101

October 25, 1979

AFGHANISTAN: THE SOVIET QUAGMIRE

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has been convulsed for more than a year by a brutal civil war of steadily escalating scope and intensity which shows no signs of abating. The pro-Soviet Taraki regime that seized power through a coup d'etat in April 1978 has been shaken to the core by a spontaneous popular backlash against its social reforms and the callous manner in which these reforms were forced upon an unwilling population. A broad spectrum of opposition groups with divergent political, religious, tribal and nationalist goals has gained widespread support in outlying rural areas and has profited heavily from the xenophobia of Afghan tribesmen who strongly resent the pervasive influence of omnipresent Soviet advisers. In spite of extensive Soviet military aid, the Afghan regime has thus far proven to be incapable of containing, let along decisively defeating, the rebel insurgency.

Due at least in part to this failure, President Nur Mohammad Taraki was recently ousted and apparently killed by his prime minister, Hafizollah Amin. Although Amin is known to be a staunch pro-Soviet hardliner, it is uncertain at this point how the change in leadership will affect the course of the Afghan conflict. The purpose of this paper is to outline the prevailing currents in the Afghan whirlpool since the 1973 coup, analyze the nature of the insurgency, evaluate its regional geopolitical implications and assess the Soviet Union's role, interests and options in the area.

THE DAOUD REGIME

On April 27, 1978, a bloody coup d'etat staged by a pro-Soviet faction of the Afghan armed forces brought to power a leftist coalition called the People's Democratic Party (PDP) led

by Nur Mohammad Taraki. By all accounts the coup was a hastily improvised affair precipitated by President Mohammad Daoud's crackdown against communists both inside and outside the government. While the PDP undoubtedly had been laying the groundwork for a future coup, President Daoud's pre-emptive purge forced its hand and resulted in a premature seizure of power which left the PDP unprepared to administer the country once it established itself in Kabul. As a result, by the time that party cadres filtered out into rural areas to assert control of the countryside they met stiff resistance from mullahs (clergy) apprehensive about the new regime's lack of commitment to Islam, landowners hostile to its land reform program and restive tribesmen traditionally intolerant of centralized power in Kabul. When the Taraki regime resorted to military coercion in an effort to intimidate its opponents, it provoked determined and widespread armed resistance which has eroded its power, drained its resources and increased its dependence upon the Soviet Union.

Although the coup has been labelled the Saur (April) revolution by the PDP regime, it was accomplished by a small conspiratorial group bereft of meaningful popular support. Its target, the Daoud regime, was autocratic, inefficient and corrupt but still maintained the grudging acceptance, if not the wholehearted support, of the Afghan people. Daoud himself had come to power via a 1973 coup against his brother-in-law King Zahir. Although he had entered into an alliance with Afghan leftists to oust the king, Daoud gradually loosened his ties to the left and by 1977 he had gone so far as to require all political parties to disband their independent organizations and merge into his new National Revolutionary Party.

The drift to the right was particularly evident in Afghanistan's foreign policy. When Daoud came to power in 1973 relations with Pakistan and Iran steadily deteriorated due to his renewal of Afghanistan's on again-off again support for Pushtun and Baluchi separatists in Pakistan. However, beginning in 1974, Iran made a concerted effort to entice the Afghans into a western-oriented Tehran-centered regional economic and security sphere embracing the Indian subcontinent and Persian Gulf states. By virtue of a ten-year $2 billion aid agreement signed in 1974, Tehran was committed to replace Moscow as Kabul's largest source of economic aid. The Iranians also made plans to link Afghanistan to Iran's Persian Gulf ports with a network of railroads and highways which would reduce Kabul's dependence on Soviet trade and transport outlets while expanding Iranian economic leverage over the Daoud regime. The Shah made it clear that continued Iranian economic assistance was contingent upon the termination of Afghan support for separatist groups in Pakistan's Baluch and Pushtun tribal areas as well as a crackdown against Afghanistan's two pro-Soviet communist parties - the Khalq (Masses) Party and its offshoot the Parcham (Banner) Party, a group which had been one of President Daoud's allies in the early days of his regime.

