the PDPA...[will be sent] to Afghanistan to maintain contact between the underground and the Center. Later,...Gulyzabzoi [one of the September plotters] will be sent to organize on the spot the anti-Amin movement. All of the other members of the Center led by Comrade Babrak will shortly be moved closer to the Afghan border so that they can work more effectively and clandestinely. The Center already has general outlines of the military plan which includes a rapid military operation in the capital with the physical elimination of H. Amin..."¹⁶⁰

The plans called for the number two position in the new Karmal regime to be given to Sarwari, the former head of the Afghan intelligence forces under Taraki and one of the plotters in the September attempt to oust Amin. According to another document cited by Mitrokhin, the Karmal "Center" was moved to the border area on 12 December.

Mitrokhin also describes information—from documents pertaining to the insertion of various Soviet troop units into Afghanistan prior to the invasion—that is fully consistent with the judgments made by some analysts at the time, described in the body of this paper, regarding the infiltration of special forces into Kabul for what would, in effect, be the "hit squad." He says that these forces were infiltrated for the specific purpose of preparing and ultimately carrying out what was labeled "Operation Agat," the elimination of Amin. While these troops were from diverse Soviet components, Mitrokhin describes the specific task of eliminating Amin as having been assigned to the "8th Department of Directorate S of the F[irst] C[hief] D[irectorate]" of the KGB, the department responsible for "special operations."¹⁶¹ Two of the detailed taskings Mitrokhin describes as part of the preparation process include "study [of] the communication lines of Amin's new residence," (for which two specialists were sent in on 7 December) and monitoring the Kubul radio broadcasts—from Dushambe, across the border in the USSR—to give your opinion of its possible use in the measures known to you." (This was assigned to the KGB Residency, clearly to check out its use for the broadcasts announcing that Karmal was coming to the rescue.)

What is equally noteworthy about the descriptions of the material given by Mitrokhin is that he offers no additional details about the attempted assassination of Amin on 17 December, and, in fact, offers fewer details than were in open sources at the time. Mitrokin's only reference to that date is a statement that on 17 December Soviet guards were deployed around Amin's

residence. Given the way that this assassination attempt played out, it is not surprising that the official KGB reporting records might have been a bit sparse.

Source Notes

At the time this monograph was written—late in 2001—virtually all the intelligence products specifically dealing with Afghanistan that were disseminated to policy officials in the 29-month period from the Afghan Communist Party coup to the Soviet invasion were still classified. A key intelligence source that has been declassified, however, is the retrospective study produced in response to the NSC request shortly after the Soviet invasion occurred. This study, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Implications for Warning* (Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, October 1980), provides an extensive, chronological description of the intelligence information obtained between April 1978 and the invasion in December 1979. (Originally classified Top Secret, its text fills some 70 double-column pages of single-spaced, relatively small type.) It describes what was known of developments in Afghanistan, the nature and degree of Soviet involvement, and the activities and movements seen in Soviet military forces in the regions near Afghanistan. Equally important, the study also describes how this information was interpreted and presented in the intelligence reports and assessments provided to policy officials in various products including current intelligence publications, special alert memoranda and periodic assessments of a more comprehensive nature. In some cases passages from these products are quoted.

Another significant declassified intelligence document—so far the only comprehensive assessment produced prior to the invasion that has been formally released—is an Interagency Intelligence Memorandum entitled *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, disseminated on 28 September 1979. It was the last comprehensive assessment produced prior to the invasion, and provides an informative overview of what was known at that point, how it was interpreted, and the specific picture that was given to senior policy officials.

Additional declassified sources for the intelligence picture at the time include contemporary documents produced by US policy agencies. Some of these refer to—and in some cases give fairly extensive descriptions of—information and intelligence assessments the policy agencies received at the time. They include, for example, embassy reporting cables, cables from Washington providing information and guidance to US embassies, and records of policy meetings—including at the White House—at which the intelligence was discussed, sometimes including summaries of briefings given by DCIs and other intelligence representatives.

The memoirs of former DCI Robert Gates describe the content of some of the Intelligence Community's alert memoranda on Afghanistan and the specific dates on which they were disseminated. Other former officials who were in office at the time—Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, for example—also have described what they believe they heard from intelligence as the events were unfolding.

Descriptions of what was known at the time also include accounts appearing in the news media. This monograph includes them in some detail partly to try to define the “value added” of intelligence from secret sources—what more did the Intelligence Community know than “everybody” could know. Press accounts also provide additional versions of intelligence

obtained by the US administration and intentionally released by it to the media to give it public exposure.

Finally, it must be noted that the author has drawn on his own involvement in the process at the time as a source for the descriptions of the flow of information and intelligence reporting. In April 1979, in the immediate aftermath of an anti-regime uprising in the Afghan city of Herat (and, as is now known, at the very time the Soviets were taking their first contingency steps for military intervention) I was detailed to the “Strategic Warning Staff” at the Pentagon. From then until the end of that year, developments in Afghanistan and the potential for Soviet military intervention constituted the main, virtually exclusive focus of day to day work. I participated in the intelligence community meetings described in the monograph at which the evidence and implications were debated, and that participation is the source for the descriptions of the debates. (Dissemination of memoranda from the Warning Staff, however, was at that time limited to Intelligence Community addressees.) My background has helped add some details to the descriptions of the information provided in the sources that are cited and, in turn, the sources have been used to validate my descriptions. This study is **not**, however, about “my role,” but about the process as a whole. It is not designed to identify who was right and who was wrong, but rather the factors that led to the unintended outcome, in the hope of helping develop analytic practices specifically targeted at countering those factors.

