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UPDATING U.S. STRATEGY FOR HELPING AFGHAN FREEDOM FIGHTERS

INTRODUCTION

Seven years after the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, Soviet troops remain locked in a protracted guerrilla war with no victory in sight. Since Soviet tanks rolled into Afghanistan on December 27, 1979, almost one million Afghans have been killed, most of them civilians. Approximately five million Afghans--one-third of the prewar population--have been driven into exile and now form the world's single largest refugee group. Those that remain at home confront a Soviet army of occupation determined to terrorize Afghans into submission. Moscow has relied on scorched earth tactics to destroy food supplies, indiscriminate bombing of population centers, illegal chemical weapons, mass executions, widespread torture, and boobytrapped toys designed to maim children.

Yet the Afghan Mujahideen (Holy Warriors) fight on. Moscow has steadily escalated Soviet military coercion, incurring mounting casualties, but has made little progress in consolidating its grip on Afghanistan or translating military superiority into political accommodation, let alone support. Moscow also has made cosmetic changes in the quisling communist regime that it props up in Kabul in a vain effort to undermine the Mujahideen and defuse international criticism. But Moscow is no closer to winning its Afghan war today than it was in 1979.

Far from giving up, however, the Soviets are settling in for the long haul. Moscow seeks to wear down the resistance in a grinding war of attrition, to depopulate key resistance strongholds and undercut the Mujahideen's base of support, and compel Pakistan and Iran to choke off external assistance to the resistance. Unless the Afghan resistance improves its military effectiveness and political unity, it is in danger of succumbing to exhaustion in the long run.

A Soviet victory in Afghanistan would destabilize Southwest Asia.¹ Fully understanding this, the United States and other nations have extended aid to the Afghan resistance. Recent revelations related to the Iranian controversy indicate that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, for instance, each contributed \$250 million in aid to the Afghans in 1986. While it appears that the Afghans finally may be receiving the quantity of aid to withstand the Soviet onslaught, it is not clear that the quality is adequate. What the Mujahideen need is a broader, more creative policy on Afghanistan from the U.S. This could include:

- 1) Effective air defense weapons in sufficient numbers without delay.
- 2) Military, medical, and educational training.
- 3) Allocation of U.S. aid to Afghan resistance groups according to criteria related to military effectiveness, not political affiliations.
- 4) Stepped-up diplomatic efforts to isolate the Kabul government by recognizing the resistance coalition as the rightful representative of the Afghan people.
- 5) A reaffirmation of U.S. support for Pakistan to deter Soviet military actions.
- 6) Increased efforts to inform the Soviet people of the economic and human losses incurred by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.
- 7) Focusing U.S. peace initiatives on securing total and permanent Soviet withdrawal.

Until the Soviets follow up their broad hints of a political solution with concrete proposals for total military withdrawal, the coalition of states that supports the Afghan resistance should maintain maximum pressure for a Soviet pullback.

THE MILITARY STALEMATE

Since 1979 the Soviets gradually have expanded their "limited contingent" occupying Afghanistan to 115,000 to 120,000 men.

1. See James Phillips, "Afghanistan: The Soviet Quagmire," Heritage Foundation Background No. 101, October 25, 1979.

Supported by 50,000 military personnel stationed across the Soviet border, this Soviet army has waged an increasingly aggressive and brutal war of attrition. Soviet forces have maintained shaky control of major Afghan population centers and lines of communication, but at a steadily growing cost in terms of Soviet casualties and equipment losses. The Soviets and their Afghan puppets control only 10 to 20 percent of the country; much of that is subject to attack at night.

The Soviet army slowly has adapted itself to guerrilla warfare in the rugged Afghan mountains. Soviet tactics have evolved from periodic massive road-bound search and destroy sweeps to a greater reliance on a larger number of operations involving smaller, more mobile forces, often transported by helicopter. Soviet special forces (spetsnatz) increasingly are deployed to launch commando attacks and night ambushes. The Soviets also have made greater use of air power. Helicopter gunships have played an expanding role in providing close air support and harassing the Mujahideen's supply caravans. High-level saturation bombing attacks on resistance strongholds have driven civilians into exile, eroding the Mujahideen's base of support and disrupting food production.