By March 1978 Daoud, prodded by the Shah, had concluded a peace agreement with Pakistan and pledged to expel Baluchi and Pushtun guerrilla groups which were using Afghan territory. In return, Pakistan agreed to train Afghan army officers, a function which had previously been performed primarily by the Soviet Union. In early April President Daoud travelled to Saudi Arabia and Egypt (the latter also offered to train Afghan army officers) to complete a series of tours of the nonaligned world which had previously taken him to Yugoslavia and India. The Shah was scheduled to visit Kabul in June and the Afghan president was known to be preparing for a White House meeting with President Carter in September in which he was expected to ask for an enhanced U.S. aid package. Shortly before the coup, Daoud launched a diplomatic initiative, undoubtedly with strong Iranian and Saudi backing, to block Cuba's assumption of leadership of the nonaligned movement scheduled to occur in September 1979. Clearly Daoud was laying the groundwork for better relations with moderate nonaligned nations and the West, a prospect which the Soviets must have found unpalatable given the fact that they had already showered over $1 billion in aid on Afghanistan since 1954 and were still providing Kabul with $200 million a year.

THE SOVIET ROLE IN THE COUP

President Daoud's decision to dissolve his alliance with the Parchamites, his growing coolness toward Moscow and his accelerating drift into Tehran's orbit triggered a significant change in Soviet policy. In March 1976 the Soviets launched a campaign to merge the Parcham and Khalq factions of the communist movement in order to strengthen the Afghan left against Tehran-inspired machinations at the hands of Daoud. The Kremlin apparently offered to ordain Nur Mohammad Taraki as leader of a unified party if he would reach a reconciliation with the Parcham faction which had splintered away from his Khalq party in 1968. The Khalq, which was the larger, more dynamic, and more radical of the two, drew its strength from rural areas, especially among the Pushtuns, while the more pro-Soviet Parcham drew most of its support from university students and the Tajik tribes in northeast Afghanistan. When their union was consumated in May 1977 Taraki emerged as the top leader of the new People's Democratic Party and Babrak Karmal, the head of the Parcham, became his second in command.

While the Soviets played a major role in re-unifying the fragmented communist movement in Afghanistan, no concrete evidence of direct Soviet involvement in the April 1978 coup has yet been uncovered. However, given the extent of the Soviet military and intelligence presence in Kabul, not to mention the historically close working relationship between Moscow and the Afghan communist movement, it is inconceivable that the Kremlin was unaware of the schemes of its Afghan clients, and highly improbable that it did not furnish material, political and/or moral support. A particularly suspicious piece of circumstantial evidence was the "unusually effective precision bombing of key targets during the critical

moments of the fighting" which strongly suggested the participation of Soviet pilots.[1] In any event, the Saur revolution abruptly halted and decisively reversed the development of an Afghan foreign policy increasingly independent of the Soviet Union.

AFGHANISTAN'S STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

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

The Soviet Union has exhibited a long-standing interest in its southern neighbors, as evidenced by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Protocol to the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact, which asserted that Soviet territorial aspirations lay in the direction of the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. In recent years, the Kremlin's incentives for expanding its influence to the south have been significantly enhanced by the growing importance of Middle Eastern, especially Persian Gulf, oil in the Western economic system. Seen from the vantage point of the Persian Gulf, the single most important energy-surplus region in the world, the April 1978 pro-Soviet Afghan coup constitutes one part of a giant pincer movement designed to encircle Gulf oil reserves. The Kremlin already has established a military presence in Ethiopia and South Yemen; now that the Iranians are no longer willing or able to underwrite Oman's security, Sultan Qabus faces the growing danger that the Dhofar insurgency will flare up once more, this time with greater material support from the Soviets' stalking horse on the Arabian Peninsula - South Yemen.

