SPECULATIONS ON A NATIONAL TRAGEDY

by Alvin Z. Rubinstein

The expansion of Soviet power into Afghanistan is a landmark event, the geopolitical consequences of which can be only dimly perceived. Pacification and sovietization are far from being realized, and the full horror of what is happening in Afghanistan has not been fully recognized. But the advance of the Soviet Union from the Oxus River to the Khyber Pass and a common border with Pakistan, the flanking of Iran's vulnerable eastern frontier, and the axial positioning for probes to the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf demand the awareness and concern of the political analyst. Having gained control over an expanse of potentially prime real estate, the Soviet leadership is in no hurry to relinquish its only territorial acquisition in the Third World.

Ever since the invasion in December 1979, there have been extensive debates over Soviet aims and motives in going into Afghanistan, and their willingness to pay a high price to remain. Seven years later these debates have become highly predictable, if inconclusive. The small band of "Afghan-watchers" cluster around three points of view: that the Soviets intend to remain in Afghanistan irrespective of the cost; that they may in time be convinced that withdrawal or a major accommodation leading to a substantial diminution of their forces is in their best interest; and that the Soviets are actively seeking a face-saving way of disengaging, having come to accept the invasion as a mistake. The degree to which one inclines toward the first or third position is probably related to the extent one perceives Afghanistan as a symbol of Soviet aggressiveness or as a sideshow in the global Cold War; sometimes positions are defended with little regard for specific events on the Afghan front. Regional developments tend, as usual, to be seen through global perspectives.

The congealing of positions is understandable. The Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan will soon enter its eighth year and for the moment there is nothing "new" to report: no major military victories for the Afghan freedom-fighters (mujahidin or "holy warriors"), and no easing of Moscow's multifaceted effort to crush them; no basic change in the plight of the four to five million Afghan refugees, whose numbers increase

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with each Soviet offensive and application of a ruthless policy of selective genocide; and no breakthrough on the diplomatic front, notwithstanding both Gorbachev's allusion to Afghanistan at the 27th Congress of the CPSU as a "bleeding wound" and the upbeat murmurs detected by some observers at the recent rounds of U.N.-sponsored "proximity talks" in Geneva, between the Soviet puppet regime in Kabul and the government of Pakistan.

Indeed, Moscow may well see glimmers of progress that make it think the beginning of the end is in sight: elite units (Spetsnaz) have had success in counterinsurgency operations and have inflicted heavy losses on mujahidin forces; and the creation of an Afghan army loyal to the Karmal-Najibullah regime may be taking hold, as most of the units that overran Commander Haqani's stronghold at Jawara in Paktia province in April 1986, were Afghan, not Russian. Taking the longer view, Moscow may also be guardedly optimistic about the prospects of cooptation, as the mixture of the sword and the bribe bring tribal disaffections from the mujahidin cause; as thousands of Soviet-trained, indoctrinated young Afghans return from Soviet Central Asia to positions and rewards that are offered to buy their loyalty; as Najibullah seeks to end the Parcham-Khalq feuding within the PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) and deal more effectively with the mujahidin; and as the resistance proves unable to recapture any urban centers or to interrupt Soviet lines of communication and shipments of natural gas, the Soviet Union's principal booty from the sorely strained Afghan economy.

We know a great deal about Soviet activities in Afghanistan, but what remains outside our ken—a telling inventory of ignorance—is of critical importance to speculations about the future:

- What does the Kremlin leadership think about the future of Afghanistan?
- What are its aims?
- What is it prepared to sacrifice in the interests of a political settlement?
- Are the costs becoming onerous?
- How long can the mujahidin resist?
- Can Moscow coopt enough Afghans to transform Afghanistan into a reliable Soviet puppet in much the same way that it converted Mongolia?
- Will Najibullah make a difference?

Essential information about Soviet policy, the fighting in Afghanistan, the shortcomings of the Kabul regime and its efforts to build an infrastructure on which to base the sovietization of the system, the

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1 Pravda, February 26, 1986, p. 8, col. 2.
performance of the mujahidin, and the dilemmas faced by Pakistan are being examined in the growing literature on the subject.

Among the questions pondered, there is one that perhaps needs still further exploration: Is the Soviet leadership looking for a way out? Obviously, if they were facing intolerable costs and bleak prospects, they could cut their losses and withdraw their forces. Aside from the possible blow to their prestige — probably more at home than abroad — there would be little loss. No threat to Soviet security is involved, even assuming a non-communist regime were in short order to replace the Afghan communist regime that would be left in control should the Soviets pull out. Afghanistan would pose no military threat to the Soviet Union — a point that bears reiteration. It never has. Neither the United States nor China is about to pour massive resources into the country or to try to convert it into a base for operations against the Soviet Union. Geography, topography, economics, and politics all militate against such a notion. Nor is there a threat from a spillover of Islamic fundamentalism. If Khomeiniism has failed to resonate in Soviet Central Asia, how much less likely to succeed is any home-spawned, tribal Afghan variation. From Moscow's perspective, the worst that could happen in the wake of a Soviet withdrawal would be instability in Afghanistan — that is, tribal and political strife until the forms and processes of leadership are settled. Instability in Kabul could create uncertainty in Moscow over how to proceed in relations with Afghanistan but not insecurity, because there is simply no military, political, or ideological threat to the USSR stemming from Afghanistan: the Soviet-Afghan border is easily patrolled and insulated from foreign intrusion.

