

Will Soviets Get Out to Get Back In?

To Avoid Losing the Peace, West Must Build Afghan Unity

By DANIEL PIPES

What are the Soviets up to in Afghanistan? Their willingness to withdraw forces can be interpreted two ways.

The optimists (which includes the Reagan Administration) believe that Mikhail S. Gorbachev must get out of the war in Afghanistan if he is to go forward with his plans for *perestroika*. According to them, the war is an inherited burden (a "bleeding wound") that must be cast off as quickly as possible.

The pessimists hold that Gorbachev's fine words and fresh spirit must be seen in the light of a 70-year history of unrelenting Soviet military ambition and territorial expansion. They are wary. Not knowing Gorbachev's motives, they want the United States to prepare for the worst. They fear that the Soviets (ostensible moves to leave the country notwithstanding) still plan to consolidate their control of Afghanistan. Pessimists suspect an application of that classic Russian dialectic—one step back, two steps forward.

The main reason, the pessimists point out, to doubt that the Soviets really intend to withdraw is that they have too much to lose by leaving Afghanistan. Even though Soviet forces have not been able to pacify the entire country, they nevertheless enjoy significant benefits there. They control several principal cities and are feverishly exploiting Afghanistan's extensive mineral and gas reserves. In addition, they control forward airfields that bring Soviet forces hundreds of miles closer to the Persian Gulf and potential hegemony over the huge oil and gas reserves there. Control over these would give the Soviet Union major leverage over the world economy.

Abandoning Afghanistan would exact more than a material price; the psychological cost for the Soviet state would be immense. Moscow's place in the world, after all, depends on its being perceived as powerful—a defeat by rag-tag insurgents would badly erode its reputation. Also, there would be domestic consequences for Gorbachev, as Soviet military leaders will surely not accept a defeat in war with grace.

For all these reasons, abandoning the country will cost the Soviets dearly. Why, then, do they agree to withdraw their forces? Recent Soviet activities suggest that they are embarking on a new and more sophisticated strategy to achieve precisely the same goals they have fought for since 1979. Withdrawal may provide the most

realistic and least costly means of doing this.

Moscow's problem lies in the worldwide agreement that the Red Army brutally and wrongly invaded Afghanistan. Afghans and Americans, as well as the Pakistani and Chinese leadership, all agree on this, as do many West Europeans and Muslims. There is no other issue in the world today that generates such wide anti-Soviet hostility. This consensus carries great weight; indeed, it is the single most important source of support for the Afghan *mujahedeen*, or resistance fighters. Without such massive backing, the *mujahedeen* would be a far weaker force.

From the Soviet point of view, the enemy's center of gravity lies in its far-reaching popularity. If Moscow can change public opinion, it can reduce the widespread opposition to Soviet troops in Afghanistan, undermine the pro-*mujahedeen* consensus and undercut the opponent. The battle for Afghanistan would effectively be over if Moscow could only mire the *mujahedeen* in the kind of controversy that faces the other forces fighting the Soviet bloc. In short, Moscow needs to turn the *mujahedeen* into Contras.

How to do this? An answer can be found in the steps actually taken by the Soviets in recent months. Very cleverly, they have offered to undo what everyone objects to—the presence of Soviet forces in Afghanistan—while preparing the way for a more nuanced role. They have created the conditions for a scenario that will go something like this:

Moscow very rapidly withdraws its troops from Afghanistan, so that a majority of them are out by this summer (though, of course, military "advisers" and KGB agents will remain). This has two main consequences for the Soviets. First, they win good will internationally, erasing the years of obloquy that they have suffered. Indeed, there will undoubtedly be many observers who will seek to reward the Soviet authorities for taking this step. This will render future assistance to the *mujahedeen* very problematic.

Second, the withdrawal creates a power vacuum in Afghanistan that the pro-Soviet government in Kabul and the anti-Soviet *mujahedeen* scramble to fill. Worse, the long-tense relations among the seven resistance groups erupt into open discord and possibly into civil war. Anarchy follows, with murder and atrocities becoming common. Afghanistan comes to resemble

Lebanon, lacking a central authority and torn by groups competing along ideological, religious, geographical and tribal lines.

Anarchy would irreparably sully the high reputation that the *mujahedeen* have sustained through eight years of valor in war. Their true toughness, even barbarism, will suddenly become apparent, leading to a quick dissolution of their wide backing.

Anarchy would also create an opening for Soviet forces to return. At the minimum, Moscow could fall back on "the protection of Soviet personnel" line to justify renewed military action in Afghanistan. At best, it could get a legitimate Afghan group to request its aid. Alternatively, the Soviets also seem to have prepared the way to split off the northern portion of Afghanistan and bring it under their direct control.

In any case, the Soviets would return to a brutalized country where the locals had shown themselves incapable of self-government. These conditions—so completely different from 1979—would win grudging acceptance internationally. If the choice is the Soviets or carnage, most observers would choose a Soviet *pax*. This is, after all, what permits the Syrians to operate in Lebanon or the Vietnamese in Cambodia without serious international opposition. In these conditions, it would be only a matter of time before Afghanistan fell wholly under Soviet control.

The Soviets would then have achieved politically what they had failed to win militarily.

The United States has a tradition of winning the war and losing the peace. After both world wars, Americans washed their hands of conflict to get back to more pleasurable pursuits. In both cases, this quick loss of interest created terrible problems in subsequent decades. It is important to keep a close eye on Afghanistan to make sure that eight years of war are not in vain.

What can Washington do to prevent losing the peace? Much hinges on *mujahedeen* disunity. As long as there was a joint enemy, disunity was manageable. But it could have a lethal effect once most of the Red Army evacuates and Afghans are left to govern their own country. If Afghanistan is to regain its independence, the *mujahedeen* must unify to form a single authority that can govern the country. Until that happens, the Soviet forces will continue to threaten.

Therefore, the West should concentrate on helping to build Afghan unity. The

composition and orientation of the government matters less than its ability to control Afghan territory. (The same applies to Iran: Bad as it is, the Khomeini government is far preferable to a breakdown of authority and the threat of a Soviet invasion.)

Keeping this in mind, Washington should work with others to establish a government in Kabul. Efforts devoted to getting the seven *moujahedeen* groups to cooperate have so far had little success. And with the taste of power in their mouths, the Peshawar leaders are less likely than ever to work together.

New thinking is needed here. One idea is to pick just one *moujahedeen* group and build up its power and authority. This group alone would then receive all the outside world's financial aid and diplomatic backing. If arms continue to be supplied, it

alone gets them. With luck and dexterity, concentrating resources in this fashion would lead to the emergence of a single authority capable of maintaining order in Afghanistan.

We have now entered the critical months of the war. The Geneva accord is important but it must not blind us to the complexities that follow. If the U.S. government does not act with care and imagination, 1 million deaths and the sufferings of 5 million refugees will have been for naught.

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