---

1. Selig Harrison, "The Shah, not the Kremlin, touched off the Afghan Coup," Washington Post, May 13, 1979, p. C5.

At the other end of the pincer the emergence of a pro-Soviet Afghanistan extends Soviet influence to within 350 miles of the Arabian Sea, blocked only by a disputed territory--Baluchistan--which itself faces the potential threat of a separatist insurgency. Afghan air bases are located less than an hour away by jet from the vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) which function as the "oil lifeline" of the industrial West. Using these bases, Soviet aircraft could reach the chokepoint at the Straits of Hormuz and remain on-station there for at least 30 minutes.[2] Clearly, Soviet access to Afghan airbases significantly upgrades the Kremlin's ability to block, or even sever, the petroleum jugular vein of the West.

SECURITY THREATS TO IRAN AND PAKISTAN

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

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

Kabul has also supported an independent Baluchistan in order to obtain access to the sea. Afghan trade is currently dependent on the Soviet overland transportation network since access to the Pakistani port of Karachi has frequently been constrained by tensions with Islamabad. However, support for an independent Baluchistan has been muted, at least in part because the potential domestic benefits of stimulating internal cohesiveness via a

---

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

popular foreign policy vis-a-vis Baluchistan are not as great as those inherent in a strong pro-Pushtun policy, given the smaller number of Baluchis living in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the Saur Revolution has visibly strengthened the ranks of militant Baluchi nationalists, who are building a skeleton guerrilla organization, confident that the PDP regime will eventually come to support a full scale insurgency once it has consolidated its internal power base within Afghanistan.[3] In addition, there have been unconfirmed reports that the Soviets have been shipping arms to Iranian Baluchis through Afghan intermediaries.[4]

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

The precarious domestic political position of the PDP regime has thus far precluded the Afghans from actively promoting in an overt fashion the territorial dismemberment of Pakistan. However, should the PDP regime consolidate its control over Afghanistan the potential threat of Soviet-encouraged, Afghan-supported insurgencies would be boosted significantly. In spite of its own domestic pre-occupations, Kabul has already found time to forge links with leftist groups in both Pakistan and Iran. Two Soviet-supervised training camps providing marxist indoctrination and guerrilla training to Pakistan and Iranian radicals have been established in Mazar-i-Sharif, close to the border with the Soviet Union.[5] Many Afghans were arrested within Iran in several of the anti-Shah demonstrations of 1978, circumstantial evidence which has been interpreted by at least one expert to suggest the involvement of the KGB-controlled Afghan secret service (Estekbarat) in the effort to oust the Shah.[6] In January 1979 almost 200 armed men were caught crossing the border into Iran from Afghanistan, according to Shahpour Bakhtiar, the deposed prime minister of the Shah's last cabinet.[7] The recent history of Afghan meddling in Iranian affairs, the large number of Afghan expatriates

---

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

already living in Iran (500,000) and the historically close working relationship which has existed between Afghanistan's Khalq Party and the pro-Soviet Iranian Tudeh Party, have caused more than a few observers to fear that the Afghans may well become Soviet surrogates in the increasingly likely event that Iran is plunged into a civil war. If the PDP regime can establish unshakeable control over Afghanistan, the Afghans may be destined to become, on a much reduced scale, the "Cubans of Asia."

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

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

THE TARAKI REGIME

When Nur Mohammad Taraki's Khalq Party seized power in April 1978 it numbered no more than 5,000 members in an estimated population of 15 million. Not only did the regime rest on an extremely narrow power base, but its cadres (termed Khalqis) were drawn from a thin stratum of urban intellectuals, teachers and

advanced-level students who had little in common with the rural Moslem tribesmen who make up the bulk of the population. A series of purges against the Parcham faction, nationalists in the armed forces, security forces, the intelligentsia and the civil services narrowed the regime's base of support even further and drained it of the trained manpower needed to administer the country. Vacant government positions were filled by party loyalists and Soviet citizens, mostly Tajiks who spoke a Persian dialect most Afghans can understand.