If the Soviets are unwilling to withdraw (or to make far-reaching concessions that would vastly improve prospects of a political settlement), their reluctance is rooted in an unwillingness to relinquish the geostategic advantages that come with control of Afghanistan or, for ideological and political reasons, to accept the reversibility of a communist system. Assuming that Moscow is not prepared to forego either Soviet hegemony or pro-Soviet communist control in Kabul — for, after all, if it were, the impasse would be over by now — requires a closer look at the main arguments as to whether the Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev

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is likely to agree to a compromise that would substantially alter its position in Afghanistan and provide the basis for meaningful procedures leading to a political solution.

Appropriate, perhaps, is Winston Churchill’s observation, in October 1939, on Stalin’s collusion with Hitler to dismember Poland: “I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.” Those who believe that the Soviet Union is looking for a face-saving way out of Afghanistan have, at different times and in different contexts, suggested reasons all of which would seem to be in the Russian national interest:

• to improve relations with the United States;
• to improve relations with China;
• to end criticism from, and a source of embarrassment in relations with, many Third World countries;
• to allay the anxieties of India, Moscow’s prized client in South Asia and one of its most important targets in the Third World;
• to arrest the drift of Pakistan toward close military relations with the United States;
• to eliminate a major source of Iranian hostility toward the Soviet Union;
• to reassure the countries of the Persian Gulf of Moscow’s nonthreatening objectives in the region;
• to close “a bleeding wound” that is beginning to have some effect on the Soviet body politque; and
• to husband scarce resources and concentrate on pressing internal reforms.

An imposing list, it should strengthen the position of those in the Kremlin who are in favor of disengagement or withdrawal. The probability of this would be high if it could be demonstrated that the thread uniting all these reasons is sound, namely, that the diplomatic, political, and military costs incurred in waging a protracted war in Afghanistan are indeed detrimental to the national interest of the USSR. However, there are several debatable premises underlying this case for the Soviet Union’s wanting to leave that fail to consider the following.

First, the international costs of invading a Third World country have long since been paid by Moscow. They are no longer a consideration in its foreign policy. The annual resolution by the U.N. General Assembly calling for a withdrawal of all “foreign” intervention is more a placebo for the nonaligned states, few of whom want to antagonize the Soviet Union, than a bitter pill for the Russians. No Third World country has broken off diplomatic relations with Moscow; each pursues as previously its own policy of dealing with the USSR. The only Muslim countries that support Afghanistan openly in a material way are Pakistan (whose own

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well-being is at stake), Iran (where Khomeini has denounced the invasion of a Muslim country), and Saudi Arabia (which has no diplomatic relations with Moscow). Indeed, what is remarkable about the diplomatic costs to Moscow is how unremarkable they have been despite its quasi-genocidal policy in Afghanistan.

Second, though military costs are difficult to assess, they do not appear to be of a magnitude that would alone impel the leadership to reconsider the wisdom of its policy. According to Henry Bradsher, estimates of Soviet expenditures range from $2.2 to $5.5 billion; with either figure, "the costs were estimated by American experts at only 1 or 2 percent of overall Soviet military expenditures." 7

Third, there are several weaknesses in the thesis that the Soviet Union should be and is amenable to a negotiated settlement because it is faced with unsupportable, escalating costs, and a heavy defense burden in the unending struggle against an unexpectedly strong resistance; and that a political settlement is completely feasible because "Moscow appears to be slowly but steadily building a functioning Afghan military and administrative apparatus manned at critical points by highly motivated Afghan communists." It insists the PDPA could retain power after the Soviet military withdrew, especially with Soviet guarantees of its survival (which would be intrinsic to the pullback of Soviet forces) and with a cutoff of Western aid to the mujahidin. The argument implies the United States is responsible for the present deadlock.

Selig Harrison, one articulate proponent of this thesis, believes that Pakistan is ready for a deal that would be acceptable to Moscow, but that Washington keeps pressuring it to refuse recognition of the communist regime in Kabul. His evidence is his talks with "private sources" and some officials. Repeated denials by Pakistani leaders of his allegations have not caused him to re-evaluate his position, which also holds that Pakistan is a U.S. puppet, unable to determine its own policy. In light of all that has transpired in the politics of the region over the past two decades, this assertion is difficult to understand, since it ignores the many strains in the U.S.-Pakistani relationship from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s that resulted from Pakistan's opposition to U.S. policy and its decision to go its own way; the mounting evidence that in superpower-Third World relationships, it is often the Third World partner that deter-

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* Saudi Arabia's assistance to the Afghans during the past two years is estimated at more than $500 million. Washington Post, June 20, 1986.
* For example, see Selig S. Harrison, "A Breakthrough in Afghanistan?" Foreign Policy, Summer 1983; and "Cut a Regional Deal," Foreign Policy, Spring 1988, pp. 126-147; and New York Times, March 17, 1986.
mines policy on issues affecting its vital security; and the extent to which
domestic politics and attention to relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran, and
China affect the position of the Zia government.

Moreover, the implication that the defense of the USSR (the
original justification for the Afghan invasion) now means that a Soviet
withdrawal can be predicated only on the continuation in Kabul of a pro-
Soviet communist regime, that nothing else could move Moscow out,
does not come to grips with the dilemma presented if the Communists
were not able to retain power once Soviet troops pulled out: would the
Russians then re-enter to put the Communists back in power?

A number of considerations militate against withdrawal and
make the case for the Soviet Union's remaining in Afghanistan more
persuasive. Moscow has no tradition of delegating authority or building
consensus among its communist satraps. It prefers diktat in dealing with
subordinates, and it is suspicious of the Afghans. To ensure adherence
to its guidelines in campaigns of pacification and sovietization, it con-
centrates decisions in its own hands and monopolizes, or at least dom-
inates, all stages of the process of institutionalizing hegemony. None of
this is promising for the idea that there will be successful cooptation in
Afghanistan.