As for Soviet planning and decisions, documents now available from the Soviet archives include minutes of Soviet Politburo meetings on Afghanistan, memoranda on various communications and discussions between various Soviet officials, and records of decisions and instructions for implementing those decisions. While some of these archival materials must be examined with the caveat that they were, even at the time, written “for the record,” they nonetheless include substantial details as to specific Soviet military plans and the actual physical contingency measures Soviet forces undertook. These can be compared to the activities observed through US intelligence sources, as described in the declassified retrospective study done in 1980.

Of particular value is the insight these Soviet archival materials provide into the process by which the Soviets made decisions leading to their military intervention. This, by itself, offers valuable lessons for intelligence analysts on the hazards of reaching overly strong conclusions about the “intentions” of political actors who are themselves far from certain about their intentions. This hazard, as the monograph demonstrates, was at the heart of the problem with intelligence performance on the Afghanistan intervention, and most studies show it to be at the heart of most intelligence failures.

Most of the Soviet materials drawn on for this study are on deposit at the National Security Archive, Gelman Library, Suite 701, 2130 H St. NW, Washington, DC. They were assembled in a single compendium used at an “oral history” conference on the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan hosted by the Nobel Institute near Oslo, Norway, in 1995. This same compendium contains most of the documents dealing with Afghanistan that have been declassified by US policy agencies, described above.

Some former Soviet officials who held positions in the chain of decisions and actions leading up to the invasion, including former military officers, also have given public descriptions of the process by which it was organized and carried out. Again, while taking into account exculpatory motives, many of these can be usefully examined alongside what was shown in US intelligence at the time.

As for the Afghan historical background, ever since that country rose to the top rank of Cold War battle sites, many accounts of how it got there have been written—from diverse

perspectives—by individuals who were intimately involved with developments there. These include, for example, a deputy foreign minister and long-serving functionary of the Afghan Government overthrown by the communist coup of 1978. Another is a former Pakistani government official who took refuge in Afghanistan after Prime Minister Bhutto's ouster by a military regime in 1977. He became personally close to Afghan Communist Party leaders, and was there both for the communist coup of 1978 and the Soviet invasion of 1979. Other accounts include those by former US journalists whose later careers turned to such diverse institutions as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and to the analytic component of CIA. Yet another account is given by a former CIA officer who served in the US embassy in Kabul in the years leading up to the communist coup.

While these varied perspectives produce many differences in the descriptions of the evolving situation, what is most important and most impressive is the extent to which, despite their different political casts, these authors give relatively common accounts of the main lines of developments.

Source List

Books

Andrew, Christopher and Gordievsky, Oleg, *KGB: The Inside Story* (New York, Harper Perennial, 1990).

Anwar, Raja, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan: A First Hand Account* (London, Verso, 1988).

Arnold, Anthony, *The Fateful Pebble: Afghanistan's Role in the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Novato, CA, Presidio Press, 1993).

Bradsher, Henry, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, 2nd ed. (Durham, SC, Duke University Press, 1985).

Brzezinski, Zbigniew, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of a National Security Advisor* (New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1983).

Cooley, John K., *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America, and International Terrorism* (London, Pluto Press, 1999).

Cordovez, Diego and Harrison, Selig, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995).

Dobrynin, Anatoly, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York, Times Books/Random House, 1995).

Garthoff, Raymond, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, rev. ed. (Washington DC, Brookings Institution, 1994).

Gates, Robert, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996).

Ghaus, Abdul Samad, *The Fall of Afghanistan: An Insider's Account* (Washington, DC, Pergamon-Brassey, 1988).

Kissinger, Henry, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston, Little and Brown, 1982).

Mangus, Ralph H., and Naby, Eden, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid*, (Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1998).

Vance, Cyrus, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1983).

Articles

Cogan, Charles, "Partners in Time: The CIA and Afghanistan since 1979," *World Affairs Journal*, Summer 1993, pp. 73-82.

Kuzichin, Vladimir, "Coups and Killings in Kabul," *Time Magazine*, 22 November 1992, pp. 33-34.

Wested, Odd Arne, "Concerning the situation in `A': New Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* No. 8-9, pp. 128-132.

Documents

Declassified Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, 28 September 1979, National Security Archive.

Declassified Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Implications for Warning*, October 1980, National Security Archive. [Note: this document reviews and describes the intelligence reporting on Afghanistan during the year preceding the Soviet invasion.]

Compendium, *The Intervention in Afghanistan and the Fall of Détente*, compiled for the Nobel Symposium, 1995, on deposit at the National Security Archive. [Contains hundreds of declassified materials relating to Afghanistan from various U.S. government agencies as well as from Soviet archives.]

Documents from Soviet Archives, dated July 1978 through December 1979, *Cold War History Project Bulletin* No. 8-9, pp. 133-162.