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

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

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

the fighting.[8] The regime's coercive apparatus seems to have paid special attention to educated elites, military officers, teachers, civil servants and businessmen. Amnesty International has charged the Taraki regime with using torture and mass executions on a large-scale basis. According to one foreign observer: "The level of executions here makes what is happening in Iran look like child's play. The problem here is that they don't bother with show trials, so its hard to keep score."[9]

THE ISLAMIC BACKLASH

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

Islamic resistance in Afghanistan has been strengthened by the triumphant resurgence of Islamic influence in Iran. The Ayatollah Khomeini has bitterly denounced Kabul for the anti-Islamic tone of its policies and has repeatedly called upon the Afghan armed forces, police and civil service to turn against the "corrupt atheists" who have attempted to subvert Afghanistan's traditional culture. Ironically, the fundamentalist Islamic backlash which threatens the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan is similar to the movement which drove the Shah out of Iran. In both cases the regime in power was perceived by rebels as being an agent of the corruption of the national culture by imported alien influences. In Iran these influences were western capitalism and permissiveness, while in Afghanistan it was atheistic Marxism. In both cases the fundamentalist Islamic movement became a potent political force because its appeal transcended ethnic, tribal and class lines. In Afghanistan, where Moslem tribesmen had virtually

---

8. MacNeil/Lehrer Report, August 14, 1979.
9. Tyler Marshall, "Marxist Afghan Regime in Trouble," Los Angeles Times, June 25, 1979, p. 11.

no institutionalized political input into Kabul's decision-making, but more particularly in Iran, where meaningful political opposition was precluded by a one-party consititution, the long-entrenched Islamic religious network provided an effective means of arousing and mobilizing the population.

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

THE PROGRESS OF THE WAR

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

The guerrillas, armed primarily with ancient bolt-action copies of Royal Enfield rifles made by village gunsmiths, have periodically laid siege to government-controlled urban centers, forcing the Kabul regime to mount costly relief operations which further dispersed government strength. The regime, for its part, launched a scorched earth policy in rebel strongholds along the Pakistani border, bombing villages and burning crops in an effort to intimidate villagers and force the rebels to spend their scarce resources on food and shelter. It is believed that over 170,000 Pushtuns have fled across the border into Pakistan, where they have established support bases and a makeshift political coalition to provide some semblance of direction and unity to the diverse opposition groups which wage separate and uncoordinated campaigns against the Taraki-Amin regime.

While the government currently controls all the major urban centers, it is believed to be in full control of only one-quarter of the country and less than half of the population. The insurgents have briefly captured some outlying towns but they have not been able to permanently seize, hold and administer any large towns or sizable areas of territory. Although the insurgents exercise undisputed control over much of the countryside at night, during the day they are vulnerable to attack from the rapidly growing Afghan air force, which is reported to have resorted to napalm bombing for punitive as well as military purposes.

The 80,000 man Afghan Army is stretched so thin in defense of scattered cities that the regime relies upon a special mobile strike force that must be transported to threatened areas in Soviet-supplied helicopters reportedly piloted by Soviet officers. Worn down by a savage brushfire war against an elusive enemy which takes refuge in some of the most rugged terrain on earth, the army has suffered approximately 10,000 casualties in the last year. The heavy rate of attrition, repeated purges of the officer corps and the frustrations of a protracted anti-guerrilla campaign have seriously undermined the morale of the Afghan armed forces and resulted in a high rate of desertion, with entire units occasionally killing their officers and defecting en masse.