There are weaknesses in the allegation that cooptation is al-
ready working, that the Soviets are willing to negotiate a possible with-
drawal because of their confidence in the staying power of the communist
regime (particularly, if buttressed by guarantees of support and an end to
outside interference). The expectation that a loyal elite can be created
through educating and indoctrinating thousands of Afghans in the Soviet
Union and broadening the base of government to include non-Commu-
nists as well is, ironically, the same argument used to support the opposing
view that Moscow will not have to relinquish its hegemony over Af-
ghanistan. Training cadres and creating new institutions is a long-term
process. Some Afghans may accept rewards from the Soviets and even
appear to cooperate, but most will turn against them. The Soviets are
fully aware of the history of the British experience: The British fought the
Afghans and bribed them, and the Afghans fought back and accepted
subsidies. All lulls were nothing more than periods of preparation between
fighting. After more than 150 years of intriguing with and gathering in-
telligence on the Afghans, it is unlikely that Moscow will think it can
create a loyal and dependable Afghan elite in a decade. Viewed in this
light, a Soviet withdrawal would seem remote.

Politically, Moscow has already invested heavily and has in
place a small but pliable communist leadership that may entrench itself
and effectuate the sovietization of the country, but that needs time and
support. Moreover, once having intervened to preserve a pro-Soviet communist regime along its border, Moscow is likely to stay as long as necessary to secure its client, or the invasion and subsequent involvement would prove to have been pointless. Official Soviet statements indicating a desire to bring the troops home “in the very near future” need to be understood in the context of the invariably accompanying demand that support for the counterrevolutionary forces must be halted first. (A similar formulation has been used for years to justify the continued presence of Cuban and Soviet forces in Angola.)

A leading Soviet journalist, Aleksandr Bovin noted:

“You know, comrades, that the Soviet government has declared more than once that the Soviet troops, which are there at Kabul’s request, will leave just as soon as the undeclared war against Afghanistan ends. And the whole problem is that forces who have no interest in maintaining a stable democratic Afghanistan are hindering in all sorts of ways the search for a political settlement.”

None of the foregoing is contravened by Gorbachev’s withdrawal of 6,000 Soviet troops at the end of October 1986. The numbers were few, and the significance for future Soviet policy is simply not clear, especially since additional troops may have been sent in prior to the widely publicized pullback of the six regiments noted above.

The problems of verification and compliance have so far defied solution: What is “support” for counterrevolutionary forces? Who is to decide? How will compliance with an agreement be monitored? What will happen to violators? The Soviets have an easier out: they can, by merely giving the appearance of interest in negotiating a withdrawal, deflect and defuse criticism, divide the opposition, and buy more and needed time for their counterinsurgency and institution-building efforts in Afghanistan. Their formal offer in July 1986 in Geneva to withdraw over a four-year period illustrates clearly that their aim is to hold on long enough to eliminate the mujahidin and entrench a pro-Soviet communist elite.

Militarily, not having been defeated, there is no reason the Soviet army should withdraw without a settlement that provides some permanent advantages. Indeed, in one sense it has won already by demonstrating that the mujahidin can not hope to drive the Red Army out of the country by force alone. A former Afghan deputy prime minister in the 1960s, Sayed Shamsuddin Majrooh, implicitly acknowledged this

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10 For example, the Tass report on Angola’s proposal in Pravda, November 17, 1984, which stated that according to the Angolan government, one of the four conditions necessary for a “gradual withdrawal of the contingent of Cuban internationalists from Angola” is “the halting of all kinds of support for the UNITA counterrevolutionary group.”


recently when he noted: "Time is not on the side of the resistance. Eventually the people will grow tired. They will turn to the Communists just to get on with living." The Soviet Union has the power to persevere. It is true that the numerous campaigns mounted by the 120,000 Soviet troops over the past seven years have not succeeded in pacifying any area for long; that Soviet commanders are able to lift the siege of beleaguered garrisons, but that as soon as they stamp out one fire, another flares up. However, the decisive factor is that the Soviets do control the cities and the main highways connecting them to the Soviet border, even though they have to use the convoy system in moving about the country, much as the British did when they ruled India but did not control the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) south of the Khyber Pass.

Strategically, the imperial greed that prompted the invasion — and not fear for the USSR’s security, as uncritically claimed — has been whetted by the conquest, not chastened by the tough experience of pacifying the countryside. Judging by the policy Moscow has followed since 1980, still in effect under Gorbachev, its strategic calculations remain unchanged. The tradition of seeking control of new territory along its periphery is as strong as ever. There are no tangible signs that Moscow seeks to disburden itself of what many in the West perceive as an albatross — there are only manifestations of a determination to maintain a permanent presence. With the advance of Soviet military power to the Khyber Pass and with the end of Afghanistan’s century-old status of buffer state, Moscow seems intent on writing a new chapter in its involvement in Asia and the Near East, the full implications of which await future regional developments. Without adherence to a negotiated timetable for an expeditious Soviet withdrawal, the strategic rationale for hanging on will undoubtedly become more compelling, particularly if the short-term costs appear tolerable.