The war has given the Soviet army valuable combat experience and is a "laboratory" to develop new military doctrines and field test sophisticated weapons. Afghanistan is an ideal place, for example, to train pilots for the Soviet Mi-24 HIND armored helicopter gunship. Moscow's Su-25 FROGFOOT attack plane has been deployed in Afghanistan for the first time anywhere. The Soviets also have tested chemical and toxin weapons banned by international treaty. The U.S. government estimates that at least 3,000 Afghans died in chemical warfare attacks between 1979 and 1981.² Although chemical warfare incidents apparently decreased after 1982, probably due to Western publicity, Soviet gas attacks continue to be reported.³

The Soviets have pursued a regionally differentiated strategy for subduing the Afghan resistance.⁴ Moscow has launched its most aggressive military operations in eastern Afghanistan, home of the fiercely independent Pushtun tribes that historically have dominated Afghanistan. Eastern Afghanistan also contains the highway that functions as Kabul's logistical lifeline to the Soviet Union. The region, moreover, is criss-crossed by hundreds of supply trails used by the resistance to move men and supplies from sanctuaries in

2. U.S. Department of State, Special Report No. 98, "Chemical Warfare in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan," 1982, pp. 14-17.

3. See Jane's Defense Weekly, November 22, 1986, p. 1206.

4. See "The Soviets in Afghanistan: Adapting, Reappraising, and Settling In," Orkand Corporation, June 1986.

Pakistan to northern and central Afghanistan. Because they have been unable to interdict Afghan supply routes, the Soviets have seeded the countryside with anti-personnel mines to inhibit movement and raise the costs of resupply. Today eastern Afghanistan is a huge free-fire zone wracked by the highest and most sustained combat levels of the war.

In contrast, the region north of the Hindu Kush mountains has been spared such heavy fighting. The flat, open terrain is not favorable for guerrilla warfare. The Soviets have accorded lower priority to controlling the mountains of central Afghanistan and the deserts of the south.

Although Moscow has made marginal progress in pacifying the north, elsewhere it is paying a heavy price for meager results. The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency estimates that since 1979 the Soviets have suffered 25,000 casualties, including 10,000 killed.⁵ Soviet sources indicate that these figures are much too low.⁶ One American expert estimates that since 1979 the Soviet Union has lost 800 aircraft and 3,000 vehicles while spending at least \$3 billion annually to finance the war.⁷ Another study asserts that the annual economic cost of the Soviet war effort could run as high as \$12 billion.⁸

Although the war is growing more costly, the Soviet human and economic costs appear manageable, given the ability of the Soviet regime to hide these costs from its own people and the potential strategic benefits of using Afghanistan as a springboard for future Soviet expansion.

THE MUJAHIDEEN: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The Afghans have demonstrated indomitable courage and iron-willed determination in blunting the Soviet invaders. Estimated to number 90,000 to 120,000 in the field at any one time, the Mujahideen could

5. Jane's Defense Weekly, November 15, 1986, p. 1151.

6. The Washington Post, July 12, 1986.

7. Major Joseph Collins, "A Seven Years War: Reflections on the Soviet Military Experience in Afghanistan," paper presented at the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Conference on the Implications of the Soviet Presence in Afghanistan, September 1986, p. 22.

8. Nake Kamrany and Leon Poullada, The Potential of Afghanistan's Society and Institutions to Resist Soviet Penetration and Domination (Los Angeles: Modeling Research Group, 1985), p. 119.

surge to perhaps 250,000 with the necessary logistical backup. Using hit-and-run guerrilla tactics based on centuries of mountain warfare experience, the Mujahideen have harassed Soviet strongpoints and lines of communication and melted into the terrain to avoid Soviet attacks.

The resistance is organized along tribal, ethnic, and ideological lines. Seven major resistance groups based among the more than three million Afghan refugees in Pakistan have helped to integrate local resistance efforts into a broader struggle, but these groups themselves have clashed due to ideological differences and personal rivalries. The seven groups--four fundamentalist groups working to establish some form of an Islamic state and three traditionalist groups with a more Western orientation--formed a loose coalition in May 1985. This has improved battlefield coordination, but political tensions persist.