[Note: Volumes of press and media articles were combed for this project, and all citations are listed in the footnotes to the text.]

Footnotes

1. The study was carried out by the DCI's Senior Review Panel, a special advisory group of seasoned policy and intelligence veterans. The Panel was established by Robert Bowie, CIA's Deputy Director for Intelligence in the late 1970s, out of concern for what he believed to be qualitative shortcomings in NIEs and other assessments. The Panel's report, examining 12 cases of "failure," was delivered to the DCI on 16 December 1983. A summary description of the purposes and findings of this study appeared the following year in the classified edition of *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Fall 1984), under the title "The Hazards of Single-Outcome Forecasting," pp. 57-70. It listed as its authors the four members of the Senior Review Panel at the time: Willis C. Armstrong, William Leonhart, William McCaffrey, and Herbert C. Rothenberg. This *Studies* article was later declassified and appears in H. Bradford Westerfield (ed.), *Inside CIA's Private World: Declassified Articles from the Agency's Internal Journal, 1955-92*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1995) pp. 238-254. (The specific case of Afghanistan appears on pp. 253-54.)
2. The historical summary in this section is drawn from the following: Abdul Samad Ghaus, *The Fall of Afghanistan: An Insider's Account* (McLean, VA: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988), pp. 79-193; Raja Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan: A First Hand Account* (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 33-91; Henry Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, 2nd ed., (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), pp. 17-74; Anthony Arnold, *The Fatal Pebble: Afghanistan's Role in the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), pp. 47-57; and Selig Harrison in Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 14-24. Ghaus served as a deputy foreign minister under Daoud, and Anwar was in Pakistan's government until the 1977 military takeover there, after which he resided in exile in Afghanistan. Both he and Ghaus spent time in prison in Afghanistan after the Soviet intervention. Bradsher was a journalist with extensive experience in Afghanistan; Arnold was a CIA officer who served in Afghanistan in the mid 1970s, and Harrison is a regional expert and former journalist now with The Carnegie Institute. Not surprisingly, all have different in perspectives, although they agree on the main facts.
3. See Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), pp. 675-677, and 687.
4. According to Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 15, citing a 1985 publication in Moscow by the Institute of Oriental Studies, *The History of the Armed Forces of Afghanistan 1947-1977*, the Soviet-trained Afghan military officers who backed Daoud's power seizure were an underground group called the "Armed Forces Revolutionary Organization" that had been formed in 1964 with the encouragement of the Soviet military intelligence arm (GRU).
5. Former Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin gives Moscow's explicit view of the two factions in his book *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to Six Presidents* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 434.
6. See Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, pp. 47 and 63, and Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble*, p. 54.
7. The Khalq paper, which propagated the Taraki-Amin opposition line, was shut down by the regime shortly after it started publishing in the spring of 1966. The Karmal-backed Parcham opened in 1968, and in 1969 was also shut down.
8. Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, p. 76. According to Anwar, the Khalq opposition stance did not keep the faction—after Daoud broke his relationship with Parcham—from offering support

to Daoud's government. The offer was turned down.

9. Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, p. 68 (re the quoted passage) and pp. 71-72 on Parcham claims about persuading Daoud. Similar descriptions are given in Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble*, p. 53; Ghaus, *The Fall of Afghanistan*, p. 107; and Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 14.

10. Ghaus, *The Fall of Afghanistan*, p. 159.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 165; also Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, pp. 15-16. Harrison cites an interview with a Russian specialist on Afghanistan as the source for the Soviet perspectives on Parcham.

12. Cordovez and Harrison, pp. 15-16; Ghaus, pp. 153-155. Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, p. 76, says the Iranian aid agreement in mid-1974 came to \$1 billion, with a promise to double it in a year.

13. Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in multi-ethnic Afghanistan, accounting for roughly 40 percent of its population. The number of Pashtuns in Pakistan—located mainly in the northwest region—is even larger, but because of the immensely greater overall population of Pakistan they are a national minority and this has been manifest in their socio-political status. The border that divides the Pashtuns between the two states is a legacy of British colonialism in the region, created in the late 19th century as a frontier defense line. It was subsequently ratified by the UN in 1947 as the national border of the newly independent state of Pakistan—and was immediately disavowed by Afghanistan and has been a source of continuing conflict between the two states.

14. This view was shared both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. See Ghaus, p. 142, and Anwar, pp. 82-83.

15. See Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, pp. 78-81 (the Pakistan perspective); and Ghaus, *The Fall of Afghanistan*, pp. 110-121 (the perspective from the Daoud regime.)

16. Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, p. 80.

17. Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 16. Harrison states that he obtained information on the "loose collaboration" from William H. Lewis, who helped implement these programs as Director of Political-Military Affairs at the State Department.

18. Ghaus, pp. 111, 115, 121, 154-155; Cordovez and Harrison, pp.19-20, citing an interview with Daoud.

19. Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble*, p. 53.

20. There are contradictory views of whether the Soviets might also have urged Daoud to enter talks. Anwar, in *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, p. 81, says they did; Ghaus, in *The Fall of Afghanistan*, p. 120, denies it. The Soviets' alleged motive was the possibility, implied by Bhutto's reasonably friendly visit to Moscow in October 1974, of improving relations with Pakistan and thereby undermining the US regional security framework.

21. Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, p. 76; Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, pp. 60-67; Ghaus, *The Fall of Afghanistan*, pp. 121, 149, and 163; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 17. Harrison says Daoud also removed 200 Soviet-trained military officers at this time, but this contradicts Ghaus's description (pp. 190-191) of Daoud's approach to dealing with the military.

(See following note.) Anwar, who says he discussed the military purges with one of the dismissed officers, also does not mention this higher figure.

22. Anwar, p. 76; Ghaus, pp. 190-194; Cordovez and Harrison, p. 17. Anwar says that by this time Daoud had removed every known communist 'from the government,' but may have been referring to the cabinet-level positions. Ghaus claims the 'government' was not completely purged until 1977.

23. *Ibid*. Ghaus does not mention the dismissal of 40 officers, but Anwar says he was given this figure by the same dismissed officer cited in footnote 19, above.

24. Ghaus, *The Fall of Afghanistan*, pp. 124-150, 193. As Deputy Foreign Minister, Ghaus was directly involved in the negotiations and served as interpreter for the one-on-one talks between Daoud and Bhutto. He provides a highly detailed, intimate account.

25. Ghaus, p. 193; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 20.

26. Ghaus, pp. 179-180. (Ghaus was an eyewitness.) Harrison, in *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 21, cites Ghaus's description and says he received the same description from the Afghan foreign minister, who also was present.

27. Ghaus, *The Fall of Afghanistan*, pp. 140-148, 154-159; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, pp. 21-22.

28. Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, pp. 85-89; Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, pp. 67-72; Ghaus, pp. 171-194; Cordovez and Harrison, pp. 17-18. Also Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble*, p. 53, who notes that the final reunification agreement was reached at a meeting held in India. Anwar says the Soviet push for reunification began as early as 1975.

29. Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, pp. 92-101; Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, pp. 74-77; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, pp. 22-28; Ghaus, *The Fall of Afghanistan*, pp. 194-200. Each of the authors gives a slightly different timing for each of the steps. For the most part, they differ only by a few hours, except for Ghaus's statement that Amin was not taken into custody until the morning of 27 April. This does not fit with the timing he and other authors give for other events he describes, and may be an editorial error.

30. Anwar, p. 111, gives a list of the new government's lineup.

31. Declassified Interagency Intelligence Memoranda (IIM), *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, 28 September 1979, p. 5; and *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, October 1980, p. 6. Both were declassified as part of CIA's historical review program and are available from the Historical Review staff. The October 1980 document was prepared as an Intelligence Community review of intelligence warnings leading up to the Soviet invasion in December 1979, and describes the flow of evidence available to analysts during that time frame. Regarding the sightings of Soviet advisors with army units carrying out the action, see Cordovez and Harrison, pp. 27 and 32, and Ghaus, pp. 197-198.

32. Among just a portion of the diverse perspectives are Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, pp. 90-94, and 102-103; Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble*, pp. 52-55 and 89-92; Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, pp. 76-81; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, pp. 27-28; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 985-987, and Ghaus, *The Fall of Afghanistan*, pp. 195-198.

33. IIMs *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, p. 4, and *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p.6. See also

Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble*, p. 93, and Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 30.

34. Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, pp. 116-121, gives a detailed account of the machinations of this purge. See also Arnold, p. 95; Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, pp. 87-89, and Cordovez and Harrison, pp. 29-30.

35. IIMs *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, p. 6, and *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 8.

36. Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 384; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of a National Security Advisor* (New York, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1983), pp. 426-428; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, pp. 32-34. Harrison attributes his information to interviews with National Security Advisor Brzezinski and Undersecretary of State David Newsom.

37. Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 388; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, pp. 32-35. The Iranian visit is described in Michael Ledeen and William Lewis, *Debacle: The American Failure in Iran* (New York, Vintage Books, 1982), p. 96.

38. Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, pp. 119-123; Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble*, pp. 95-96; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 30. Arnold argues (p. 96) that it is unlikely Karmal could have arranged the coup before he left in July and that it is therefore more likely the September plot was arranged between Moscow and its sympathizers in the Afghan army.

39. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 8.

40. Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, p. 123; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 30.

41. Anwar, pp. 118, and 125-150; Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble*, pp. 57 and 97; Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, pp. 90-96. Cordovez and Harrison, pp. 30-32. Anwar's detailed, close-up and in-depth examination of the incompatibility of the Marxist-Leninist program and the Afghan social structure is a notably objective appraisal by someone who himself has been part of a more leftist regime.

42. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 8.

43. IIM, *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, p. 8.

44. Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 388; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, p. 34; "Guerillas Train In Afghanistan to Oust Afghan Government," *The Washington Post*, 2 February 1979, p. A23.

45. Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, pp. 153-154; IIMs, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 8-9, and *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, pp. 6 and 8. According to Anwar, citing discussions with fellow prisoners, the commander of the Asadabad garrison would later become one of the leaders of the Afghan guerrilla units in the eastern provinces opposing the Soviet intervention forces.

46. Anwar, pp. 154-155; Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble*, p. 99; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, pp. 34-35; IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 9.

47. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 9-10. Accounts in subsequent years said the number of Soviet advisors killed was at least nine and perhaps 40, and put the number of Afghan deaths at from 800 to 3,000. See Anwar, p. 157, and Cordovez and Harrison, pp. 35-36.

48. The leadership shuffle was announced publicly on 18 March (reported by the Foreign

Broadcast Information Service and the Embassy).

49. A “Motorized Rifle Division” was essentially an infantry, or ground troops, division equipped with armored transport vehicles and including units equipped with tanks, artillery and other weapons.

50. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 10 and 47 (for locations of the divisions).

51. The author was present for these debates.

52. *National Intelligence Daily*, 23 March 1979, quoted in IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 15.

53. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 10.

54. *Ibid.* , p. 13.

55. *Ibid.* ; and IIM, *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, pp. 6 and 8.

56. IIM, *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, p.9, and IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 14-15, which cites a “pro and con” assessment disseminated 16 June 1979.

57. IIMs, *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, pp. 9-10, and *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 10-12, 15 and 20.

58. “Moscow Said to Urge Shaky Afghan Regime to Broaden Base,” *The New York Times*, 2 August 1979, p. A10. Also US Embassy Kabul 5493 of 22 July and Kabul 5627 of 25 July, at the National Security Archive. These cables are in a compendium entitled “The Intervention in Afghanistan and the Fall of Détente,” compiled for a 1995 Nobel Symposium in Oslo, Norway, hereafter referred to as the Nobel Compendium. See also Garthoff’s description of other State Department reporting cables in *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 1001, footnote 61.

59. US Embassy Kabul 5493, 22 July 79; IIMs, *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, p.10, and *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 2; *The New York Times*, 2 August 1979, op. cit.

60. IIMs, *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, p. 7, and *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 16-17.

61. IIMs, *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, pp. 6-7, and *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 16-17; *The New York Times*, 2 August 1979, op. cit.

62. Charles Cogan, “Partners in Time: The CIA and Afghanistan,” *World Affairs Journal*, Summer 1993, p. 76; Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 146; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, op. cit., p. 427.

63. “US Indirectly Pressing Russians...,” *The New York Times*, 3 August 1979, p. A1.

64. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 17; US Embassy Kabul 5967, 6 August 1979.

65. This was then a relatively new position created by the DCI specifically to highlight potential crises early in their development. See IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 63, regarding memoranda prepared for the National Intelligence Officer for Warning. The description of this specific memorandum is based on the personal knowledge of the author, who was working virtually full time on the military dimensions of Soviet activities related to the Afghan situation

from Spring 1979 through the Soviet invasion. Other descriptions herein of intelligence reporting and assessments informed by the author's personal participation are so identified.

66. IIMs *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, p.10, and *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p.17.

67. IIMs *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, pp.10 and 14, and *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 21, plus author's participation.

68. Gates, *From the Shadows*, op cit., p.132, citing a still-classified report of 24 August 1979.

69. US Embassy Kabul 6604, 2 September 1979, and Kabul 6672, 6 September 1979, Nobel Compendium.

70. US Embassy Kabul 6672, 6 September 1979.

71. "Soviet Role in Afghan Clash Shows Signs of Toughening," *The New York Times*, 6 September 1979, p. A2.

72. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 17-18.

73. *Ibid.*; IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 18 and 21, quoting the *National Intelligence Daily* of 7 September 1979.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 21, and author's personal knowledge.

75. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 21; Gates, *From the Shadows*, pp. 132-133.

76. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), Middle East edition, 15 September 1979, p. S1; declassified cable, US Embassy Kabul 6874, 15 September 1979. Much of this was described in western media a few days later. See "New Afghan Leader, Taking Over, Pledges Better Social Order," *The New York Times*, 18 September 1979, p. A18.

77. FBIS, Middle East edition, 17 September 1979, pp. S1-2.

78. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 20 and 47. See especially the reference on p. 20 to a division also known as the "54th MRD." The interpretation of this text is based in part on the author's participation in the analysis. According to the author's recollection, this division was located at Dushambe, and was more commonly known as the 201st MRD. In fact, the IIM later (on p.47) lists the 201st as one of the divisions observed engaging in preparatory measures, although a date is not given.

79. "US Sees More Soviet Activity," *The New York Times*, 20 September 1979, p. A10. See also State Department cable 250373 of 22 September 1979, Nobel Compendium.

80. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 428; Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 133; Brzezinski Memo, 20 September 1979, Nobel Compendium-Additional Materials, National Security Archive.

81. Declassified cables US Embassy Kabul 6914, 16 September 1979; Kabul 6936, 17 September 1979; Kabul 6959, 18 September 1979; Kabul 7025, 20 September 1979; Islamabad 10745, 20 September 1979; Kabul 7281, 2 October 1979; Ankara 7966, 25 October 1979, and Kabul 7784, 30 October 1979. Also "New Afghan Head Called Survivor," *The New York Times*, 20 September 1979, p. A10, and IIM, *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, p.16. Successor regimes in Afghanistan, participants and scholars have added detail and conspiratorial nuance to this rendition, but do not change the main outlines of the picture that emerged at the time.