In the absence of real change in the leadership’s outlook, Moscow is remaining in Afghanistan. There is no evidence that any of the following are forcing a reappraisal of policy in the Kremlin: (1) that the leadership is prepared to acknowledge a mistake has been made; (2) that the costs of pacification and occupation are deemed disproportionate to prospective geostrategic benefit, in other words, that casualties are creating serious problems at home or that the international reaction to the invasion is damaging other, more vital policy objectives; (3) that the leadership has reached the point where it believes, as Stalin apparently did when he pulled out of Iran in 1946, that some advantages would accrue to it in return for withdrawal; (4) that Gorbachev is under pressure in the Politburo to stop Moscow’s "bleeding wound"; or (5) that it faces

elsewhere such security-political threats as would compel an end to the
draining of resources for what is, after all, on the margin of the Soviet
empire.

None of these considerations seems to loom large in Gor-
bachev's thinking. Since coming to power in March 1985, he has dra­
matically changed the Kremlin's approach to arms control talks and
negotiations with the United States but not its attitude toward Afghanistan.
Had Gorbachev not supported the Marxist regime in Kabul in 1985 at
the start of his rule, it would probably have been perceived as more
damaging to Soviet prestige than a failure to have done so in 1979. 14

Now, almost two years in office, Gorbachev is no more prepared than
were his predecessors to just walk away from a communist regime. His
shifts are for consolidation, not withdrawal: In May 1986, Babrak Karmal
was replaced as party secretary by Najibullah, former head of the secret
police and a Moscow-trained protégé; new Soviet pronouncements stress
the defense of socialism and the Saur Revolution. On November 20,
1986, Babrak Karmal was removed from all his government and party
posts; his successor as acting president is Haji Mohammad Chamkani, a
little-known tribal leader.

To date, Gorbachev has said a great deal but has done little
to introduce changes and modernize the system or to challenge en-
trenched institutional centers of power and change established ways of
operating. 15 Compared to Khrushchev, he shows no readiness to innovate.
Indeed, based on his record to date, he comes across more as a young
Brezhnev than a Khrushchev. But he does want to energize the Soviet
people and reverse the trends of economic stagnation and social alienation
that bedevil him, and, in his eagerness, some of his remarks and actions
show a disposition to exploit nationalism — some would say chauvinism.

At a time when the moderate 1985 party program has drastically toned
down the glowing promises of Khrushchev's 1961 program to overtake
and surpass the U.S. standard of living by the 1980s and when the
economic prospects for the country are not encouraging, Russophilic
currents are surfacing. For example, Dostoyevsky is in vogue again, his
appeal to the distinctiveness of Russia, its history, institutions, and values
a rebuke today, as 100 years ago, to those who look to Europe for

14 Bradsher, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, p. 265.
15 Donald Kimmelman, "Gorbachev Vision Clashes with Soviet Reality," Philadelphia Inquirer,
July 27, 1986. To illustrate this point, Mr. Kimmelman, who is completing his tour as correspondent in
Moscow, noted that a Soviet humor magazine, Krokodil, caught the prevailing attitude with the following
cover cartoon in its July issue: "In the first frame, three office workers are shown at their desks: a man
reading an adventure novel, a woman knitting, and a second man doing a crossword puzzle. The boss
stands before them, his fist upraised as he shouts in a perfect parody of Gorbachev-era rhetoric:
'Comrades, our department needs to reorganize itself and begin working in the new way!' In the second
frame, the workers are again at their desks. But the first man is now knitting, the woman is doing the
crossword puzzle, and the second man is reading the novel."

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acceptance. Of Europe's (that is, the West's) attitude toward Russia, he wrote in a prophetic vein:

Under no circumstances will they believe that we can in truth, on an equal basis with them, participate in the future destinies of their civilization. They consider us alien to their civilization; they regard us as strangers and imposters. They take us for thieves who stole from them their enlightenment and who disguised themselves in their garbs. Turks and Semites are spiritually closer to them than we, Aryans. All this has a very important reason: we carry to mankind an altogether different idea than they — that's the reason.16

In the same essay, "Geok Tepe: What is Asia to Us?" he extolled General M. D. Skobelev's capture of the Turkoman fortress in Central Asia and urged expansion in Asia as essential for the regeneration of Russia:

In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, whereas we shall go to Asia as masters. In Europe we were Asiatics, whereas in Asia we, too, are Europeans. Our civilizing mission in Asia will bribe our spirit and drive us thither. It is only necessary that the movement should start. Build only two railroads: begin with the one to Siberia, and then — to Central Asia — and at once you will see the consequences.17

Dostoyevsky's call for Russifying Central Asia, in whose bosom he felt was concealed enormous economic wealth, has contemporary relevance; the Soviet Union's future does depend on harnessing the economic potential — minerals, power, and agriculture — of its vast empire east of the Urals. If all this has any significance for Gorbachev, it may steel his resolve to prevail in Afghanistan; he may be determined not to be the first Soviet leader to lose a war. Moreover, he is a Great Russian, and how this may affect his outlook is still an open question.

Judging by the increased Soviet coverage of Afghanistan as a dangerous place for Soviet soldiers, Gorbachev realizes the war will be a long one. He rests his expectation of eventual victory on two assumptions: first, that the ruthless application of a scorched-earth policy — what Louis Dupree calls "the 'rubblization' of Afghan villages, in an attempt to drive them out of the country — a kind of 'migratory genocide'" — will force the mujahidin to recognize the impossibility of ever defeating the Soviet Union; 18 and, second, that cooptation and sovietization will take root.