The Afghan army is composed of conscripts taken in disproportionate numbers from ethnic minorities such as the Hazaras, Uzbeks and Turkomans, minority groups which also happen to be in the forefront of the revolt. Most solders are devout Moslems from villages and tribal areas with no real commitment to the regime and are reluctant to shoot other Moslems, especially members of their own tribal groups. While the pay of officers and NCOs was doubled in August to improve their morale, the lower ranks are still paid $1.20 per month, and are known to be disgruntled by the widespread presence of Soviet officers (often dressed in Afghan uniforms) who occasionally step out of their strictly advisory roles to issue commands in units as small as companies. Bloody mutinies in Herat in March, Jalabad in April, and Kabul in August have thrown into question the long-term reliability and staying power of the Afghan army. Although Soviet-supplied airpower has thus far given it the capability to decisively neutralize and defeat any rebel offensive, it is clear that the army will be incapable of defeating the insurgency in the future without a significant escalation of the Soviet presence and a massive infusion of Soviet military technology.

THE SOVIET CONNECTION

When Nur Mohammad Taraki came to power in April 1978 the Soviets had approximately 1200 advisors in Afghanistan. By August 1979 their presence had grown to at least 4,500 advisors, 1500 of whom were military advisors assigned to the Afghan army.[10]

---

10. "Army Mutiny in Afghanistan Presents Soviet with Dilemma," Washington Post, August 7, 1979, p. A 13.

While the magnitude of the Soviet presence does not yet match Russo-Cuban commitments to Ethiopia or Angola, it should be noted that Afghanistan is a much smaller country and it is unlikely that the buildup has in fact ended.

In addition to providing advisory support to the Afghan armed forces, and training 200 Afghan army officers each year, the Kremlin has undertaken a massive buildup of Kabul's military hardware. In recent months the flow of materiel has become so great that 400 Soviet personnel are reported to have taken complete control of Bargam Airport, 40 miles from Kabul, the primary destination for the seemingly endless procession of giant Antonov transport planes laden with Soviet weapons earmarked for Afghanistan.

The pace of the Soviet supply effort visibly quickened after the April 1979 visit of a high-level military mission led by the chief political commissar of the Soviet armed forces, General Aleksei Yepishev, who not-so-coincidentally was a key figure in the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. In the immediate aftermath of Yepishev's visit, Moscow dispatched MiG 16 and MiG 21 fighters, SU 20 bombers, over one hundred T 62 tanks, trucks, artillery, Mi-8 troop transport helicopters and the Russians' newest helicopter gunship, the rocket-armed Mi-24 (NATO code name - "HIND") which had never before been used in combat.[11] In early September the Soviets sent another high-level military mission to Kabul to assess the military situation, this time led by a commander of ground forces. While there has been speculation that this action may foreshadow increased Soviet military aid and/or involvement in the future, at this time is is premature to make such a judgment, especially in view of the recent ouster of Taraki.

It is clear, however, that the Soviet military role has been gradually evolving from one of supplying arms, training and technical/organizational expertise to a more direct involvement in the day-to-day operational guidance of indigenous forces. Afghan officers are now reported to clear their commands through Soviet advisors, Soviet officers have apparently taken command roles in the field and Soviet pilots are believed to be flying combat sorties against rebel stongholds and ferrying Afghan troops via helicopter to the battlefield.[12] According to U.S. government estimates, the Russians have lost at least 80 men in the war as of mid-September.[13]

While there is no hard evidence of direct involvement by Soviet combat troops, refugees in Pakistan claim that a commando

---

11. Jonathan Randal, "Afghanistan: Moscow's Vietnam?" Washington Post, May 10, 1979, p. A43.
12. Stuart Auerback, "Afghan President Quits as Moslem Rebellion Grows," Washington Post, September 17, 1979, p. A15.
13. Washington Star, September 19, 1979, p. 2.

force has been flown in from the Soviet Union for surprise attacks and then quickly withdrawn.[14] In March 1979 there was a limited Soviet military buildup along the border which prompted Washington to warn the Soviets publicly against direct intervention. In September the coup against the Taraki government triggered an alert among Soviet paratroop units stationed near the border. These indications of increased Soviet willingness to flex its military muscles underline the future possiblity of direct military involvement.

