The Najib regime in Kabul and the Soviet grand design for South Asia withstood their greatest challenge to date in early March. General Shah Nawaz Tanai, a veteran communist and one of the USSR's staunchest supporters in Kabul, led an open rebellion against the Soviet-installed regime. Some of the USSR's key strategic assets in Afghanistan, notably the Baghram air base, were severely hit in the coup attempt. However, at present, not only has Najib survived the coup attempt, but the USSR seems to have manipulated and exploited it to further its grand design.

More than anything else, the coup in Kabul illustrated the extent of the Soviet's control over Afghanistan and the extent of their flexibility and damage control capabilities.

The 6 March coup came as a surprise because so much had been known about it in advance that all concerned were certain that it had already been averted. A trial of some of Tanai's supporters who had participated in his December "pseudo-coup" (for details see below) was about to begin on 5 March, and Najib was determined to turn it into a show trial. Just prior to the beginning of the trial, Tanai had a private meeting with Najib. It went very badly, and progressed from an argument on the trial to a general dispute on the course the PDPA was taking. The argument was so heated that Tanai at one point threw his Party papers and his uniform coat on the table in front of Najib and threatened him personally. Najib still urged Tanai not to attempt a coup or to do anything that he would later regret. Reportedly, Najib still urged Tanai to remain defense minister as Tanai stormed out of the room, taking with him a briefcase full of "valuable government documents".

Najib then called in the senior Soviet advisers. Reportedly, all believed that the short tempered Tanai would calm down as he had in the past after similar outbursts. Nevertheless, Soviet advisers talked to Tanai and also urged calm. As a unilateral concession to Tanai, the conspiracy trial began in a mild fashion. It did not go beyond bare formalities and then recessed for an unspecified duration, creating an outlet for Tanai. Although rumors of an impending Najib-Tanai showdown were circulating all over Kabul, the general impression in official and diplomatic circles was that a last minute compromise had been achieved by the Soviets.
The Soviets must have known better. Security around key
government facilities was beefed-up with Soviet and
Soviet-controlled troops of the Presidential Guard, and some of
the Air Force squadrons based in Kabul International and Baghram
that had operated under Tanai’s direct command against the
resistance were ordered to deploy immediately to Shindand for
additional training and the installation of new equipment. In the
pre-dawn hours, tank units of the Presidential Guards and WAD
spetsnazniki deployed around the garrisons of the 4th Tank
Brigade in Pul-e-Charki and of elements of the 15th Tank Brigade
near the Defense Ministry.

On the morning of 6 March, Najib sent a personal messenger to the
Defence Ministry and suggested negotiations. Tanai refused to
even see the messenger. Instead he scrambled four fighter-bombers
from Baghram. The first bombs fell between 12:30 and 1:00 p.m.
when Najib and his aids were known to be at lunch. The first
cluster of 3 250 kg bombs destroyed a small administrative
building some 12 feet from where Najib was working at the time,
killing 4 Soviet (Central Asian) KGB elite soldiers. Four other
bombs hit nearby buildings.

All through the day, small formations of fighter-bombers
continued to fly low above the city, bombing and strafing
government facilities and residential areas. No more than five
aircraft were over Kabul at any given time. By the afternoon, the
tank units loyal to Tanai also attempted to join the fighting.
The first elements of the 4th Tank Brigade barely came out of
their garrison only to find themselves encircled by
Soviet-controlled units. The Soviet advisers subsequently
convinced the brigade commander to return to his base. The
elements of the 15th Tank Brigade were also convinced to lay down
their arms. However, one company of the 4th Tank Brigade suddenly
turned around and tried to break through the siege. It was
stalled by tank fire from the Presidential Guards. Only two tanks
broke away from their garrison and reached the grounds of the
Military Academy where they were destroyed by elite troops.
Altogether, only some 15 tanks are believed to have been
destroyed during the coup.

These resolute Soviet actions deprived Tanai of his ground forces
and therefore limited him to air strikes on Kabul. Although
these aerial strikes were bloody and destructive, they were not
enough to unseat Najib. However, still not knowing the extent of
the neutralization of his forces, Tanai decided to claim success.
Saleh Mohammad Zeray, a senior coup participant, was sent to
Radio Kabul to announce victory. The Soviets, however, were
informed of the move in advance, (according to some sources by
Tanai himself), and a detachment of KGB-WAD spetsnazniki jumped
Zeray near the Radio building and arrested him with Tanai’s
statement in his pocket. Just to be on the safe side, Radio Kabul
had been moved during the night to concealed facilities near the
Presidential Guards cantonment.
Despite all their precautions, it seems that the Soviets were taken by surprise. Soviet advisers in Kabul must have believed that Tanai's loyalty to the USSR meant that he would not do anything against their advise. "Tanai believes that Moscow can do no wrong," remarked an Afghan defector who knew him well. However, by the afternoon of March 6, it was clear that Tanai's actions had exceeded the acceptable.

The time was ripe for a counter-attack. Six Soviet fighter-bombers, most likely FLOGGERS, were scrambled from Tajikistan and flew low over Kabul, demonstrating that the Najib government had airpower and could challenge Tanai's supporters.

The Soviet aircraft also bombed the Ministry of Defence throughout the afternoon. Additional aircraft, FITTERs and FLOGGERS, were scrambled from Mazar-e-Sharief, (the Deh Daddi air base,) where the bulk of the aircrews are Soviet, Indian and Soviet commanded Afghans. They bombed targets in Kabul and near Baghram. A mechanized and armored column of Presidential Guards under Soviet command moved and surrounded the Darulaman Palace under aerial cover. Tanai and a few close aids escaped to Baghram air base at the last minute. His loyalists were subjected to a 24-hour siege and fire strike that severely damaged the palace.