Gorbachev's outlook is not tempered by any romantic admiration for the backward and primitive Afghans, such as was expressed by early nineteenth-century writers like Tolstoy and Pushkin, for the tough mountain tribes of the Caucasus. In the back of his mind appears to be

17 Ibid., p. 274.
General Skobelev's century-old formula for dealing with the recalcitrant peoples of Central Asia:

I hold it as a principle that in Asia the duration of peace is in direct proportion to the slaughter you inflict upon the enemy. The harder you hit them the longer they will be quiet afterwards. My system is this: to strike hard, and keep on hitting till resistance is completely over; then at once to form ranks, cease slaughter, and be kind and humane to the prostrate enemy.19

Gorbachev has launched an increasing number of major offensives, deploying elite forces backed by massive air and artillery bombardments, which have carried the fight to the mujahidin. "In all the years of war, we had never seen anything like it. They bombed us night and day," reported one resistance commander.20 Given the severity of Soviet strikes against civilians and the food supply infrastructure, the possibility exists that Gorbachev has embraced the essence of Skobelev.

A belief in the ability of overwhelming military power to secure desired political objectives is deeply ingrained in the Great Russian outlook. Theoretically, the insistence on a military solution could backfire, and the Soviets could find themselves inadvertently nurturing a sense of nationalism and nationhood (Watan) among the disparate tribal and ethnic groups, a development that would make their conquest more difficult. But, in light of Russia's history of expansion and conquest in Central Asia, Gorbachev probably assumes the outcome in Afghanistan will be no different from what it was elsewhere in Central Asia.

An appraisal of Soviet policy must keep in mind that the purpose of the drastic Soviet military measures may be to convince the mujahidin of the futility of fighting on and to strengthen the Soviet bargaining position in the U.N.-sponsored talks in Geneva by demonstrating the permanence of the Soviet/Kabul regime. In this way Moscow hopes both to undermine the resistance and to gain recognition for the Kabul regime. Moreover, by demonstrating a determination to take whatever military measures are necessary to secure the PDPA and defeat the mujahidin, including a growing number of attacks across the border into Pakistan, Moscow may also hope to dissuade Islamabad from actively supporting the resistance. All of the above are possible and pertinent considerations in any assessment of Soviet policy.

What, then, is to be done in this distressful situation? Moscow is not immune to pressure, but direct and obvious attempts to compel

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seldom work. Nor is the Soviet public going to turn against its government because of the involvement in Afghanistan. Russians are proud of their country’s military power and respond wholeheartedly to appeals that mention threats from the outside. If Moscow is to change its basic policy in Afghanistan, it must be confronted with opponents whose behavior is coherent, forceful, sustained, and, in particular, politically telling. Interested and involved participants could adopt several approaches without abandoning any of their present military efforts to carry the fight to the Soviets.

First and foremost, the mujahidin must learn to fight politically. Valor is not enough; historically, it has never been a sufficient condition for winning a protracted war. Unfortunately, there are no “Afghans” — only members of ethno-linguistic tribal groups that, for the most part, do not like each other. Though sharing a common desire to expel the Soviets from their land, they lack a sense of nationhood. Centuries of discord and rivalry have not been forgotten, or even deferred, in the interests of a common struggle against an invader. Perhaps a sense of national cohesion is being forged in the Afghan crucible, but this takes time. Without doubt, Moscow is depending on continued dissension to prevent the resistance from cooperating.

In May 1985, the seven leading resistance groups based in Peshawar, Pakistan, formed the Islamic Unity of Afghan Mujahidin, known as the Alliance. All oppose the Soviets, but they differ markedly “in ideology, in base of support, and relative capability.” Four of the groups are Islamic “fundamentalists,” though there are significant differences among them:

As a rule, they advocate the establishment of a “new” political system, namely an Islamic Republic, which has not existed in Afghanistan before, and which does not exist in any Sunni Muslim country. The largest Afghan “fundamentalist” groups are Burhanuddin Rabbani’s Jamiat-i-Islami; Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e-Islami; Yunus Khalis’s Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan; and Abdul Rasool Sayyaf’s Islamic Alliance for the Liberation of Afghanistan.21

Three of the groups can be described as “traditionalists”:

They, too, declare that they want an Islamic government in Afghanistan. However, they would be satisfied if pre-1978 Afghan political institutions are restored. One such “traditionalist” party is Mahez-e-Milli-ye Islami, led by Siabghatuallah Mojaddedi; a third is Mohammad Nabi’s Haraket-e-Inqelab-ye-Islami.22

Differences are complicated by the lack of formal ties between the leaders of these political groups and the military leaders in the field, each of whom is a power unto himself and may or may not be aligned

21 Khalilzad, “Moscow’s Afghan War,” p. 10.
22 Ibid., p. 11.
with any of the groups in Peshawar. What goes on in the Panjsher Valley, in Paktia, in Kandahar, in Herat, or in any one of dozens of regional locales is episodic and uncoordinated. Cooperation among the battlefield commanders is happenstance. As a result the military, as well as the political, value of what commanders achieve on the battlefield is vitiated, and the record of impressive local successes inside Afghanistan has only a tenuous connection to, and bearing on, the politics of the Alliance in Peshawar. The fragmentation of command, lack of military or political planning, and ever-shifting alignments of groups can only be a source of constant encouragement to the Kremlin.

Paradoxically, the acentric and highly individual character of the mujahidin's military operations that assists in making their many local victories also attenuates the overall effects of their achievements. Unless successes on the battlefield can be coordinated and extended, they may not bring the desired military or political benefits. It is axiomatic that what cannot be won on the battlefield cannot be secured at the negotiating table.