THE INSURGENTS' LACK OF OUTSIDE SUPPORT

In constrast to the immense quantities of military hardware bestowed upon Kabul, the rebels have thus far been able to attract little more than a trickle of external aid. Although Moscow and Kabul have accused Iran, Pakistan, the People's Republic of China, the United States and even Egypt of supporting the insurgency, there currently is no hard evidence that significant amounts of aid are being extended by any external power. Those that profess to see a close parallel between Soviet involvement in Afghanistan and U.S. involvement in Vietnam would do well to remember that the North Vietnamese were able to withstand U.S. military pressures for as long as they did because they were deluged with military aid from both Moscow and Peking. The Afghan rebels enjoy no such luxury. They are fighting the pro-Soviet regime, and by extension the Soviets, on their own, bereft of significant external support. Moreover, they are fighting only a few miles from the Soviet border.

Their closest potential benefactor, Pakistan, has officially disassociated itself from the rebellion and the rebels maintain that Pakistan provides nothing but tents and food for refugees. However, the Pakistanis have been known to be less than zealous in prohibiting military training in guerrilla camps. Moreover, Islamabad has turned a blind eye to rebel arms smugglers along the ill-defined border, claiming that it is incapable of halting the arms traffic there due to the rugged nature of the terrain. Iran, pre-occupied with its own internal problems, has apparently provided little but moral support to the insurgents. Recently there have been rumors that Arab oil producing states have played a limited financial role in backing the rebels (Riyadh is supposably channeling its funds through the Moslem Brotherhood) but such rumors have not been substantiated to date.

The Soviets have claimed that Peking has utilized a recently built highway across Pakistan's Karakoram mountains which links Xinjiang in China with Hunza in Pakistan to transport arms, munitions and subversive literature to rebels in eastern Afghanistan. Peking denies these charges and western intelligence

---

14. Charles Bartlett, "The Invasion of Afghanistan." Washington Star, August 8, 1979, p. A15.

agencies have not publicly confirmed either position. Given the intensely anti-communist disposition of the rebel groups and the fact that a major Islamic movement - Hezb-I-Islami - has announced that it would never accept Chinese aid, if offered, it is unlikely that Peking has been or will become a major source of aid to Afghan rebels.

Not only is the United State not sending aid to the rebels, but in spite of congressional pressures it is currently providing a limited amount of economic development assistance to the Kabul regime, assistance that was "in the pipeline" when President Carter cut off aid to Afghanistan in the wake of the murder of Ambassador Dubs last February. The Carter Administration's most forceful move regarding the Afghan situation up to this point has been the refusal to name a successor to Ambassador Dubs, hardly a sanction which will make any difference to Kabul or impress nervous allies in the region. Washington's unwillingness and/or inability to respond in concrete terms to Soviet gains in Afghanistan has undermined the confidence of American allies in the usefulness--and perhaps even the relevance--of close relations with the United States.

THE SOVIET STAKE IN AFGHANISTAN

Moscow has brushed up against an Afghan tarbaby and now finds itself entangled in the internal politics of one of the most ungovernable countries on earth. It is confronted by a dilemma of empire. If it escalates its military involvement it runs the risk of being bogged down in a protracted guerrilla war which will cost it dearly in terms of men, material, diplomatic capital, world opinion, and relations with Islamic states throughout the world, as well as the United States. But if it cuts its losses and seeks a political solution it runs the risk of undermining the credibility of its commitments elsewhere and acknowledging the incompatibility of Marxism and Islam.