An ultimatum, although it is not clear from whom, was awaiting Tanai when he reached Baghram. Consequently, Tanai stopped the aerial activities for a short while in order to assess his situation. (The ultimatum must have been serious, for it prompted Brigadier General Abdul Qader Akka, one of Afghanistan's most devout communists, and a group of officers, including two other Brigadier Generals, to steal an An-26 and escape to Pakistan.) In the end, the defiant Tanai rejected the ultimatum, notifying the senders of it that he intended to continue the fight and would resume aerial bombing.

The Soviet reaction was fierce. Baghram was subjected to a massive air strike. Aircraft from Deh Daddi bombed it, followed by "a rain" of SCUDs SSMs, FROG-7Bs SSMs, BM-21Ps and BM-22s (BM-27s) rockets most of them fired by Soviet and Indian crews from the fire bases on Bughra Hill in Khairkhana. The first missiles and rockets hit Baghram the moment Tanai's aircraft were getting ready to take off, causing heavy damage. (It is not clear if the excellent timing of this barrage strike was by luck or on the basis of accurate inside intelligence.) The barrage continued until the base was "completely destroyed", according to some sources, or, more likely, severely damaged. About 10 aircraft, mainly FISHBEDs, were destroyed on the ground. The runway was so badly gutted that no take-offs could be attempted.

Reportedly Tanai was all this time in communication with the Soviets, both in Kabul and with the senior advisers located in Baghram. (There are reports that Tanai even passed through the Soviet embassy on his way to Baghram, but no independent
confirmation of this is available at the time of this writing.) Whatever was said in these contacts, they apparently sealed the fate of the coup. Tanai's family arrived at Baghram from Kabul without interruption and all climbed on a HIP that took them to northern Pakistan. Although fighters were in the air, no attempt was made to interfere with the Tanai flight.

The coup was effectively over by the end of the day. A few skirmishes continued in Shindand between air force personnel but no meaningful casualties or damage were reported. There were also small scale skirmishes in several garrisons, especially in Herat and Qandahar, between Tanai and Najib loyalists. These were put down quickly and without difficulty. Some sporadic and isolated clashes continue in Kabul during the nights, but they are insignificant and do not endanger the Najib regime. Exploiting the preoccupation of the Afghan Air Force, the resistance attacked in the Khost area, nevertheless still failing to breach the defence lines.

On 8 March, UN officials reported that "Kabul is back to normal." Officials reported that government offices and shops were open, mail was delivered and that long lines were formed outside banks, although these were still closed. UN observers reported heavy damage in Kabul, including the presidential palace, Radio Kabul and other installations. "The damage is extensive in the city and a lot of people get hurt in that kind of situation, but there is no way of knowing how many casualties there were," reported a UN official.

A Kabul government source claimed that the civilian death toll reached 95. The military casualties were estimated to be hundreds of officers and elite commandos. Government figures claimed that 4 bazaars, 9 restaurants, 230 shops, 18 buildings and 282 apartments were destroyed during the coup attempt.

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The immediate result of the Tanai coup is the bolstering of the Najib regime. The Kabul leadership has become monolithic with the purge of the remnants of the Khalq veterans, ostensibly for their participation in and/or support for the coup. This is not Tanai's first "coup". In past "coup attempts," Tanai's "threats" were capitalized on to present Najib as a "moderate" aspiring for peaceful reconciliation against the pressure from hardliners within the PDPA. These "coup"s were also used by the KGB-WAD to uncover and flush out resistance cells in Kabul who had come out of underground to offer help. Little wonder that, shielded by the Soviets, Tanai not only remained the Minister of Defence, but he was elevated in the Politburo and Defence Council.

This deceptive "good cop-bad cop" game proved so successful in past "Tanai coups," and especially the Soviet-inspired "coup" of last December which was timed to coincide with the Malta Summit,
that the Soviets must have been confident that they would remain in control of the "coup" that would inevitably be brewing before the start of the upcoming trial. However, Tanai's proud defiance and commitment to his loyalists seemed to have exceeded the Soviet estimates. Moscow found itself facing a runaway coup. Moreover, saving the Najib regime meant destroying some of the USSR's closest and most loyal allies in Afghanistan -- Tanai and his aides. It was therefore imperative for the Soviets to find a dignified way out for Tanai.

The Soviet grand design in South Asia is based on a two-track strategy: The first track opts for active support and expediting the realization of an ethno-based quest for self-determination which means a certain level of regional Balkanization (either the emergence of new independent states instead of Pakistan and Afghanistan, or the establishment of strong local governments and weak regimes in Kabul and Islamabad). The second approach calls for the establishment of a strong centralized regime in Kabul that will serve the USSR's strategic interests, along with India and Iran, pushing Pakistan into moving away from its alliance with the West. Najib is committed to the first option, while Tanai is committed to the second.

Despite the collapse of the March coup, Moscow still needs a viable force for the second option should the need arise. With Tanai forced away from Kabul, such a center must be established outside the Kabul scene.

Apparently, Tanai's alliance with Gulbaddin Hekmatiyar, who is also committed to a strong, albeit Islamic, centralized government in Kabul, serves this end. The exact relations and arrangements between Tanai and Hekmatiyar are not yet clear. Most reports suggest that Tanai is with the Hezb-i-Islami in Parwan near Charikar, but these are resistance forces long under KGB-WAD dominance. Moreover, Hekmatiyar's own relations with the KGB are far from being adversarial.

Therefore, Tanai's escape from Kabul in the wake of his "runaway coup" might still prove to be only the beginning of a new complex Byzantine plot aimed at furthering the consolidation of the USSR's control over south Asia.

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(This paper may not necessarily express the views of all the members of the Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare. It is intended to provoke discussion and debate.)