If the Afghans are to persuade Moscow to change its policy and opt for compromise instead of conquest, they need a program that reflects shared political goals and an institutional structure that can be developed into a government-in-exile. Both are essential. In its policy toward liberation struggles in the Third World, Moscow slights those that lack these strengths. Without them, the mujahidin will not be taken seriously politically by the Russians, who will continue to predicate their policy on the assumption that Afghan tribal and cultural heterogeneity can be exploited and the country eventually managed, as were all Muslim areas conquered by Russia, through a combination of coercion and cooperation.

The Alliance is only a start. A political body that rotates its leader every three months has no leader; one that has a joint military committee that lacks authority cannot command troops in the field; and one that disagrees on goals and is riven with suspicion has no credibility. As it stands, the Alliance may placate its foreign supporters, but it will not force Gorbachev to rethink his Afghan options. It exists without substance.

Spokesmen for the Alliance commonly stress the role that Islam plays in unifying the Afghans. The defense of Islam against Soviet-exported communism surely motivates some freedom-fighters, and the proclamation of jihad, or holy war, may inspire them. But the appeal to Islam has never been enough to forge a political unity out of cultural, ethnic, linguistic diversity or to sustain a successful struggle against a foreign oppressor. It certainly poses no major challenge for Moscow.
the acquiescence of Syria, Libya, the PDRY, and the PLO to the Soviet rationale for invading Afghanistan, as well as by the meager help that has come to the mujahidin from the Islamic world — the notable exceptions being Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and, above all, Pakistan — the notion of Islamic unity is a will-o’-the-wisp and sometime phenomenon. In fact, it begs the real challenge that faces the Alliance; it is a delusory substitution for meaningful political steps.

Members of the Alliance may be at a watershed. As they look to the future, they should dread, and take steps to avoid, becoming another PLO. If they cannot transcend their internal divisions and bickering and agree on a common program and strategy for waging not just battles but also the critical political campaign on the international front, they may well lose the war, in spite of increased effectiveness in insurgency operations. No amount of outside assistance can compensate for the absence of political unity. Indeed, unless the mujahidin achieve political unity, aid itself may in time dry up.

The Alliance’s lack of cohesion was evident during a visit to the United States in mid-June 1986 by four of the leaders of the seven-group coalition. While Rabbani, Mojaddedi, Gailani, and Mohammad Nabi were meeting with President Reagan and appealing for diplomatic recognition and more arms, in Peshawar Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Rasul Sayoof, who head two of the fundamentalist groups, issued a statement criticizing the meeting and calling it a threat to the unity of the movement.23 Precisely this kind of divisiveness and working at cross-purposes is the greatest danger to the Afghan liberation struggle — and a boon to Moscow.

Second, the mujahidin must form a government-in-exile. Without it, the Alliance will not be able to lobby its friends to derecognize and delegitimize the Kabul regime; nor will it acquire the diplomatic recognition and status that come with such a move. Unless and until there is widespread derecognition of the Kabul regime, Moscow will feel confirmed in the essential political correctness of its assessment that it has already paid the international costs of the invasion and that, in time, it will be able to exploit its control of Afghanistan. Without a readiness to make compromises in the interest of their common struggle for a Free Afghanistan, the members of the Alliance will become the targets of derision and be viewed as a bevy of elders feathering their nests and posturing to their constituencies. If the seven leaders of the Alliance cannot provide the political leadership needed to influence the Kremlin, Peshawar will become a backwash of emigré politics and not the hub of a liberation struggle.

The PLO’s experience should be a warning. In the mid-1970s, the PLO was propelled by Arab oil power into the center of the international stage, accorded extensive diplomatic recognition, and lavishly supplied with arms and money. But it has been unable to establish a government-in-exile because of internecine struggles — personal and ideological: the different groups comprising the PLO could not agree on apportionment of posts, on priorities, or on an overall strategy. The result, a decade later, is a politically and militarily weaker PLO, still distant from its goal.

Taking steps to persuade the Muslim world to derecognize the Kabul regime is a third option to achieve a Soviet withdrawal. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the mujahidin’s staunchest Muslim supporters, have been active, but their efforts are hampered by the Alliance’s inability to project itself as a credible political alternative.

In early 1980 the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), with the approval of the overwhelming number of the more than forty members (the important exceptions being Syria, Libya, the PDRY, and the PLO), condemned the Soviet Union’s aggression and appealed for an end to the Soviet military presence. It also suspended Afghanistan’s membership and invited member-states to withhold recognition of the “illegal regime.” Periodically since then, the leaders of the major Afghan resistance groups have called on all Islamic countries to sever diplomatic relations with the Kabul regime and the Soviet Union and to recognize the mujahidin groups as the legitimate representatives of Afghanistan. However, though OIC members voice their concern, they have taken neither step. Islamic foreign ministers meeting in Fez, Morocco, in January 1986, reiterated their previous demands for an immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal of “all foreign troops” from Afghanistan. The same call was made at the nonaligned movement’s (NAM) summit in September 1986, as it was at previous NAM meetings. But the Alliance’s request for member states to derecognize the Soviet puppet regime in Kabul is repeatedly ignored, and its request for formal membership is repeatedly deferred. In brief, the OIC gives a modicum of moral succor but no tangible political help; it shies away from any meaningful collective action.