Afghanistan is both a stepping stone for Soviet strategic penetration of the Northern Tier and a stepping stone for Islamic religious penetration of Soviet Central Asia. The Soviets desire a pro-Soviet Afghanistan in order to gain leverage over Iran and Pakistan; they desire a non-Islamic Afghanistan in order to halt the Islamic revival at the Hindu Kush and insulate their growing Moslem population from dangerously explosive politico-religious doctrines. Moscow can not countenance an Islamic victory in Afghanistan because it would reinforce the lessons of Iran in the eyes of Soviet Moslem subjects and hasten the creation of a belt of Islamic states around the southern periphery of the Soviet Union which could hope to deter Soviet interference in their internal affairs by threatening to retaliate by fomenting religious turmoil in the Central Asian republics which have similar ethnic compositions. While the magnitude of the "green menance" has not yet been made manifest and will certainly be severely circumscribed, if not circumvented, by the omnipresent Soviet

internal security forces, the Kremlin cannot afford to underestimate the strength of the Islamic threat.

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

The Kremlin therefore does not wish to be perceived to be letting down an ally - particularly one on its own doorstep. Soviet officials in Kabul have told foreign diplomats that: "This is a socialist revolution which is our duty to defend."[15] Premier Brezhnev further underlined the Soviet commitment in a conversation with the former Indian Prime Minister Moraji Desai by putting himself on record as saying "We shall not leave our friend in need."[16] Such expressions of Soviet commitment signal Moscow's readiness to go to great lengths to preserve their Afghan clients.

SOVIET OPTIONS

Although the Kremlin has strong reasons for propping up the precarious Khalq regime in Kabul, it has equally strong reasons for avoiding direct military involvement in Afghanistan. A Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan would be a far cry from the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia. The Afghans are a fierce, proud people whose warrior tradition enabled them to twice defeat the British in the nineteenth century. Soviet intervention might lean to an open-ended commitment of military resources which would draw down Soviet strength on the western front and/or the Chinese border. A Soviet invasion would remove the last vestigial claim that the Khalq regime would have on

---

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

nationalist sentiments and poison Russian relations with the states of the Indian subcontinent and Arab world. It would further unravel the already weakened fabric of detente with the United States and would hand the Chinese an excellent opportunity to improve their position on the subcontinent at Soviet expense.

Given the many disadvantages of a military solution to their Afghan problem, the Soviets might be tempted to try instead a political solution. In spite of their growing commitment to the Khalq regime they have carefully avoided closing off their political options. The Parcham faction purged in September 1978 has been kept in cold storage in Eastern Europe and constitutes one string to the Soviet bow. The Soviets have also been rumored to have made contact with the former king, Mohammad Zahir Shah, now in exile in Rome. In early August, Dr. Nur Ahmad Etemadi, the King's ex-prime minister, was apparently taken out of prison in Kabul for talks with Soviet representatives. All of these actions are entirely consistent with the efforts of Vasily Safronchuk, a top Soviet political troubleshooter, who has reportedly been urging the Taraki regime to broaden its political base and slow down the pace of modernization since his arrival in April. Still another hint of a Soviet political offensive was a significant change in August of the political formula by which Moscow ritually expressed its endorsement of the ruling regime. Soviet support of the Taraki government suddenly was altered to become support of the "Afghan revolution and people."[17] Such symbolic semantic changes have often presaged changes in key personnel in the past and there is no reason to doubt that the Soviets fully intended to force its Afghan clients to broaden their base of support.

However, the ill-conceived shootout at the presidential palace on September 14 which resulted in the apparent death of Taraki and the triumph of Amin was probably not the change that the Kremlin had in mind. While the events leading up to the shootout are still unclear, there is a general consensus among foreign observers that the Russians themselves were taken by surprise, as evidenced by the groups of Soviet advisors and their dependents who were casually strolling around Kabul when gunfire rang out in the palace. Moreover, Brezhnev welcomed Taraki to Moscow the week before the coup with a public bearhug, an improbable occurrence (even by Soviet standards) if Brezhnev had been plotting his overthrow.

There has been speculation that Amin learned of a Soviet-backed attempt to oust him from the ruling regime and pre-emptively struck out at Taraki to present the Soviets with a fait accompli. Amin's takeover leaves the Soviets in a precarious position. Since he has eliminated all logical successors and has placed his own handpicked men in key positions in the army and internal security forces, the Soviets have little choice but to support him.