82. Declassified cables US Embassy Kabul 6936, 7025; and 7784; Ankara 7966; and *The New York Times*, 20 September 1979, op. cit.
83. Declassified cables US Embassy Kabul 6936 and Kabul 6978, 18 September 1979, Nobel Compendium; *The New York Times*, 18 September 1979, p. A18; IIM, *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, Key Judgments, pp. 1-2 and text p. 4. This Interagency Intelligence Memorandum was disseminated on 28 September 1979 in response to Brzezinski's 20 September request for an assessment. Indicative of the contrasting views in Washington at the time, former Secretary of State Vance, in *Hard Choices*, pp. 385-386, says the Soviets "no doubt hoped [Amin] would be more effective [than Taraki] in prosecuting the war."
84. IIM, *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, p. 6. The assessment noted that these figures did not include some 3,600 additional troops that, according to an unconfirmed report from one clandestine source, had been moved to Kabul to protect Soviet citizens and facilities. See also US Embassy Kabul 7319, 3 October 1979, Nobel Compendium. (Later intelligence assessments judged this unsupported information to be probably untrue or, at a minimum, exaggerated. See IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 20).
85. *Ibid.* ., pp. 10-12.
86. *Ibid.* ., p. 17.
87. *Ibid.* ., p. 11.
88. *Ibid.* ., p. 16.
89. *Ibid.* ., pp. 12-13.
90. *Ibid.* ., pp. 15-17; see also the "Key Judgments," pp. 2-3.
91. *Ibid.* ., p. 1; Passages from the 10 October Radio Kabul announcement of Taraki's death are in Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, p. 115. For the prevailing view in Washington, see Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 388, and "US Experts Say Afghan Civil War Has Reached a Stalemate," *The New York Times*, 29 October 1979, p. A3.
92. IIM, *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, p. 17.
93. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 23. This mutiny was also described at the time in the press. See "Afghan Army Mutiny is Reportedly Put Down," *The New York Times*, 17 October 1979, p. A10, and "Afghanistan Said To Subdue Military Uprising but not Civilian Rebels," *The New York Times*, 20 October 1979, p. 5. These articles describe the mutiny as beginning on 14 October. See also "15 October Situation Report," Nobel Compendium.
94. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 23-24. Identification of Kizyl Arvat as the location for the 58th Division is on p. 47.
95. *Ibid.* ., p. 24.
96. *Ibid.* ., p. 22; "US Experts say Afghanistan Civil War Has Reached a Stalemate," *The New York Times*, 29 October 1979, p. A3.
97. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 22, quoting DIA *Weekly Intelligence Summary* of 26 October 1979.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 23; declassified cable, US Embassy Ankara 7966, 25 October 1979; "US Experts Say Afghanistan Civil War Has Reached a Stalemate," *The New York Times*, 29 October 1979, op cit., p. A3.
99. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 23-24, 29, 47, and author's background information.
100. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 24.
101. The Kabul radio reports are recorded in the FBIS Middle East edition of 3 December 1979, pp. S1-2. Bradsher, pp. 175-177, gives some background on Paputin and his visit.
102. This information is from the author's involvement in tracking these developments. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, p. 176 refers to the flights into Afghanistan beginning on 29 November 1979, but describes them as going into Bagram. He may have drawn this conclusion, quite logically, from the fact that newly arrived Soviet units were discovered at Bagram a few days later, indicating that some flights had indeed gone there. But there is no question that there also were flights into Kabul. Defense attaches at the US Embassy saw the aircraft there.
103. These deployments and the *NID* and *DIN* reports are described in the declassified IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 24-26. As these intelligence reports were being disseminated, the press was reporting an Afghan rebel supporter's claim that the number of Soviet advisors had jumped to 25,000, a figure which, *at that time*, was greatly exaggerated. See "Afghan Guerilla Says Soviets Have Greatly Expanded Advisor Forces," *The New York Times*, 11 December 1979, p. A4. The State Department responded to these stories by publicly reaffirming the estimate of 3,500 to 4,000 military advisors and an equal number of civilian advisors.
104. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 26.
105. The author was present at this meeting.
106. The fact that the Embassy reported these sightings is described in Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, p. 176. He notes that this was reported in *The Washington Star* on 13 December, p. A10, modestly not mentioning that at the time he was covering events in Afghanistan for the *Star*. Description of the analysts' interpretations is based on the author's participation in the assessments, and recently was affirmed in interviews of persons stationed at the time at the US Embassy in Kabul.
107. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 29, 33 and 47.
108. Brzezinski's memorandum to the DCI, *Publicizing the Soviet Forces in Afghanistan*, 10 December 1979, is in the Nobel Compendium.
109. Schulman's meeting with the Soviet chargé is described in a declassified cable in the Nobel Compendium-Additional Materials Volume. The instruction to the US ambassador—in State Department Cable 323556, 15 December 1979—is referred to in a cable from the US Embassy in Moscow reporting on the Soviet reaction—Moscow 27530, 17 December 1979, also in the Nobel Compendium.
110. Record of the meeting of the Special Coordination Committee, 17 December 1979, "Subject: Iran," Nobel Compendium.

111. *Ibid.* .