Much the same story is repeated in the United Nations. Each year, by an overwhelming majority the U.N. General Assembly passes a resolution calling for the immediate withdrawal of “all foreign troops” — a euphemism for Soviet forces, which member states are reluctant to condemn openly. At the 1985 session, despite the continuing Soviet war in Afghanistan, a number of Muslim states sided with the USSR’s position:

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24 For example, New York Times, May 21, 1980.
Syria, Libya, and the PDRY voted against the resolution, while Algeria, Iraq, Yemen, and Mali abstained. Most Muslim countries have not been prepared to take bold steps on behalf of the mujahidin, nor have they manifested the disenchantment with the Soviet Union that many Afghans expected.

If the Alliance is unable to obtain the diplomatic recognition of Muslim governments, its prospects elsewhere will be slim. Failure on this vital front will only adversely affect its ability to convince Moscow that it is a force to be contended with and will lessen the likelihood that important nonaligned countries such as India, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe will do anything more than give lip service to the Afghan struggle.

Fourth, steps must be taken to ensure that the U.S. military assistance to the mujahidin, currently funneled through Pakistan, actually reaches the Afghans. There have been enough reports from credible sources to suggest that this is a major problem. The situation is complex. A stable Pakistan, steadfast in its commitment to the Afghan cause, is the crucial part of the pipeline, but an open tap is not in its best national interest. Without Pakistan's fraternal encouragement, the mujahidin could not organize, train, or be armed effectively. But the government of Pakistan, already shouldering a heavy part of the burden for helping the three million refugees in the NWFP, has serious problems that could be aggravated by the permanent settlement of the refugees in its country. Hence, it is interested in a political solution that would permit most of them to return to Afghanistan — a prospect many analysts in Pakistan acknowledge grows more remote with each passing year — and it tries to avoid doing anything that would intensify Soviet military pressure and incursions along the Afghan-Pakistani border. In this situation, Pakistan and the United States may well disagree over the kinds and amounts of weapons to be sent to the mujahidin. As long as Moscow shows no readiness for political compromise, a major challenge for Islamabad and Washington is how to sustain the resistance in its fight and to ensure the delivery of

27 According to Edward Girardet, a French journalist who is one of the small band of West Europeans to have spent considerable time with mujahidin combat groups in Afghanistan, "the weapons come in fits and starts." Moreover, the quantities are small and not always adequate to the terrain; for example, the 82mm medium-range mortar "not only has a poor range but also a dangerously high misfire rate." He suggests that what is needed is a proper distribution network with aid going directly to the interior with as little involvement by the Pakistanis as possible. (Christian Science Monitor, November 20, 1984.) Mohammed Nabi Salehi, an Afghan resistance leader, alleges that only a fraction of U.S. covert arms assistance reaches the mujahidin because "the people delivering the aid on the ground are doing it in a way that aggravates rivalries, jealousies and accusations of corruption." (New York Times, May 9, 1985.) In June 1986, U.S. officials acknowledged that shoulder-fired antiaircraft missiles, essential to counter Soviet helicopter gunships, have not been sent to the mujahidin (probably, because of fears that the missiles might get into the hands of terrorists). New York Times, June 19, 1986; also, Washington Post, June 21, 1986.
weapons that are reliable and appropriate—and consistent with Pakistan's own security and survival. But reconciling their disagreements on tactics will not be easy.

The United States' history in Pakistan has given it the reputation of a poor patron. Hopefully, the U.S. leadership has learned to discipline its zest for "bold initiatives" and "sending signals" to the Soviets. On the Afghan issue, close U.S. cooperation with Pakistan means not assuming a leading diplomatic-political role. The United States should follow in the wake of the parties most affected and be satisfied with steady and unobtrusive assistance. It is simply not in a position to mobilize the kind of support in the Muslim world that is prerequisite for the Alliance's political prospects and for Pakistan's confidence in the utility of gradually expanding levels of military assistance to the mujahidin. Indeed, a prominent U.S. role would probably undermine the Afghan cause internationally, by enabling Moscow to cast the struggle in Afghanistan in an East-West mould and to blame the United States for being in great measure responsible for the outcome. The political considerations criss-cross so much that even a congressional resolution declaring the readiness of the United States, "in consultation with key nations of the Islamic Conference, to recognize an Afghan government-in-exile, if such a unified entity, representing the broad majority of the Afghan people, can be formed by the Afghans themselves, without foreign interference," might be premature.28

Fifth, the mujahidin and their friends must try to make better use of the media—and this is especially true in the United States. The failure of the American media in reporting the story of the Soviet war in Afghanistan is a national disgrace. The war attracts none of the sustained, in-depth coverage, human interest stories, or probing exposés regularly given to the fighting in Lebanon, El Salvador, or South Africa. There is an urgent need to set up and maintain a watch at the Khyber and report to the world what is seen.

The Soviet Union's terror tactics have been a matter of record for years. For example, in February 1986, the U.N. Human Rights Commission issued a report on human rights violations in Afghanistan in which it depicted a pattern of "systematic brutality" that points "inevitably to a situation approaching genocide." The report, prepared by Mr. Felix Ermacora, an Austrian lawyer who previously investigated human rights abuses in Chile and South Africa for the United Nations, stresses that the civilian population has become the primary target of Soviet/Kabul regime attacks. It estimates civilian casualties in 1985 at 35,000. The Soviets use
all kinds of weapons against Afghan villages, including napalm, anti-personnel mines, and booby-traps, such as toy bombs designed to maim rather than to kill. Torture is widespread. Villagers are frequently stripped of all possessions and forced to leave the country. Approximately five million Afghans have been made refugees since the Soviet invasion.