---

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

It would appear that he has not only out-maneuvered Taraki but possibly the Russians as well. The ball now appears to be in the Soviet court and it will be interesting to see how they respond.

CONCLUSION

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

Afghanistan is important to Moscow for regional as well as global geopolitical and geostrategic reasons. It pivotal geographical location has made it the "cockpit of Asia" and led it to become a barometer of the balance of power in the central Asian area. The growing Soviet presence in Afghanistan constitutes a significant penetration of the increasingly vulnerable Northern Tier group of countries which had previously shielded the vital Persian Gulf region from direct Soviet pressures. Because Afghanistan is a potential staging area for subversive and separatist activities in Pakistan and Iran, a pro-Soviet Afghanistan enhances Soviet diplomatic leverage over both states and increases the risks that one or both will be dismembered in the future, possibly paving the way for the establishment of an independent Baluchistan. Such a state would almost automatically be pro-Soviet, since it would require support against Iran and Pakistan; in return for their support the Soviets could hope to establish a naval base uncomfortably close to the crucial Persian Gulf oil arteries upon which the industrialized West will be dependent for the foreseeable future. Already, Soviet aircraft based in Afghanistan are little more than an hour's flying time from the strategic chokepoint at the Strait of Hormuz.

Afghanistan is both a stepping stone for Soviet penetration of the Northern Tier and a stepping stone for Islamic religious penetration of Soviet Central Asia. The Kremlin desires a pro-Soviet Afghanistan for offensive purposes but needs a non-Islamic buffer for defensive purposes. A fundamentalist Islamic victory in Afghanistan, coming on the heels of of similar victory in Iran, would expose Moscow's Moslem regions to the potentially corrosive effects of the "green menace." The Soviets also have a vested interest in preserving the credibility of their commitments to client regimes, especially those in eastern Europe which

long ago signed treaties remarkably similar to the 1978 treaty of "friendship, good neighborliness and cooperation" signed with Kabul. If the Soviets permit Kabul to fall into the hands of religious/nationalist forces they would be setting a dangerous precedent for Warsaw.

Although the Soviet Union has strong reasons for propping up the precarious Khalq regime in Kabul it has equally strong reasons for avoiding direct military involvement. Soviet intervention might lead to an open-ended commitment of military resources which would draw down Soviet strength on the western front and/or the Chinese border. An invasion would strain relations with the states of the Indian subcontinent and the Arab world, further unravel the already tattered fabric of detente with the United States and hand the Chinese and excellent opportunity to improve their position in South Asia at Soviet expense.

For these reasons, the Kremlin has studiously avoided closing off its option of negotiating a political solution. By enticing moderate political figures into participating in a broadened popular front type of regime the Russians could hope to take some of the steam out of the rebellion and exploit the disunity of the rebel camp. Such a coalition strategy might enable them to salvage a non-Islamic, if not a pro-Soviet Afghanistan from the carnage of the Afghan civil war without making a major commitment of military forces. Moreover, such a tactical retreat could always be reversed at a later date if it became expedient to do so.

However, if the Soviets were in fact considering a political solution to their Afghan problems, the September 14 coup, which replaced President Taraki with his ruthless prime minister, Hafizollah Amin, undoubtedly disrupted their plans. Amin is an ardent hardline communist who is known to be the most unpopular figure in the country because of his close identification with the Khalq regime's constant purges, political repression and scorched earth policy. At present, it is unclear how Amin's coup will affect Moscow's relations with Kabul or its support of the Khalq regime's war against the insurgents. In any event, the chronic turbulence in the Afghan political scene makes it more than likely that Amin will be (according to an old Afghan folk-expression) Barre Duroz Shah -"King for two days." If and when Amin falls prey to the same fate that befell his predecessors it can be expected that Moscow will have other candidates for power waiting in the wings.

James Phillips
Congressional Fellow