A number of charismatic regional commanders have emerged in the course of the war. Examples: Ahmad Shah Massoud, the celebrated "Lion of the Panjsher"; Jalaluddin of Paktia province; Ismail Khan in Herat; and Abdul Haq in Kabul. They have inspired unity among diverse groups and mounted increasingly effective operations. Over time they may be able to transform tribal and regional loyalties among Afghanistan's 21 distinct ethnic groups into an overarching Afghan nationalism.

Aside from operational disunity, the chief weakness of the resistance has been its vulnerability to Soviet air power. Until recently Mujahideen air defense consisted of a few unreliable Soviet-made SA-7 shoulder-fired missiles and heavy machine guns captured from the Afghan army or bought on the black market. The resistance is now receiving small quantities of modern air defense weapons. These include some 40 20mm Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns and British-made Blowpipe anti-aircraft missiles.¹⁰ Most important, U.S.-made Stinger shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles are now in use. By one estimate, the U.S. covertly supplied the resistance in 1986 with 150 Stinger launchers, each with two missiles. The Stingers are scoring five hits for every eight launches, and Soviet aircraft losses are rising.¹¹ The Soviets have reacted by substituting high-flying fighter-bombers for low-flying helicopter gunships and taking increased evasive measures. If the Mujahideen can maintain an effective air defense over the long run, they will raise the Soviet

9. See Zalmay Khalilzad, "Moscow's Afghan War," Problems of Communism, January-February 1986, pp. 10-13; also Nasir Shansab, Soviet Expansion in the Third World: Afghanistan as a Case Study, Bartelby Press, forthcoming.

10. Jane's Defense Weekly, November 29, 1986, p. 1259; Jane's Defense Weekly, November 15, 1986, p. 1151.

11. Foreign Report, published in London by The Economist, November 13, 1986, p. 1.

costs of the war significantly, consolidate their own control over the countryside, halt the momentum of Soviet depopulation campaigns, and prevent the civilian population from growing despondent.

The overall effectiveness of the Mujahideen remains constrained by deficiencies in training, tactics, and leadership.¹² And while the resistance has improved its military performance, the Soviets have made even greater gains. According to Elie Krakowski, a Defense Department expert on the war: "The central factor...is not absolute but relative performance, and in the latter...the Soviets have widened the gap in their favor."¹³ It took the Soviet Union more than a decade to subdue the Basmachi revolt in Central Asia in the 1920s. Moscow is taking the same patient long-term approach in Afghanistan.

The official Afghan army has been an unreliable Soviet ally and an important barometer measuring the lack of popular support enjoyed by the Kabul regime. Despite press gangs that grab men up to age 38, the army remains less than half of its preinvasion size of 80,000 troops. The desertion rate is so high that the army is a revolving door with some deserters being drafted--and then deserting again--as many as three times because of the "vacuum cleaner" approach to conscription.¹⁴ The Mujahideen have established informal nonaggression pacts with many Afghan army units and receive weapons, ammunition, and valuable intelligence from sympathizers in the army. In January 1986 four Afghan generals were arrested for warning resistance leaders about Soviet military plans. As a result, the Soviets now do not inform the Afghan army of its objectives until four hours before operations begin.

Dismayed by the dismal performance of the official Afghan army, Moscow increasingly is using tribal militias recruited as mercenaries from disgruntled border tribes. Although the militias give the Mujahideen a better fight than the army, they also have little loyalty to the regime and have been known to defect en masse after being paid.

The backbone of the Kabul regime is the 40,000-strong KHAD, the Afghan secret police. Supervised by the Soviet KGB, the KHAD has extended its influence throughout government and party offices. The May 1986 elevation of Major General Najibullah, former Chief of the

12. Richard Cronin, "Military Effectiveness of the Afghan Resistance," testimony before the congressional Task Force on Afghanistan, August 13, 1986, p. 12.

13. Elie Krakowski, "Defining Success in Afghanistan," Washington Quarterly, Spring 1985, p. 42.

14. Louis Dupree, statement before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, House Foreign Affairs Committee, May 1, 1986, p. 2.