Although more people are being deliberately killed and tortured in Afghanistan than in Central America, Lebanon, and South Africa combined, the U.S. media's coverage, though slightly better than a few years ago, is irregular and meager. The media cannot use the excuse that it lacks access. There are more than three million Afghan refugees in Pakistan's NWFP, and the leading mujahidin groups are headquartered in Peshawar. All are available and eager to tell of their struggle. Moreover, opportunities exist for journalists — admittedly without full television crews — to accompany Afghan freedom-fighters into the war zone and to report on the situation in the cities, the mountains, and villages. Of course, this is a hazardous undertaking, but more journalists have been murdered in Lebanon than killed in Afghanistan. It is to the credit of the West Europeans that they report on the war firsthand and often. One analyst of the media's shortcomings in conveying the reality of the war observed:

Afghanistan has been an invisible war in which fragments and glimpses have been taken as sufficient to get an overview, a complete picture of events. Yet the human cost of the war has never been part of the equation. The napalm and phosphorus bombs, the reports of chemical weapons, the bombs disguised as toys and innocent objects have been heard of — but the human wreckage has not been seen. It needs the compassion inspired by endurance of such suffering to get some clearer vision of the depth of loyalty to the ideal of independence which has sustained the Afghan resistance.²⁹

What, then, explains the neglect in the United States? Is the reason the lack of direct American involvement? Is it that attracting an audience is more important than providing news on a crucial area, and that Nicaragua, Lebanon, and South Africa are of interest to important sectors of American public opinion, whereas Afghanistan and Southwest Asia are not? Is the media, especially the Establishment press and television, reluctant to report unfavorably on the Soviet Union, out of a desire to avoid giving ammunition to the Reagan administration's tough stance vis-à-vis Moscow, a fear of aggravating an already tense world situation, an indifference to so far away and unfamiliar a people as the Afghans, a tendency to regard the Soviet conquest as irreversible, or a hesitation to offend Moscow lest it retaliate by restricting media access to the Soviet Union? There are no easy answers.

²⁹Merryle Wyn Davies, Inquiry, June 1986, as noted in Afghanistan Forum, July 1986, p. 23.
Consideration might be given to establishing in the United States a Permanent Tribunal of the Peoples similar to the one in Paris, the purpose of which is to give wide circulation to Soviet atrocities. One incident reported in the press is more potent than one hundred learned papers. A U.S. government analyst describes the shock of West Europeans over one account of how "the Soviets sealed the villagers in the tunnel in which they had taken refuge as the Soviets were approaching. The Soviets then poured gasoline and other chemicals designed to ensure combustion in oxygen-poor environments, burned everyone to death, and openly rejoiced before departing." 30

The Soviets do not like adverse publicity, and they react when the spotlight is fixed on the seamy side of their foreign policy. On a number of occasions the Kabul regime accused France of fanning hostility to it and interfering directly in its internal affairs by permitting government buildings to be used by French organizations who conducted "biased" hearings on "The True Road of a Political Settlement in Afghanistan," to which "some ringleaders of the Afghan counterrevolution were invited." 31

The Alliance could establish a press and information department to provide regular updates on developments in Afghanistan. 32 This would counteract the disinformation and misinformation spread by Soviet sources and sympathizers. Dissemination of accurate information would also enhance the credibility of the Alliance abroad and help its friends heighten world interest in the Afghan cause.

Finally, resources in Pakistan and the United States should be utilized more fully in order to synthesize the up-to-date information on all aspects of the Afghan problem: What is happening in the different parts of Afghanistan? What is the morale of Soviet troops? How successful is pacification? Sovietization? Cooptation? What is happening in the Alliance and in its constituent groups? What is the mood and degree of politicization of the RTVs (refugee tented villages)? There should be greater interaction on a regular basis between researchers in Peshawar and the United States, which has only one Center for Afghan Studies, at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, headed by Dr. Thomas E. Gouttiere. Along with the gathering of information must come greater attention to

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31 FBIS/USSR South Asia, June 6, 1986, p. D 1. See also General Secretary Najibullah's denunciation of President Reagan's meeting on June 16 with four members of the Alliance. FBIS/USSR South Asia, June 24, 1986, p. D 1.

32 For example, see Henrik Bering-Jensen, "Resistance Aims at 6 O'Clock News," Insight, November 17, 1986, pp. 34-35.
analysis. The situation calls for interdisciplinary efforts to wrestle with the wide range of subjects having policy relevance.

In politics, terminology can be potent. I would like to suggest that we stop using the term "the Great Game" to describe Soviet policy in Afghanistan; its use tends to confer a kind of legitimacy on what is happening. It is a metaphor that distracts attention away from the ruthless war the Soviet Union is waging, the purpose of which is to destroy a culture and, if necessary, a people. Afghanistan is no longer the exotic setting where the intrigues of two equally matched rivals, Russia and Britain, were acted out, but a battleground on which have fallen countless thousands of Afghans — on which perhaps as many as one million have been killed. This war is no romantic exploit, no derring-do of professionals trying to outwit each other in an enterprise more psychological and political than military. Today, only one power is fully involved, and it seeks to consolidate a conquest, without regard for the devastation it inflicts. The time for illusions about Soviet policy has passed.

The conclusion seems inescapable that this dirty war will drag on for years. Meanwhile, the United States and the Soviet Union have many serious issues to negotiate, especially in the nuclear field, and progress on them should not be sidetracked to await a more propitious time: friendly interludes occur infrequently in Soviet-American relations. This does not mean the Afghan problem should be shelved. The Afghans have shown great courage and deserve our even greater respect and support. Their struggle is not only a drain on the Soviets and a cost-effective American way of weakening the Soviet Union but a powerful testament to man's wish to be free.