112. US Embassy Moscow 27530, 17 December 1979, op. cit. The transmission time shown on this cable is 0937 EST, and the record of the White House meeting that day shows it was still in session at that time.

113. The FBIS Middle East edition of 21 December 1979, p. S2, gives an account of the Kabul radio broadcast of 20 December. A subsequent account appeared in *The New York Times* on 2 January 1980, p. 1. A good description is in Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, p. 178, who notes (footnote 45) that some accounts gave a different date.

114. The author was present for these debates. Examples of the “augmentation” are given in the IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 34.

115. *Ibid.*, p. 33 regarding airborne preparations, pp. 29 and 35 on the logistic buildup, pp. 29 and 47 regarding the 5th Guards Motorized Rifle Division, and p. 38 on the *NID* report on securing the road to Kabul. The name “Salang Pass” is based on the author’s participation in the intelligence deliberations at the time. Press articles soon after the invasion quoted US officials as saying the securing of the “Salang Pass” was one of the warning signals for a Soviet invasion. See “US Believes Amin Ousted Because He Refused to Accept Soviet Troops,” *The New York Times*, 2 January 1980, p. A14.

116. *Ibid.* ., p. 35, gives excerpts from the text of the 19 December 1979 Alert Memorandum and from the 20 December 1979 *NID* .

117. “Soviet Buildup Seen At Afghan Border,” *The New York Times*, 22 December 1979 (dateline 21 December 1979), p. A1; “US Voices Concern Repeatedly to Moscow Over Afghan Buildup,” *The New York Times*, 23 December 1979 (dateline 22 December 1979), p. 11 (both stories by Rick Burt); “Hodding Carter Brief at State,” *The Washington Post*, 22 December 1979, p. A15; “US Worries About Possibility of Soviet Dominance in Afghanistan,” *The Washington Post*, 23 December 1979, p.1 (story by Don Obendorfer). Moscow immediately issued a denial, asserting in its own media on 23 December 1979 that US reports of Soviet combat troops moving into Afghanistan were “pure invention” designed to camouflage US efforts to subvert the Afghan government by supporting insurgents. See FBIS Soviet Union edition of 26 December 1979, p. D1, and “Soviets Deny Charge on Afghans,” *The New York Times*, 24 December 1979, p. A9.

118. Gates, *From the Shadows*, p. 133; At the time, Gates was assistant to National Security Advisor Brzezinski.

119. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 38. Various accounts give different times for the beginning of the invasion, but on Christmas Eve the author received a phone call from the National Intelligence Officer for Warning, who had been summoned to the CIA Operations Center, informing him the airlift was under way.

120. *Ibid.* ., pp. 37-38 and pp. 45-46.

121. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39 and 62 describe the *NID* and *DIN* reporting of these events.

122. *Ibid.* . As is noted later, subsequent information shows these troop estimates were low by more than half.

123. Intelligence on the sham origins of the radio broadcast (the text is in the FBIS Middle East edition of 28 December 1979, p. S1) was reported the next day and sent to various embassies.

See State Department cable 333161, in the National Security Archive Afghan Compendium. The intelligence picture of these events, including the fake radio broadcast, was also given to the press. See “Afghan President Ousted and Executed in Kabul Coup reportedly with Soviet Help,” *The New York Times*, 28 December 1979, p. A1, and “Carter Tells Soviet Union to Pull Troops Out of Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, 30 December 1979, p. 1. Accounts based on subsequent information are in Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, pp. 180-182, and Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 1018-1019.

124. In addition to the articles of 28 and 30 December in *The New York Times* cited above, this description includes information the author gained from his participation in the intelligence coverage.

125. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 39, 46-47; “New Afghan Regime Says Moscow Agrees to Send In Additional Aid,” *The New York Times*, 29 December 1979, p. 1; “Carter Tells Soviet Union to Pull Its Troops Out of Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, 30 December 1979, p. 1; “Soviet Union Says It Sent a Limited Force to Help Afghans Repel Aggressor,” *The New York Times*, 31 December, p. A1; “Tripling of Soviet Forces,” *The Washington Post*, 30 December, p. A1.

126. FBIS Middle East edition of 28 December 1979, p. S2; *The New York Times*, 29 December 1979, op. cit.

127. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 429.

128. See “The Soviet Union and Afghanistan, 1978-1989: Documents from the Soviet and East German Archives,” and “Transcripts of CPSU Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan, 17-19 March 1979,” Woodrow Wilson Center, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin 8-9*, Winter 1996-97, pp. 136-145, hereafter cited as CWIHP.

129. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

130. *Ibid.*, p. 144. For deployment of the 201st Motorized Rifle Division into Afghanistan, see IIM, *Soviet Options in Afghanistan*, p. 47.

131. See “Meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee—17 March 1979,” from the “Transcripts....” cited in footnote 126, pp. 136-140.

132. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

133. *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

134. *Ibid.*, pp. 137-139.

135. *Ibid.* The recommendations are summarized on p. 140. The “who will be fighting” passage appears on p. 138, in remarks by Kirilenko.

136. *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142.

137. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

138. *Ibid.*, p. 143. The record of the 19 March 1979 session is on pp. 143-145.

139. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

140. For a sample, see the documents dated 17,18, 20 and 22 March; 14 April; 24 May; 19-21 July,

and 25 August 1979, *CWIHP Bulletin 8-9*, pp. 145-154. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 1008, provides a list of six other documents showing Afghan requests for troops.

141. "Gromyko-Andropov-Ustinov-Ponomarev Report to the CPSU CC on the Situation in Afghanistan, 28 June 1979," in "The Soviet Union and Afghanistan, 1979-1989," *CWIHP Bulletin 8-9*, pp. 152-153. Regarding the increase in troops at Bagram to an estimated 600 around August-September 1979, see US Embassy Kabul 73194, 3 October 1979, at the National Security Archive, Nobel Compendium. Regarding the approval, see Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 998, note 57 on Protocol 156 of the 29 June Politburo meeting.

142. US Embassy Kabul 7319, 3 October 1979, for example, describes the detachments of Soviet soldiers providing security in Kabul wearing Afghan Army uniforms.

143. "CPSU CC Politburo Decisions on Afghanistan, 13 September 1979, (excerpts)," *CWIHP Bulletin 8-9*, p. 154.

144. "CPSU CC Politburo Decision, 15 December 1979..." *Ibid.*, p. 154; "Cable from CC CPSU to GDR Leader Honecker, 16 September 1979," *Ibid.*, p. 155; "Information from the CC CPSU to Leader Honecker, 1 October 1979," *Ibid.*, p. 156.

145. "Gromyko-Andropov-Ustinov-Ponomarev Report to CPSU CC, 29 October 1979," *CWIHP Bulletin 8-9*, op cit., pp. 157-158.

146. Re Karmal's move to Moscow in October, see Pavel Demchenko, "How It Began in Afghanistan," *Ekho Planety*, No. 46, Moscow, November 1989, p. 28, and Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 1010.

147. "Extract from CPSU CC Politburo Decision, 6 December 1979," *CWIHP Bulletin 8-9*, op cit., p. 159. (The 29 June protocol did indeed refer to a future deployment of a special GRU unit, although it said at the time that this was envisaged for Bagram.)

148. Notes on this document taken by former Soviet Ambassador to the US Anatoly F. Dobrynin were provided to the Nobel Institute in Stockholm. See "Personnel Memorandum, Andropov to Brezhnev, n.d. [early December]," *CWIHP Bulletin 8-9*, p. 159.

149. See Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 1014, quoting an article by General V. Merimsky in *Voyenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* [Military Historical Journal] No. 11, Moscow 1003, pp. 31-32.

150. See for example Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, pp. 185-186, who received a description from someone who met with Amin two days before he was killed, and Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 1017, who cites many other sources.

151. This English translation appears in *CWIHP Bulletin 4 (Fall 1994)*, p. 76. A photocopy of the Russian-language original appeared in "Secret Memos Trace Moscow's March to War," by Michael Dobbs, *The Washington Post*, 15 November 1992, p. 1.

152. Three accounts which benefit from interviews and reviews of a wide spectrum of former Soviet sources are Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 106-1017; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, pp. 48-49, and Odd Arne Westad, "Concerning the Situation in 'A': New Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Iran," *CWIHP Bulletin 8-9*, p. 131. The nine signatures under the original 12 December 1979 date were Andropov, Ustinov, Gromyko, Pelshe, Suslov, Kiriolenco, and Chernenko. Brezhnev's signature is scrawled at the bottom, rather than in the space provided for his official signature.

153. See Wested, op. cit., citing General Varennikov's description given at the Nobel symposium in the fall of 1995, and Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence* (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 437-438.

154. Descriptions of much of this more-recent testimony and literature from former Soviet officials can be found in the extensively researched and sourced presentations of Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, pp. 45-49; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, especially pp. 1010-1018; Welch and Wested, *The Intervention in Afghanistan, Oral History...* (Nobel Symposium 95), and Wested's summary in "The Soviet Union and Afghanistan," *CWHIP Bulletin 8-9*, especially p. 131. Also see Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 437-439.

155. The intelligence descriptions are given in detail in the preceding text. The timing of Akhromeyev's arrival at Termez is described in the article by former Soviet General Merimsky, cited above, footnote 147, and also in accounts of discussions at the 1995 Nobel symposium, in Wested, "The Soviet Union and Afghanistan," *CWHIP Bulletin 8-9*, p. 131.

156. IIM, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, pp. 39-40 and 62-63. Various accounts of perceptions at the time are presented in such memoirs as Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 426-429 (He was inclined to a more-ominous interpretation of the preparations than were most intelligence analysts); Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 385-388, and Gates (who was on Brzezinski's staff at the time), *From the Shadows*, pp. 133-134. The views of NSC staff officers described here were expressed to the author at the time.

157. See for example, Richards J. Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1999), Chapter 2.

158. This information is now available in "The KGB in Afghanistan," CHIHP Special Working Paper No. 40, (Washington, DC, Woodrow Wilson Center, February 2002). The large volume of information from documents that Mitrokhin brought out from the KGB archives is presented in detail in Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999).

159. *Ibid.*, Page 52.

160. This quotation and the descriptions in the following paragraphs are on pages 92-95 of Mitrokhin's paper.

161. *Ibid.*