KHAD, to the supreme leadership of the Afghan Communist Party underscores the growing ascendancy of the KHAD.

With little hope of winning over this generation of Afghans, the Soviet Union is looking to the next generation. Each year at least two thousand Afghans aged 6 to 9, are sent to the Soviet Union for up to ten years of "education," sometimes without the permission of their families.¹⁵ Up to 40,000 Afghans have received this Soviet education.

GORBACHEV AND AFGHANISTAN

Since taking power in 1985 Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev has escalated the war in Afghanistan. He has appointed an aggressive new theatre commander, General Mikhail Zaitsev, formerly commander of Soviet forces in Germany, who has intensified military pressure on the Mujahideen. At the same time, Gorbachev has ordered changes in the Kabul regime to try to broaden its support. Moscow's replacement of the ineffective Babrak Karmal by the wily Najibullah, an adept practitioner of divide and rule politics, foreshadows a stepped-up effort to woo Pushtun groups on both sides of the Pakistani border.

Gorbachev has sought to drive a wedge between the Mujahideen and Pakistan by steadily increasing pressure on Pakistan. He sternly warned Pakistani President Zia al-Haq when they first met in March 1985. Since then Moscow has been waging a mounting war of nerves with Pakistan. Incidents of Soviet and Afghan warplanes violating Pakistani air space jumped from 251 in 1985 to 650 in the first ten months of 1986.¹⁶ Pakistani border villages have been bombed, strafed, and shelled, killing Pakistani civilians. Dissident Pushtun tribesmen in Pakistan's tribal belt have been showered with Soviet guns and money. Terrorist bombings along the frontier have underscored the risks of harboring the Mujahideen. An undercurrent of Pakistani resentment of the Afghan refugees has given Pakistan's leftist opposition an opportunity to score political points by criticizing Pakistan's failure to cut a deal with Kabul that would result in the return of the refugees to Afghanistan.

The Soviet Union has used the United Nations-sponsored talks between Kabul and Islamabad to defuse international criticism, demoralize the Mujahideen by fanning suspicions of a Pakistani

15. Jeri Laber, "Afghanistan's Other War," New York Review of Books, December 18, 1986, p. 3.

16. The New York Times, October 30, 1986.

sellout, and discourage aid to the resistance. The talks have been deadlocked since 1983 by Moscow's refusal to propose a reasonable timetable for withdrawal of Soviet forces. In any event, the talks do not include the chief belligerents--the Soviets and the Mujahideen.

Gorbachev uses the talks to hint at flexibility. This minimizes international pressures for Soviet withdrawal and keeps Pakistan and the Mujahideen off balance. He also talks tantalizingly about withdrawing the Soviet forces. In a July 28th speech at Vladivostok, he promised to pull out six Soviet regiments. The troops pulled out with maximum fanfare just before the annual U.N. General Assembly vote calling for withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger has denounced the withdrawal, most of which consisted of useless anti-aircraft units, as a ruse masking further Soviet escalation of the war. Recent hints that the Kremlin is searching for a way out may be timed to undercut anti-Soviet demonstrations on the upcoming anniversary of the invasion.

Gorbachev was not personally associated with the 1979 decision to invade Afghanistan because he was not then a full Politburo member. This gives him some latitude in rethinking Afghanistan policy. Yet he is not likely to abandon his predecessors' goal of a Sovietized Afghanistan until he concludes that the war is unwinnable at an acceptable level of cost. Given the pattern of recent Soviet escalation, this is not an immediate prospect.

U.S. POLICY AND AFGHANISTAN

The Carter Administration reacted to the Soviet invasion by imposing limited and mainly symbolic economic and political sanctions on the Soviet Union and by initiating covert aid to the Afghans. Ronald Reagan has expanded significantly this aid effort, making Afghanistan a key component of the Reagan Doctrine's pledge to help freedom fighters. In boosting U.S. help to the Mujahideen, Reagan has received enthusiastic bipartisan congressional backing.

By one estimate, U.S. aid to the free Afghans has risen from \$75 million in 1983 to \$122 million in 1984, \$280 million in 1985, and \$470 million in 1986.¹⁷ In 1987 aid will be increased substantially once again as Congress reportedly has pencilled in more than the Administration requested.¹⁸ Broad congressional support for the Mujahideen signals the Kremlin that American backing of the Afghans

17. Foreign Report, op. cit.

18. "Afghanistan Seven Years Later," National Security Record, Heritage Foundation, December 1986, p. 5.

will continue unabated after the close of the Reagan Administration.

The Need for Modern Weapons: The quality of U.S. aid is now more important than the quantity. The Mujahideen need more modern air defense weapons, accurate stand-off weapons such as 81mm mortars, and modern mine detectors to help remove an estimated 2 million Soviet mines. Radio communications equipment is needed to improve battlefield coordination. Field hospitals staffed by trained Afghan medical personnel are needed to prevent casualties from turning into fatalities. Excessive bleeding and gangrene are the two most frequent causes of death among the Mujahideen. Improved medical support would reduce manpower losses and raise morale, both important considerations in a grinding war of attrition.

Training: Training is needed to enhance the effectiveness of Afghan firepower, conserve ammunition, and improve operational planning. Afghans too often fight as an uncoordinated mass of individuals rather than as part of a team. Their ferocious courage leads them to take needless risks that jeopardize the success of their operations. Military instructors could be drawn from the large number of Muslim nations that support the Afghan resistance.

Encouraging the Rise of Field Commanders: The U.S. should encourage the emergence of the young, battle-hardened regional leaders who hold the Mujahideen together. Washington should provide direct assistance in a discreet manner to these commanders according to their military effectiveness and regardless of their political affiliations. Such aid should be in addition to rather than at the expense of aid furnished to the political parties headquartered at Peshawar. Although aid channeled to the Peshawar groups does not always find its way inside Afghanistan, such aid is a necessary lever to encourage military cooperation between the groups.

Improving Staying Power: The U.S. must bolster the resilience of the resistance. The free Afghans need help in restoring agricultural production in areas they control. Seeds, farm tools, and agricultural training would help them rebuild village economies and reduce the strain on their logistical system by reducing the amount of space allocated for foodstuffs in supply caravans.

Improving Organizational Abilities: The Mujahideen have paid too little attention to establishing social, economic, medical, and educational infrastructures to provide Afghan civilians with long-term alternatives to communist rule. All groups should be encouraged to follow the example set by Ahmad Shah Massoud in inspiring, organizing, and mobilizing the population of the Panjsher valley. If the resistance is to survive, it must rely more on systematic organization than on charismatic leadership that can be terminated by a KHAD assassin. The Afghans need help in training a cadre of organizers

capable of taking charge of the long-term sociopolitical aspects of the struggle and eventually replacing the present government.

Policy Toward Pakistan: The Mujahideen's struggle can be lost in Pakistan. If Moscow coerces Pakistan to stop helping the resistance, the Afghans could not offset the loss of the Pakistani aid conduit and sanctuary, even if Iran boosted its relatively low levels of aid. Pakistan has borne significant security risks on behalf of the free Afghans and continues to shoulder the brunt of the economic burden imposed by three million refugees. The U.S. should help reduce these risks and lighten the economic burden. The Administration has proposed a six-year \$4 billion program of military and economic aid to Pakistan. The economic development portion of this aid should be focused on the economies of those Pakistani provinces bordering Afghanistan. This not only would ease tensions between Afghan refugees and Pakistanis, but could blunt the appeal of pro-Soviet Pushtun and Baluchi separatists by giving these ethnic minorities more of a stake in Pakistan's future.

U.S. military assistance is essential to the modernization of Pakistan's armed forces. It enables Islamabad to withstand Moscow's coercive diplomacy and intimidation. Washington should reaffirm its 1959 bilateral defense agreement, reaffirmed last in 1979, to assist Islamabad in the event of aggression against it. Washington also should warn Moscow that the U.S. response to an attack on Pakistan not only would be more support for Islamabad, but also direct U.S. air supply to the Mujahideen, among other actions.

To reduce Pakistani fears of a two-front war with the USSR and India, Washington should try to help ease Pakistani-Indian tensions. For one thing, the U.S. should warn Islamabad not to proceed with its clandestine nuclear weapons program. For another, the U.S. should press Pakistan to ease India's suspicions about Pakistani support for Sikh separatists in India. In return, India should freeze its own nuclear weapons program and end its hypocrisy on the Afghan issue by throwing its diplomatic weight behind worldwide calls for Soviet troop withdrawal. India has been the only democratic nation refusing to condemn the Soviet invasion. The Afghan resistance is a victim of Indo-Pakistani tensions to the extent that Pakistan neglects its Afghan forward defenses, or is tempted to strike a deal with Moscow, to focus on the perceived threat from India on its eastern front.

Diplomatic Pressure: The U.S. must raise Moscow's diplomatic and political costs of the war. American diplomats should inject the Afghan issue into every multilateral conference, international forum, and bilateral meeting with Soviet-bloc representatives. The U.S. should work with other nations to expel the Kabul regime from its U.N. seat and replace it with representatives of the resistance. There is a recent precedent for this. The U.N. denied a seat to the Vietnamese puppet regime in Cambodia, recognizing in its place a coalition of resistance groups. The same should be done for Afghanistan.

It is occasionally suggested that the Mujahideen should form a government in exile to give the resistance a higher international profile. Such governments, however, seldom assume power. Preferable to a government in exile would be the establishment of a rival government on Afghan territory, as Jonas Savimbi has done in Angola. Once the Mujahideen accomplished this, the U.S. should break relations with Kabul and recognize the new government. The resistance has paid too high a price to be denied this right.

Media Coverage: Washington should increase coverage of the war in Voice of America and Radio Liberty radio broadcasts to the Soviet people to make them aware of the true scale of their casualties and economic losses. Parents of Soviet draftees slated for duty in Afghanistan have staged demonstrations against the draft.¹⁹ Although such protests have no immediate impact on Soviet policy, the Kremlin cannot help but notice them. A link should be established in Soviet minds between the growing economic costs of the war and their stagnant living standards.

U.S. government officials, academic specialists, and policy makers should drive home the horrifying human rights situation in Afghanistan. Washington should support efforts to bring wounded Afghans and Soviet deserters before Western and Third World audiences to offer first-hand accounts of Soviet war crimes. Given the scale of the carnage, it is curious that so little attention has been paid to Afghanistan by human rights activists, the media, and international organizations.

Peace Efforts: The U.S. periodically should test Soviet willingness to negotiate an Afghanistan political settlement. But the U.S. cannot permit Moscow to win at the negotiating table what it has been unable to gain in seven years of fighting. Nothing less than a total Soviet withdrawal on a fixed and rapid time schedule with an unconditional public commitment against future interventions and a ban on Soviet bases should be acceptable. Substantial war reparations also would be in order. External aid to the Mujahideen should be reduced only in proportion to the reduction of Soviet aid to the Kabul regime.

The U.S. focus, therefore, should be on obtaining a Soviet withdrawal. Washington should not allow itself to be diverted into specifying the precise nature of the future Kabul government. No foreign government can speak for the resistance. One possible solution would be an internationally supervised plebiscite to determine the nature of the postwar government. The Afghans should be

19. Julia Wishnevsky, "The War in Afghanistan in Samizdat," Radio Liberty Research, July 22, 1985.

allowed to determine for themselves their own political future. Any resistance coalition that is strong and unified enough to force the Soviets to negotiate a total withdrawal should be powerful enough to deal with the Afghan communists once the Soviets have departed. The key is to get Soviet troops out of Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

The Soviet Union will continue waging its war against the Afghan people as long as it believes it can win at an acceptable cost. As such, the U.S. must help the Mujahideen raise the Soviet military, economic and political costs of the war effort to the point that they outweigh the potential gains. Moscow will contemplate a negotiated withdrawal only when it has been denied a military solution. An expanded U.S. strategy backed by more effective U.S. aid to Afghanistan does not guarantee victory to the Mujahideen Freedom Fighters. But it will give them a much better chance.

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